



She's nursing  
a broken heart.  
He's realizing  
he has one.

SWEET  
BABY

TEDDY JOVIAL

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# Dedication

To my son, whose birth gave me both the motivation and the time to write this book.

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My siblings, who were forced to read everything I wrote and tell me it was amazing.

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# Prologue

## ERIC

She was angry, hands on her hips, staring straight into his eyes while waiting for a satisfactory answer. The thing was, she would not be getting one. They never did.

“Why are you smiling?”

“I’m not.”

“It looks like you’re fucking enjoying this.”

Her anger was blushing her cheeks. She had high cheekbones, a beautiful face, and an even more beautiful body. She was pretty perfect - but he was not interested.

“Enjoying what?”

“Watching me pack up my stuff and leave!”

He still was not giving her what she wanted - emotion.

“I’m not.”

“You think this is funny?”

“None of this is funny.”

“Well, I’m upset.”

“I’m sorry you’re upset.”

She was packing her belongings into a single bag. He had made sure she never left much at his place, and now it was paying off.

“How am I supposed to feel?” Her voice was breaking like she was trying not to cry.

“I don’t know why you’re acting like you didn’t know this would eventually end.”

“You lied to me.”

“I did the absolute opposite of that.”

“You hurt me. You made me feel special.”



“I told you from the very first date that I don’t do relationships. I can’t control how you feel.”

“Well, I thought you changed your mind.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s been six months!”

“I was very clear from the beginning.”

“Well, I thought it changed.”

“You thought wrong.”

“You’re an ass.” She huffed as she zipped her bag closed.

He shrugged as she stormed past him, her small bag filled with worthless items like a bottle of shampoo and some face cream.

“Goodbye, Eric.”

He paused for a second, thinking.

“Angela! Wait...”

“What?”

She was at the front door, turning to face him, her eyes hopeful.

“You forgot this.”

He walked towards her and handed her a cell phone.

She angrily grabbed the phone and pointed it at him while she strained words through gritted teeth and a tightly clenched jaw, “Don’t. Ever. Call. Me. Again.”

Eric just stared at her blankly. “Isn’t that what we are doing?”

“Fuck you.”

She turned on her heel and left through the front door, not even bothering to slam it behind her. He could not help but feel slightly responsible for her hurt - but that was it - only slightly.

He leaned forward and gently closed the door.

That went smoother than it usually did.

He was impressed. Either he was getting better at this, or they were getting less attached to him.

# Chapter 1

## ERIC

Eric was simply the observer in an intense argument between his client and his client's ex-wife. He had done what he could for mediation, but now it was up to the two parties to negotiate the final part – spousal support.

Their arguing was like background music, or perhaps a theme song, to his career. He knew it was happening, he was actively listening, but the words held no meaning to him.

His last name, 'Forrever' perfectly described what he did – he was a lawyer forever because marriages were not.

It was his client who was speaking now.

"I always knew you cared more about my money than you did about me. I should have listened to my mother when I first met you."

His eyebrows were furrowed, and the vein on the centre of his forehead was pulsing with the enunciation of each angry word.

"*And I* should have listened to *my* mother when she said you were a greedy asshole!"

Her lips were set in a straight line, her blonde bangs bouncing as she thrust her chin back at him.

This time the vein lessened as he laughed and rolled his eyes. "Your mother always loved me! *In fact*, she said I was like the son she never had."

Redness flushed into her face as she bit the inside of her cheek. "Why don't you just have sex with your mistress again, and let's get this over with already!"

"She's just my secretary – I really thought you would have been over this by now." Another eye roll.

"You keep saying that, but I caught you two, and *you* know it!"

Eric took a deep breath and shrugged his shoulders into his fitted suit jacket as he observed the two clients arguing.

This was going nowhere.

He glanced over at the other divorce attorney, and they shared a knowing look. Spousal support arguments tended to become quite heated.

Eric cleared his throat, running his hands through his medium-cropped chestnut brown hair. “Why don’t we call it a day, and we can revisit next week once we have all had a chance to cool down.”

The man he represented stood up forcefully as he pushed his chair back. His salt and pepper hair remained perfectly in place despite the heated level of the past hour. His trendy grey business suit had barely a wrinkle as he glared at his ex-wife.

“We can meet every week for the next five years - I’m still not agreeing to give her a damn cent.” His anger was dripping from his tongue as he spoke through clenched teeth.

His ex-wife stood up, a deep scowl on her thin face, her hands angrily gripping her curvy hips. She looked at least ten years younger than him with long blond hair, freshly manicured nails and long legs in a pair of designer heels. “That would cost you more money than just paying me spousal support!”

The ex-husband snickered, “I would *gladly* pay these lawyers money rather than give it to you. Let us see who runs out of money first, honey. See you next week.”

Angrily he stalked out of the room.

Eric stood up to follow when his client turned back around and spoke, “Oh, and just in case you’re wondering – the botox and filler aren’t working, so stop wasting my money on it. You’ll never compete with the twenty-somethings I’m dating now.”

His ex-wife’s mouth dropped.

Eric quickly ushered his client out of the meeting room.

“Can I give you advice, Eric?” His client asked as Eric matched his angry stride.

“Always.”

“Never get married.”

Eric smiled. After the divorces he saw, he wasn't even planning to fall in love.

He walked his client out to the elevators with a plan to meet next week.

Once his client was safely out of sight, he turned back to see the ex-wife say goodbye to her lawyer and walk off, looking defeated.

Her lawyer came over to meet at Eric's office. Her tight-fitting blue suit was distracting, to say the least.

“I think this case might go on for quite some time. Your client looked pretty upset when he left here.”

Eric laughed. “Yeah, I would probably be, too.”

“You know he's going to have to pay spousal support, right?” Her cherry-coloured lips were perfectly pouty. Eric was having trouble caring about what she was saying to him.

“We shall see about that.”

She laughed and put a hand on his arm. “Well, maybe the sooner this is over, the sooner you can ask me out for a drink.”

Taking her hand off his arm, she gave him a wink and left. Eric made a mental note to follow up on that drink as he enjoyed watching her walk away.

He smiled to himself.

Never getting into a serious relationship was one of the better decisions he ever made.



## ERIC

Eric enjoyed the sing-song melodies of birds singing when he removed his headphones at the end of his run.

The air was crisp but felt lighter in his lungs than the cold runs he had endured during the winter in Ottawa. He did the same run he always did every morning before work.

He ran down the Rideau Canal to Dow's Lake and back up along winding paths that were a part of the world-renowned tulip festival each May. It was due to start in the next couple of days which meant his entire neighbourhood would be inundated with out-of-town folk looking for street parking. At least, no matter the season, in early mornings there was scarcely a person outside and he had the pathways to himself.

He took the final corner to his block and let his pace slow to a walk to match the rhythm of his recovering heartbeat. Every house on the street was coming out of its winter hibernation. Lawns were starting to turn green and new buds had formed on all the trees.

Victorian houses lined the streets of the old neighbourhood he lived in. Staying true to the tune of a heritage suburb, there were no houses or buildings more than three stories tall.

"Eric!" a voice called out to him from down the block. "I sent you a message to say I was running late, but I guess you didn't get it."

Eric looked down at his watch. "It's an hour later. I don't bring my phone with me on my runs."

He shook his head at his friend. He had a schedule to keep – he couldn't be waiting for Marc for *an hour*.

"Unlike you, I have to be at work for a certain time. Not all of us can work from home." Eric winked as he waited for Marc's response.

Marc shrugged. "Baby wouldn't settle this morning; it was hard to get out."

There were dark circles under his eyes, and his uncombed blonde hair made it look like he had just woken up.

"Is that baby vomit on your shoulder?" Eric pointed to the collar of Marc's running shirt.

Marc pulled the collar away from his neck to squint down at it. "Oh, yeah, I guess that is."

“I don’t know how you do it, man. That’s so gross.”

Marc shrugged and smirked. “Well, you’ll be happy to hear that Lucy is pregnant again...”

“*Again?* Isn’t your daughter only a year old?”

“She sure is. Oh, and by the way, Lucy wanted me to remind you to not forget about our daughter’s birthday weekend coming up. You’re coming, right?”

“Is there alcohol?”

“At a *child’s* birthday party?” Marc raised an eyebrow, then laughing said, “Just messing with you, of course there is.”

He started to jog on the spot as Eric turned towards his front door.

“It’s my only alone time in the mornings, and I *refuse* to miss out on this run. I’ll catch you tomorrow.” He yawned heavily and covered his mouth. “I won’t be late again!”

Eric and Marc had been best friends since elementary school. They both grew up in the same neighbourhood, and now as adults, they were repeating history. Marc bought his house a couple of years after Eric and now lived only a block away.

They promised to keep up with their morning runs after Marc’s daughter was born. So far, they had been able to for the most part, but Eric doubted it would continue with a second child in the mix. Lucy was an independent woman, but she was no match for two children in diapers.

His friends’ lives continually reaffirmed why he was happy with his lifestyle choices of no children, no girlfriend, and no problems.

Once at his front step, he entered the code into the keypad and let himself in. His house was consistent with the others on the street. It was well maintained, despite it being a couple of hundred years old, and had a modernized interior.

It was also clean and quiet - just the way he liked it.

It was perfectly silent when he stepped into his hallway. Everything was how he had left it – which was neat and tidy. He

had minimal belongings, and what he did own was unique and had its place.

He lived alone and couldn't picture himself living with anyone else.

Walking into Marc and Lucy's place made his skin crawl. Although clean – by a parent's standards – it was too messy for his taste.

There were kid's toys on the floor and baby clothes hanging on various furniture pieces – not to mention the child-proofing that completely ruined the aesthetic of the place.

He had tried to live the family life when he was much younger and much in love with his ex-girlfriend, Anna, and his son, Elliott.

Inevitably the financial and emotional stress of law school had caused a premature end to their relationship when Elliott was just a baby.

He had moved out and started over, choosing to focus on making partner at his law firm.

The bachelor's life was a consequence of his devotion to his career, and he regretted nothing.

Unfortunately, Anna had died unexpectedly two years prior. At the time of her passing, Elliott had been living at home and Eric's involvement with him was minimal at best.

At the time of Anna's passing, Eric was at a loss for how to support his son. He had offered for Elliott to come and live with him, but Elliott declined saying he preferred to live on his own.

After Eric made a brief appearance at the funeral, he confirmed living expenses with his son and agreed to send monthly funds to cover the cost of rent and necessities.

Even though there was never a thank you or even acknowledgement of help received, Eric still felt it was his duty to ensure his son was well cared for.

This year Elliott turned twenty years old and was working a full-time job while living independently. Eric continued to financially support him as promised.



Thinking of his son, he checked his phone on the kitchen counter and was disappointed that there was still no response to his last message.

It was the first time that the money he sent to Elliott had not been deposited, and he felt unsettled.

He had tried various messaging modalities and even calling, but everything was left unread and unanswered.

He would have to try another call again this afternoon. It wasn't unusual not to hear from him for months at a time – but not accepting money was a first.

Their relationship would best be described as strained although they never had a falling out. They were just never close.

When Elliot was young, Eric had kept his promise of spending one weekend together every month. As Elliott became older, and life became busy for both of them, the visits decreased to just holidays. After Anna passed away, the holidays turned into virtual exchanges and then missed phone calls.

Before she passed, Anna had been the gatekeeper to their relationship. There was a lot of resentment after Eric had left, and she had ensured she consistently found a way to make everything difficult for him.

When she passed, he had hoped he could work on the relationship with his son, but it was clear the damage had been done.

Despite everything she had put him through, he never spoke badly about her in front of Elliott. It was a promise he had made when they had separated, and one he had honoured.

He had seen the damage it had done to the children of his clients and had vowed to never have his son go through it. Unfortunately, his ex was not above belittling him, and he ended up being labeled as the dead-beat father.

She had made it her life's mission to portray him poorly – and as evidenced by the remnants of his relationship with Elliott – it appeared she was quite successful.

Not wanting to dwell on it further, he walked over to his coffee maker and started a pot before heading upstairs to shower.

Peeling off his clothes in front of the mirror, he scrutinized himself carefully. Despite his eighty-hour work weeks, he still had visible abs without flexing and solid athletic thighs and calves. He always made his health a priority and was happy to see it paying off in his forties.

Compared to the lawyers his age, who were worn down by young children and high-maintenance partners, he was in the best shape of his life.

He slept eight hours each night, had a clean house, healthy food in the fridge and took vacations whenever he wanted. On paper he had everything and was generally satisfied – despite denying to himself that sometimes it felt like something was missing.

Not wanting to admit that he could be jealous of his overweight and pasty colleagues - he told himself that all of them were on the road to an eventual divorce, and without commitment, he was avoiding inevitable hurt.

He often told himself that in the long run, he was the one who would be happier - even if he didn't always believe his own words.



## **ERIC**

“Don’t forget it’s Mother’s Day next weekend. Do you have any plans?”

Miranda was leaning on the corner of his desk, patiently waiting for his answer with a smirk on her face.

“Nope.”

“Eric, you have to call your mother at the very least! Maybe bring her to the tulip festival or something.”

He sighed. “You don’t know her. She would hate that.”

“Send her flowers?”

“Waste of money. Her words. Not mine.”

She was twirling her auburn hair in her fingers, looking pensive. “Want to come with me to mine?”

He almost choked on the sip of coffee he was taking. “Thank you for that. I needed a laugh today.”

She let out a giggle. “You know how happy she would be to see you again. It’s all she ever talks about when she asks me about work! She wants to know how my ‘dreamy’ colleague is.”

Eric let out another chuckle. “I’m flattered, really. Now would you get off my desk? I was hoping to get out of here a bit early today.”

She bit down a smile as she slowly stood up, adjusting her fitted skirt as she stood, but Eric took no notice. He never noticed things like that about her. They had known each other since the first year of law school and had been nothing but friends.

“Don’t tell me you have a hot date?” She was in front of him now, leaning forward and grabbing the pen out of his hands.

“Maybe, now would you get out of here?”

“Only if you tell me if I know her or not.”

“Let’s not do this again...” his voice trailed off as he avoided eye contact with her. She really knew how to get under his skin.

“I knew it!” She was handing the pen back to his open hand when there was a gentle knock at his door. A young twenty-something woman poked her head in and seemed startled to see Miranda there.

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t know you had company.” She was looking down at her hands as she talked.

Long blonde hair, plump red lips and a tight red dress. Miranda was beginning to guess who he was leaving work early for.

“Did you need something?” Eric asked, making direct eye contact with the twenty-something without breaking.

“No,” she stammered, “I’ll catch up with you later. Have a good evening!”

The door closed softly behind her as Miranda leaned back on Eric’s desk and laughed.

“Seriously?”

He chuckled. “I don’t kiss and tell. See you tomorrow, Miss Coleman.

## Chapter 2

### ADRIANNA

Adrianna woke in a sweat, her phone buzzing with the early alarm she had set the night before. The open window was blowing cool morning air on her damp skin.

She knew it was just a bad dream, but her heart wasn't so convinced. She could feel it pounding underneath her shirt. The beat was strong in her neck as it pulsed with adrenaline.

She turned off the alarm and lifted her long brown hair off her shoulders to allow the back of her neck to dry. The cool air felt heavenly against her sticky goosebumps.

Her bad dream was about every nurse's worst nightmare – forgetting about a baby and neglecting them for twelve hours.

Every so often, she and her neonatal ICU colleagues would have the same recurring nightmare where they realized at the end of their shift that they missed a baby in their assignment.

Of course, this happening would be nearly impossible, but it scared nurses enough to haunt their dreams and ruin their sleep.

She wondered if nurses for adults experienced the same dream.

The sound of the monitoring alarms would always wake her up. In reality, it was the sound of her morning alarm floating into her dream and sounding off as the emergency alarms in the ICU - and today, it was just that.

It was her first shift out of four today, and her heart was racing before the day had started.

She hated waking up with anxiety, especially when she would be adding caffeine to the mix to help keep her alert until the evening.

She took another deep breath of the fresh spring air. Now that it was May and the weather was warming up, it was easier to convince herself to walk to work.

It was her favourite time of year, with early sun in the mornings and warm summer nights. It meant starting and ending her shift in sunlight rather than the darkness of the winter months.

Adrianna lived in a cozy house that was not far from the hospital. She had bought it from her grandmother just before the housing market spiralled out of control, or her dream of owning a house would never have become a reality.

Lowering her feet to the floor, she outstretched her arms to rid herself of the last remnants of sleep that still riddled her body.

From the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of her dog at the end of the bed. He was intensely analyzing her, willing her with his eyes to take him for a walk before work.

“Okay, go get your leash.”

Henry jumped off her bed with the energy she wished she had in the mornings. His brown and white shaggy coat was a blur as he flew down the hallway. He started making noises by the front door as he searched his box for his leash. It was one of the only tricks he knew, and it came in handy in the early mornings.

It was unfortunate he couldn't take himself around the block for a morning walk while she made herself a coffee.

She giggled at the thought of Henry roaming the streets. He would have one end of the leash attached to his collar, the other end in his mouth as he led himself on an adventure.

Luckily, he was a well-trained dog. From an early age, she had taught him to use a doggy door that led to her fenced backyard. This way, she wouldn't have to worry about him during her twelve-hour shifts. If not, she would never be able to own a dog with the long hours that she worked. He provided her with the companionship that she needed.

Her coworkers that owned dogs all had partners to assist them, which she also had at one point – but not now.

It reminded her of how lonely she felt as of late.

It wasn't just living alone and not having a partner that made her feel lonely. It was also that, although she had several big groups of friends, she had no close individuals she could call on.

In terms of family, she had a mother and father whom she barely spoke to and who lived a few hours away.

Her sister, Melody, was busy with her married life, and her only other sibling lived in Australia. Her brother, Grayson, had moved there for school when he was in university and loved the country so much that he never came back. She meant to visit him, but year after year had passed, and she still hadn't made the effort.

Henry was now back with the leash in his mouth and his tail wagging vigorously in anticipation. She patted his head gently and clipped the leash onto his collar, slowly standing to stretch one more time before she put her work scrubs on.

She chose dark green scrubs for the day. She tucked the loose top into the waist of the matching joggers. Her outfit looked professional, but it also accentuated her curvy hips and narrow waist.

Looking in the mirror, she noted how tired her hazel eyes looked. Not wanting to put in too much effort, she grabbed her long brown hair and put it into a messy bun on the top of her head.

All she needed was some concealer under her eyes to mask the dark circles and light blush on her cheeks to bring some life into her face.

First shift of four today, and then she would have a stretch of five days off.

Hopefully, the next few days would fly by quickly and she would be off before she knew it.



## **ADRIANNA**

Being in a hospital in the morning often reminded her of the first day of school. You always noticed the smells of the freshly sanitized floors after a summer away.

It was the same at the hospital - aromas of hand soap, sanitizer and breakfast trays mixed with freshly brewed coffee wafted to her nose.

As she walked down the hospital hallway towards the NICU, she could hear the echoes of her coworkers chatting in the break room before their shift started.

Everyone had different rotations, so the unit was always fully staffed. This way, she had a couple of coworkers she worked with all the time and others she only worked with half the time. The rest of the nurses on shift were part-time workers who were often newer staff waiting their time for full-time hours to become available.

She remembered the anxiety of being a new nurse, coming to the hospital, and not knowing what the next twelve hours would look like. Each shift, she would throw herself into the unknown, not knowing how complicated her patient assignment would be or if she would oversee a critical admission.

Her shifts today were the same level of unknown, but experience quickly defeated the anxiety that marked her junior years.

Hanging up her spring coat in the break room, her back was turned to her coworkers. They were giggling and catching up on their lives from not seeing each other the past few days. Their multiple conversations were a complex muttering of everything from new dates to issues with childcare.

Looking at the clock, she saw that it was fifteen minutes before her shift, and it was now time for everyone to relieve the night staff and get their shift reports.

Shift reports were a complete medical history of the baby and a summary of how they did overnight.

Gradually they all slowly shuffled down the hallway to the closed doors of the NICU.

The unit was a locked unit and could only be accessed with a badge. Family members needed to ring a doorbell to screen into the unit.



After one nurse used their badge to unlock the main door, they all filed in after one another.

Once inside, they sanitized their hands and used a special machine to sanitize anything they were bringing in, like pens and their badges.

A whiteboard was posted at the front of the unit and held all the names of the babies and which nurses were assigned to them.

Adrianna could see her name listed three times on the board, which meant she had a full assignment of three babies.

She felt a sense of relief because she was looking forward to a busy shift to make the time go by fast. Hopefully, a shift without admitting a baby would afford her this.

Of the three babies she was assigned to, only one she knew from a previous shift. The other two were a set of twins that were recently transferred from another hospital.

She walked to the back of the unit to find the nurses who cared for her assigned babies overnight. The one baby she knew already was what they called a “feeder grower,” which meant the baby was otherwise healthy but biding their time until they were old enough to leave the unit safely.

The twins were born prematurely at another hospital at thirty-two weeks of age and were now thirty-six weeks old. The boy twin was expected to be discharged that day as he was much larger than his sister.

The sister would hopefully join her brother soon. She needed a few more days as she was still too small to leave the unit and struggled with feeding from a bottle.

During the shift report, the night nurse joked that the sister had decided she no longer wanted to use her feeding tube and pulled it out. The plan was to try and continue with bottle feeding and not re-insert another feeding tube unless they had to. They called this the “sink or swim” method.

Adrianna smiled - she was excited to meet the parents that morning and do the final discharge teaching before they took their son home. There was nothing more beautiful than clipping

their baby into a car seat for the first time and reassuring the parents that they were good to take their little one safely home.

She also knew the anxiety surrounding having a baby in the NICU and understood how difficult it was to take one baby home and leave the other behind. Hopefully, the sister wouldn't be far behind, and their little family would be reunited shortly.

Adrianna settled into her shift by scrubbing in, checking all her emergency equipment at the bedside, and preparing all the bottles of breast milk and formula she would need for her entire shift.

The morning flew by quickly, and by ten o'clock, the parents of the twins arrived, and discharge was confirmed. Lucas, the little boy, was dressed in his finest outfit when his parents arrived.

Adrianna had taken the time to pick out a cute outfit that would fit nicely in the car seat and also provide warmth to the chill outside that day. It was early spring, and babies, especially ones from the ICU, needed an extra layer of clothing compared to their parents.

Adrianna met the parents with a smile and started going through discharge teaching with them. They were well prepared with the car seat and confirmed they were ready with diapers, bottles, and a bassinet at home.

The NICU physician arrived at the bedside to perform the final head-to-toe assessment, confirming with Adrianna that nothing had changed from previous reports.

The family confirmed they were seeing a pediatrician within two days of leaving the hospital. They agreed to join the optional social media website where patients and staff would keep in touch with photos after discharge.

Adrianna bundled up the baby after the NICU physician was finished and placed the baby in the car seat, reviewing the final points of car seat safety with the parents.

Once little Lucas was strapped in and had fallen asleep, she congratulated the parents again on the successful discharge of their baby boy. She provided them with an adorable diploma

that proudly announced, “Graduated from the NICU,” with a little impression of Lucas’ footprint on the bottom.

The parents smiled and thanked Adrianna, and after saying goodbye to his sister Lily, promised that one of them would be back that evening to feed and bathe her.

Adrianna’s heart felt like it grew about two sizes when she remembered how the parents had seemed so anxious when they first arrived in the morning and had left feeling confident and happy.

She felt a pit in her stomach as she always did when she had babies discharged, knowing not all babies made it home. Blinking away tears, she refocused on Lily’s monitor, which was alarming that she had no pulse or oxygen rate. She knew this was because her little foot had kicked off the oxygen probe, and quickly walked over to ensure everything was okay.

At the bedside, she could see Lily’s face was perfectly pink and smiling in her sleep, but her one foot was kicked out of the swaddle with the oxygen probe hanging loosely. Quickly, she reattached the probe and stuck the little foot back into the swaddle without waking her up.

Once back at her desk, she had a quick review of the admission board from labour and delivery to see what mothers were on the unit and if they were expecting any new admissions.

Her eyes caught the details of a mom in active labour, thirty-eight weeks pregnant with a baby at high risk of drug withdrawal due to opiate abuse, among other drugs.

Typically, those babies would end up in the NICU right after delivery or within forty-eight hours, as this was when they started experiencing withdrawal symptoms.

The other mothers on the floor were at term, only a few were in active labour, and no high-risk mothers were currently admitted. Hopefully, this would mean an easygoing shift, and she could catch up on her discharge report.

Her mind drifted back to the drug withdrawal baby as she looked at the empty room beside her. The NICU saved the single rooms for the drug withdrawal babies so they could be in a quiet room with minimal disturbances.

Drug withdrawal babies needed a lot of soothing. They also required decreased stimulation in dark and quiet rooms.

Typically, they were the only babies allowed in swings on the unit, which helped rock the babies to sleep when the nurses were unable to hold them. Withdrawal babies usually wanted to be held 24/7 and had a lot of difficulty sleeping on their own.

It was a heart-wrenching process to see a little baby scared and uncomfortable. The only thing that made it worse was when they were alone in their suffering. They needed the warmth of loving arms to feel secure and help comfort them from withdrawal symptoms.

A nurse would have a lighter assignment if she had a drug withdrawal baby and often no more than one other baby to look after.

Sometimes, if the baby required immediate medication titrations and constant assessments, the ratio was changed to one-to-one so the nurse could focus solely on the one baby.

Adrianna had a feeling she would be admitting that baby in the next few hours or possibly on her shift tomorrow, but hoped the baby wouldn't be delivered until she was safely at home in her bed.

One last look at the admission board saw that the mom wasn't in the active stage of labour, but that could change quickly. She went to close the screen and noticed the mother's age; she was only nineteen years old.

This meant child services would also be involved, as well as the social worker.

Poor mother. Poor child. Poor nurse admitting that patient.

It would likely be a difficult case for everyone.



**ADRIANNA**

Adrianna had made it out of her shift without an admission. The drug withdrawal baby had not been born yet, and no other babies had been admitted. It was an easy shift report at the end of the day; only two babies and Lily was being cared for by her mother at the bedside.

When Adrianna left, Lily was skin-to-skin after her bath with her mother. Adrianna smiled at her and wished her a good evening, promising to see her again tomorrow. The mother provided an update, saying that Lucas was safely at home with his father and was doing well.

When she grabbed her jacket and put on her outdoor shoes, it was seven-thirty, and her stomach grumbled. She would only have enough time to walk home, walk Henry and make a quick bite to eat before she had to play soccer.

After soccer, she would be back in bed quickly to get up early tomorrow for her second shift.

She smiled, thinking about Lucas at home with his father, waiting to be reunited with Lily and his mother. One big happy family whose story was only beginning.

Feeling a chill as she left the hospital, she wrapped her arms around herself and made her way back home.

It wasn't her usual night to play soccer, but she was one of the few goalies in the city, and was often asked to help out teams who needed someone.

It made her feel special to be needed, especially since she was one of the only female goalies.

Co-ed teams were ecstatic to have her on the field to meet their required female player quota.

It also made the lonely nights more tolerable if she had socialization outside of work.

She wasn't looking forward to spending the night alone, but was comforted knowing she would have the warmth of Henry at her feet.

She imagined the feeling of her head sinking into her fluffy pillow at the end of the night as she wrapped her big warm blankets around herself.

It was the time of year she would open her bedroom window a crack to let the cool night air in. Her thick comforter would cover every inch of her body as she used it to protect herself from the cool air while she drifted off to sleep.

## Chapter 3

### ERIC

Eric glanced at his phone again to see if his son had responded to his messages. It had been two weeks, and Elliott had still not read his messages or deposited his monthly cheque. Worry started to creep into his heart, but the fast pace of the day kept him distracted.

The morning had involved mediation with two separate couples. It had been emotionally exhausting for everyone.

His legs were itching for another run; he felt he needed to do something to burn off his anxious energy.

With a sigh, he called in his administrative assistant and asked for a run-down of the afternoon. He knew they had gone through everything before their day started this morning, but he hoped to move some things around and leave the office early.

“Sir? You wanted to see me?”

“Yes, Darryl, please come sit. I want to review the afternoon meetings.”

Darryl sat nervously in front of him, laptop in hand, to review his schedule.

“Of course, Mr. Forrever. I have everything here. It looks like a mediation was set for this afternoon, but the client requested a rescheduling for a third time, so I have pushed her to next week. After that, there are just some pending emails to review, and a call came for you from a social worker at the hospital. She did not say what it was regarding but noted that she needed to speak with you directly. She would not tell me anything else.”

Darryl nervously took a deep breath as he passed a post-it note to Eric. “All her details are listed here; I would have let you know sooner, but she did not say if it was urgent. I am sorry I could not get any further information for you.”

Eric sighed. “Did she say which client this is in relation to?”

Darryl squirmed anxiously before answering, “No, sir. She insisted you speak with her today, but would not provide further details. Again, my apologies. I can call her back and ask her again, but she was rather insistent she could only speak with you.”

“Very well. I’ll call her now and will let you know if I need anything else. Thank you.”

Darryl nodded and promptly scurried back to his desk outside of Eric’s office.

He was a new assistant, aimed to please and was particularly good at his job, but he needed to boost his confidence or else his anxiety would drive Eric crazy.

Eric placed the yellow sticky note next to his phone and picked it up to dial.

*Civic Hospital, call Mary back at extension 7009.*

Easy enough.

Once he dialled the extension, a pleasant voice answered quickly.

“Hello, Mary. This is Eric Forrester returning your call. Can I ask what client this is in reference to?”

There was a quick pause on the line before he heard Mary take a deep breath.

“Mr. Forrester, thank you for calling me back so quickly. May I ask if now is a suitable time to discuss a personal matter? Do you feel safe to have a discussion with me at this time, or would you prefer that I wait until you are more comfortable or alone?”

Eric was taken aback; his heart beat faster with each breath.

“I can speak freely now. Thank you for your concern.”

“I was wondering if you could come to discuss this in person at the hospital. It’s a rather sensitive subject, and I have several things to review with you - but I’ll get to the point quickly as I know your time is valuable.”

Another pause.



“I am a social worker at the Civic Hospital, and my job includes working mainly with the labour and delivery department and the neonatal ICU. We have a young woman who has given birth to a lovely baby boy.”

Eric stayed silent, allowing her to continue without interruption.

“Her name is Ashlee Lampert, and I believe she is known to your son, Elliott Forrever?”

“Elliott is my son ... yes. I’m sorry, I’m confused. How is my son involved in this? And why am I being contacted?”

He hated when people knew that his son’s dad was a lawyer. They always found a way to ask for free law advice, and he really was not in the mood for that today.

“Thank you for confirming he is your son. Ashlee has stated that the baby’s father is Elliott, but we are unable to get a hold of him at the moment due to his incarceration.”

“Incarceration?” Eric was beginning to lose patience at how long it was taking Mary to get to the point.

“I’m sorry if you were unaware, but I spoke with the local jail, and they have confirmed that Elliott has been incarcerated for about three weeks now. I have confirmation that he was aware of this pregnancy and does not deny that he is the father.”

Eric’s head was spinning.

“Sorry, this is a lot to take in. What is my involvement with this?”

Mary continued, “The main issue is the safety of the child. This is where I come in. Ashlee has informed me that both the father and her had discussions about placing the child into placement for adoption. I have paperwork here from the Children’s Aid Society which confirms that they tried to have this resolved before the baby came.”

Mary explained that her role was to liaise with the Children’s Aid Society (CAS) in confirming that there were not any other family members who would like to be involved in the adoption process. Once confirmed, CAS could then move forward with the legal paperwork.

She carefully explained that the baby had been admitted to the NICU for neonatal abstinence syndrome (NAS), and the mother had refused all involvement with the child.

“She has officially signed away rights to the baby, and we are awaiting final paperwork from your son to confirm this is also his wish.”

Eric did not have words.

“Eric, are you there?”

He cleared his throat - which was difficult because all the saliva had left his taste buds feeling like sandpaper against the roof of his mouth.

“Yes, I am here. What are the next steps?”

“I would ask that you come to the hospital to see me, and we can further discuss your involvement. If you wish to remain uninvolved, then I will contact CAS, who will seek out a foster or adoptive parent. If you wish to be involved, I can escort you to meet the baby in the NICU.”

He licked his lips with his sandpaper tongue.

“I can make it to the hospital in an hour or so if that works. Can you please confirm the term ‘neonatal abstinence?’”

“Yes, of course. This is a term that means withdrawal from substances. We cannot confirm what substances the mother was under the influence of, as drug screening was refused. Still, she was very open that she continues to use substances at this time, and we anticipate that the baby will experience withdrawal symptoms in the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours. If you would like to come to the NICU, I can ask that our medical team provide you with more of a medical update.”

Eric was frustrated. This would be yet another mess for him to clean up after his son. It wasn't even the first time his son had been incarcerated in the past few years – and it likely wouldn't be the last.

The last couple of times, it had been for getting in with the wrong crowd and fighting while inebriated.

Repeat offences came with longer sentences, and he assumed this incarceration was for reasons similar to prior.

Unfortunately, he would never know. His son never told him what was happening in his life unless he needed a lawyer – and even then, it was nearly impossible to get the full details from him.

This time he would wait for his son to reach out to him.

The conversation ended with Mary letting Eric know the location of her office and where he could find parking at the hospital.



## **ERIC**

Eric had already decided before meeting with the social worker that he would be as little involved as possible.

He would meet with her to gain information he could discuss later with his son. He would also need to research the legal implications, if any.

He agreed with Elliott's decision to place the child for adoption. His son was certainly not in the right place in his life to care for another human being – he could barely care for himself.

The good news was that a loving family would receive a phone call that a baby was available for adoption.

He figured the meeting with Mary wouldn't take long. He would tell her he was not planning on adopting the child; he did not know the mother and was not in communication with his son.

He would decline the medical update and the tour of the NICU. It was all unnecessary at this point.

His head throbbed slightly as he entered the hospital through the main sliding glass doors. The air smelled of stale coffee and sterility - neither of which he cared for. He found the scent both unwelcoming and pungent.

The last time he had been in a hospital was when Elliott was born. He had been almost the same age as his son was now.

Twenty years ago, he had felt scared, too young for the responsibility, and angry that the situation had been thrust upon him.

The hospital smelled the same as he remembered.

He followed a long hallway that was oddly lined with mirrors at one point. Briefly, he glanced at his reflection and was startled to see the deep lines of worry and exhaustion on his face.

Quickly he distracted himself and looked through his phone to the saved note with the social worker's instructions on how to find her office. He had memorized the details before he left the hospital and closed his phone as he made his way to the elevators at the end of the hall.

When the elevators opened to the fourth floor, he turned right and knocked on the first office he saw.

A woman who appeared to be in her late fifties opened the door to him with a smile, introducing herself as Mary, the social worker.

Their conversation was the same as the phone call, and the same information was relayed to him for a second time. He nodded in understanding and politely waited for her to finish.

"I have the forms that your son signed earlier. They were faxed over after our phone call."

She handed him a stack of legal documents, which he reviewed carefully. Everything looked in order, right to the signature on the bottom where his son had signed away any legal rights to the child.

"I believe there are no other next-of-kin to contact. My understanding is his mother passed away a couple of years ago, and he has no siblings."

"That is correct."

"That would leave the final decision with you. The mother has no next of kin available for contact and was discharged this afternoon. I have already spoken with the medical team, and

they are happy to meet with you in about fifteen minutes to discuss the next steps regarding care.”

Eric ran his fingers through his brown hair, coaxing it out of his eyes.

“I don’t know if having a medical update is necessary. I don’t intend on having any further involvement with the child at this point, and can sign any further documentation to support this discussion if required-”

His words were cut off as a gentle knock on the door turned both their heads. A beautiful woman, who he assumed was a nurse by her green scrubs, leaned in carefully, her hazel eyes meeting Eric’s as she scanned the room.

“My apologies, Mary. I was told to come to your office to escort a gentleman to the new admission and provide a medical update.”

Eric quickly turned his attention back to Mary. He could not let the beautiful woman cause him to lose focus now. He repeated to himself that he was here to sign documents and to make this nightmare disappear.

He could feel the heat of her eyes on the back of his neck and shrugged his shoulders in his suit jacket to reset himself.

“Adrianna, this is Eric, the grandfather of baby Lampert. We were discussing taking a quick visit to see the baby.” Mary turned and looked Eric deep in his eyes, “Which I was just saying we encourage - and highly recommend - before discussing any legal matters further.”

Mary sighed and furrowed her brow, seeming to think better of her chosen words. “Of course, Eric, if you are firm on any decision, we will support you in whichever direction you choose.”

As Eric was about to protest for a second time, a sudden loud alarm boomed overhead, and Adrianna took off running down the hallway in a blur.

Mary didn’t bat an eye as the alarm continued to its intensity, and a person called over the speaker, “Code 222, all required personnel to room 4702 urgently.”

Eric looked at Mary with a questioning look, but she didn't seem worried.

She sensed his concern and quickly explained, "That's the distress code for our babies. There was likely a recent delivery, and the new baby is having difficulty transitioning after birth. The labour and delivery unit know to call the NICU team for resuscitation and intervention."

Eric had a wave of nausea overcome him as he remembered the delivery of his son, who came out blue and not breathing.

He carried that memory with him as one of the worst moments of his life. He had felt completely helpless when he watched the medical team whisk away his child before he even had a chance to cut the umbilical cord.

Suddenly the thought of a young baby in the NICU by himself was pulling at his heart, and he turned to Mary.

"How long will it take to find a suitable family? Perhaps I will stay involved until someone is appointed."

Mary nodded, "Typically, there is a long waitlist, and it shouldn't take more than a few days. We are heading into the long May weekend, so anything will be dealt with next week. Still, we should have a family in place before next weekend. If not, a foster will be available before then. I don't know the status of the baby at this point, but typically the stay of a neonate going through withdrawals is about one to two weeks. We have plenty of time to get everything in place."

Eric nodded and stood up.

"I'll bring you to see the baby, and Adrianna can provide an update when she returns from the code."

Adrianna, the hazel eyes in the green nursing scrubs which tightly fit her sweeping curves.

Somehow, he wished he had been assigned an elderly nurse close to retirement – then, at least, it would be easier to concentrate.

# Chapter 4

## ERIC

Adrianna looked perfectly in control as she pushed the incubator towards the NICU with the charge nurse, respiratory therapist, neonatal physician and the baby's father following behind her.

The charge nurse pushed the ventilation equipment behind the incubator, checking numbers and jotting notes on a piece of paper. Eric had seen enough medical cases in his early career to know that they were recording everything to document later in case there was ever an issue.

Eric was standing in the front hallway of the unit at this point, patiently waiting to be directed further. Mary had brought him into the front of the unit and shown him the assignment board with the names of all the babies, but then had been called over by another nurse and disappeared.

Now he was standing alone, left to wait and observe while he felt like an intruder.

Adrianna was reading some numbers off the machines and calling them out as she pushed past him with a little baby inside an incubator.

The baby was attached to several wires that ran through multiple portholes on the incubator. Each wire led to a different machine with various beeps and moving numbers. It was overwhelming to see, and his brain couldn't make sense of what seemed to be chaos.

An alarm started sounding as the team rushed past him.

He didn't mean to intrude on patient confidentiality, but he couldn't keep his eyes off Adrianna. She was calm and collected as another nurse came over to the baby, and she started providing a detailed report. It hadn't taken them long to stabilize the baby.

Eric thought it looked like the assignment was being handed to another nurse. That would mean Adrianna would be free soon.

Adrianna was speaking in a matter-of-fact tone, reminding him of a soldier on the front lines of a battle.

“34 weeker, came out flat, required vigorous stim and suction, breaths were given and CPAP was initiated by RT. Pressures are set at 7, highest FiO2 was 50%, but we are now almost weaned to room air. IV inserted into their right hand with D10 running, CBC, lytes and gas were sent to the lab, results just came in, and they look great.”

After her report, her voice changed to more soft and melodic tones as she started cooing to the baby and jokingly giving her trouble for scaring the parents.

“You just had to come out early to scare Mom and Dad, didn’t you? Oh, you sweet thing. Let’s go into the room so we can get you all set up and comfy.”

She paused and looked over at the father, whose face was ashen and looked like he might pass out. She pointed into the room they were heading into.

“Dad, you can go into the room with your little one, and please take lots of photos for Mom so she knows that baby is okay. Laura will take care of her for now, so try not to worry. She looks great and just needs a little rest from her stressful delivery. She’s beautiful, by the way. Congratulations again, Dad.”

He thought it was sweet that she called him ‘Dad.’ He was sure all the nurses did this, but he still found it endearing.

A thought suddenly pulled him back to reality. Would he then be granddad? He had heard Mary describe him as this earlier, but it hadn’t hit him until now.

It made his stomach clench. He thought he had been too young to be a father, and now he felt too young to be a grandfather.

Mary came out of another room and met with Adrianna, speaking quietly before they both looked over at Eric.



Adrianna nodded and parted ways with Mary, making her way toward Eric with a nurturing smile.

“Hello, Mr. Forrester, I’m Adrianna. I’m sorry for the wait. If you follow me, I’ll lead you to your little one’s room and give you a bit of an update.”

He noticed that she did not call him dad – or *granddad*.

She turned on her heels and made her way down a hallway lined with what looked like little rooms surrounded by glass walls and doors.

Some of the rooms looked to hold several babies, all at separate stations in little cots or incubators like he had seen the one baby in earlier. Other rooms only fit one or two babies.

Each baby was hooked up to computer monitors with varying graphs and numbers that appeared to be in real-time. Each monitor had a nurse periodically reviewing it or adjusting settings if it alarmed. It was a quiet unit in terms of voice- but had the constant murmur of equipment moving, with different drips and alarms feeding into it.

He was brought down to the end of the unit, where Adrianna stopped and pointed at a room with a closed door and the lights turned off. It was the only room he had seen that wasn’t open and he wondered if this was normal.

“This is where baby Lampert is. We have the door shut to decrease stimulation. I’m just going to get an update from my colleagues, and I’ll meet you there shortly.”

She was looking at him inquisitively, as if she was trying to figure him out but have her eyes remain nonjudgmental.

As he grabbed the handle of the door, she rushed to his side. “Just gently lean the door shut if you don’t mind; it can close loudly. There’s a chair in there for you to sit.”

He walked into the room and did as she instructed, and slowly closed the door behind him.

To his very left was a tiny baby in an open cot wearing several cords that connected to a monitor. Unlike the other babies who were wrapped up in blankets, this baby was only

wearing a diaper which he found strange. He had a blanket loosely around his waist, but his upper body and feet were completely exposed.

The room wasn't cold, but it certainly wasn't too warm.

The monitor had several numbers and what looked like cardiac graphs, but he wasn't sure. There was one sink, a small counter with medical equipment, a little cupboard that looked like it held jackets, one window with a bare windowsill and a single chair that looked like a medical recliner - if such a thing existed.

A laundry hamper, a garbage bin and another small shelf were on the adjacent wall to the tiny cot. On the small shelf, there was an extremely tiny scale and a little plastic machine that he assumed was some sort of a bottle warmer.

Not wanting to disturb anything, he took his light jacket off and slung it across the back of the recliner. He walked over to the window to see what part of the hospital grounds he could view and noted that he could see his car in the distant parking lot.

Directly below was an ambulance bay for the emergency department, which seemed quiet at the moment.

He sat in the recliner and took his phone out of his pocket to see if any urgent messages had come from his office. He only had one text from Miranda, asking him why he had rushed past her without saying goodbye, and then an email from his admin to the office stating he would be out of the office for the remainder of the afternoon.

He sighed and let his head rest on the back of the recliner. With only the low natural sunlight in the room and the peaceful quiet, he could almost take a nap.

Suddenly a shriek sailed into the air and pierced his ears. It was a long sorrowful wail that made his heart skip a beat and his adrenaline rush.

He didn't remember cries like this when he had his son twenty years prior.

He jumped up, and within two steps was at the side of the cot, watching the baby's chubby face turn red while tears fell down his cheeks. His first instinct was to try and comfort him, but he had no idea how. He also wasn't sure if he was even allowed to touch the baby.

The monitor started alarming, and he could see a number climbing into the 200s, turning yellow and then red with urgency.

He needed Adrianna - or someone - because something bad was happening, and he shouldn't have ever been left alone to care for this fragile baby.

Eric looked through the glass and saw an empty hallway.

Where *was* everyone? What the *hell* was he doing in this small room with the sudden responsibility of this baby? This was not how he thought his day was going to end up.

He kept repeating in his mind that something was wrong. Very wrong.

The large number on the monitor was blinking red; an urgent alarm was coming from the speaker, and a flashing red light on top of the monitor created panic in his bones.

He started wringing his hands in frustration as sweat collected above his eyebrows. He wanted to trust that everything was okay, but his heart told him something wasn't right.

The sorrowful wails grew even louder and pierced his ears. The redness on the baby's cheeks had now spread to his entire face and upper chest. Tears were collecting on his little neck.

Eric felt panic set in but tried to rationalize with himself. Perhaps it was hot in this room. He could feel dampness seeping into the cloth of his dress shirt - from everywhere: his chest, armpits, even his back.

As he was about to pound on the glass, calm and collected Adrianna sauntered in and gently leaned over between him and the baby to turn the monitor off. Her scrub top had a slight gap in the neckline, and he thought he saw black lace underneath

before he hastily looked away. He was too angry to be turned on right now.

He had fire in his eyes as he glared at her. With a furrowed brow and his nostrils flared, he angrily sucked in a deep breath and then let loose in her direction.

“What kind of an operation are you running around here? Why isn’t anyone watching this child? He’s not even wearing clothes, for Christ’s sake.”

He was seething, and all he could see was red as his heart throbbed in his temples. He couldn’t help himself as he glared at Adrianna, demanding an answer.

Looking back, it was at that moment that he knew he had messed up.

In an instant, the sweetness he saw earlier in Adrianna’s eyes cooled over as she met his glare with her own, her hands defensively gripping her curvy hips. It made her waist look even smaller than he had noticed before.

He couldn’t remember the last time someone had looked at him like that, especially not in his position as a partnered lawyer at his firm.

She continued to meet his gaze. He shifted uncomfortably on his feet as he questioned whether she had heard him. The baby was still crying loudly, and Adrianna made no move to attend to him.

It took another half second, which felt like five minutes, before she sanitized her hands and scooped up the baby, quickly detaching the monitoring equipment from his little limbs and tucking them into her neck while tapping his bum with her one hand.

The baby was still crying, but it was muffled in her scrub top. His tiny fists thumped against her breasts, but she made no motion to stop them.

Without speaking, she turned and left the room, leaving him staring blankly at the closed door.

The echo of the door closing was still in his ears moments later. She had been right - it really did slam when you let it go.

Within a few minutes, she returned with a hospital gown and a small bottle with a nipple attached.

The baby was still crying as she thrust the gown to him while not making eye contact. The cries were growing more desperate.

He accepted the hospital gown from her hands, not knowing what she wanted from him.

“Did you sanitize your hands, sir?” She bounced the baby and shot an icy glare to the wall where a hand sanitizer was.

He followed her gaze and took a step, sanitizing his hands quickly.

“You’ll need to remove your shirt and replace it with this gown. It ties in the back, but you’re going to wear it with the tie in the front.”

“What?”

She was about to repeat herself when the baby started shrieking louder.

Quickly she placed the baby back in the cot and turned her back to him while she tended to his cries. It looked like she was performing an assessment as she had her stethoscope out and was listening to his chest while simultaneously popping a soother into his mouth.

Even despite the soother, the baby continued to whimper. He was amazed she was able to listen to anything while the baby was so upset.

Not wanting to complicate things further, but still confused, he again asked what she wanted of him.

“The baby is hungry and needs to be comforted, or he won’t eat. We promote ‘skin to skin’ here, but since this baby does not have any active parents, he doesn’t have anyone to soothe him.”

She had her stethoscope around her neck now, one hand holding a soother into the baby's mouth to stifle some of the cries.

“Skin to skin?”

“Yes, it means the baby wears nothing but a diaper, and you hold the baby close to you, so that your skin is touching. It releases endorphins that help calm the child.”

Without thinking, he looked at her chest and asked, “Is this a service that the, uhh, nurses also provide?”

“No.”

With that, she turned away from him and back to the baby, making cooing sounds to help comfort him again because his cries were ramping back up.

“And for the record, we have monitors outside the unit that we are always reviewing. I saw exactly what was happening with him while you were here, but was busy drawing up his medication. The elevated number you saw was his heart rate which is completely normal to increase above two hundred when he is crying.”

She was talking with her back to him, and as she turned around, her eyes fell on his chest as she saw him shirtless. He thought maybe he saw the hint of a smile in her eyes, but in a blink, she was professional again, and maintaining eye contact with him.

He turned and put the gown on as she instructed, leaving the front open.

The baby started crying again as she picked him up and walked him over to Eric.

“You can sit, and I'll hand him to you.”

Eric promptly sat, following her commands, and outstretched his arms to hold the baby. She gently passed him, carefully holding the baby's head and neck as she did so.

Eric held the baby close and felt the soft skin of the newborn press onto his own. He awkwardly tried to readjust

the baby's head when she moved her hands to help him, ever so slightly grazing his chest as she assisted.

Eric noticed that the baby seemed stiff and awkward. He didn't remember his son being this way - he remembered him as this gentle floppy baby that he had to be extremely careful with.

Adrianna seemed to read his mind and began speaking as she popped a bottle into the warmer. She pulled a small syringe out of her scrub top pocket and walked back to the small countertop beside the cot.

"Babies in drug withdrawal are unlike regular newborns. I'll briefly explain what you can expect to see, and then I can go into what we are seeing with your little one here. We call these babies 'NAS babies,' which stands for Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome."

She was so professional and so cool that he wished he could go back and not have snapped at her the way he did. He wanted to apologize, but the way she was educating him didn't allow space for him to do so.

She was typing into what looked like a small iPhone as she spoke, taking a moment to scan the syringe in her hands.

"Babies in withdrawal are warmer than regular babies, which is why we don't have him wrapped in anything, nor is he wearing any clothing."

She made a point of staring into his eyes when she said the last part.

Point taken; he had been an ass.

"In addition, they are quite stiff, and although it appears they have good head and neck control and can sometimes even hold a bottle, what you're seeing is a reaction to withdrawing from substances."

She looked back down at the syringe in her hands.

"We give small amounts of opiates to alleviate the withdrawal symptoms, and what I have here is a very small dose of morphine. We can always titrate up and down, and we

do so based on a system of scoring we call ‘Finnegan scoring.’ You need not worry about this part, as the medical team will do the scoring. Still, things we look for are difficulty sleeping, irritability, sores or skin breakdown, increased temperatures, vomiting, diarrhea-” she was cut off by the baby sneezing five times in a row - sneezing his soother out onto the floor with the last sneeze, “- and sneezing.”

He looked at her, intent on learning but still feeling awkward with his shirt off and holding this small baby he didn’t know about until this morning.

“Sneezing?”

“Yes, but only if it’s multiple times in a row.”

He shook his head. This was all getting to be a bit much.

She leaned down and grabbed the dirty soother, placing it on the counter.

“You can bring that home to sanitize for later use, and I’ll grab another one.”

He was just about to correct her and say he didn’t intend on having any further involvement with this baby other than what she was witnessing in front of her, but the baby started screaming again. She took another soother out of a plastic wrap and popped it in his mouth.

This seemed to upset him further, and just as he was about to spit this second soother on the ground, she started putting the pink contents of the syringe into his mouth.

“It’s sweet-tasting, and babies usually like it.”

She was so close that Eric could feel loose chestnut strands of hair tickling his hands as he held the baby. He could smell coconut, but he wasn’t sure if it was her hair, or deodorant, or just the natural sweetness of her.

Whatever it was, he found it intoxicating.

What further complicated things was how she treated him was turning him on.



He was used to women fawning over him, despite how he acted, but here his position meant nothing. Being a lawyer, even if she knew it, likely would mean nothing to her. He had a feeling that a prestigious job would do little to impress her.

She was surrounded by physicians all day, for that matter. Not saving lives put him lower on the totem pole around here, and he felt uncomfortably insignificant.

A beeping from the small plastic machine started, and she walked over and took the bottle of milk out.

The softness in her voice returned as she brought the formula over to Eric and started talking to the baby while leaning in closely again.

“I’ll show you how to feed him, and then I’ll explain the findings of my assessment earlier to give you a real-time update. Once I’m done, I’ll hook him back up to the monitor so the two of you can snuggle.”

She took another breath, standing up straight and looking him in the eyes as she slowly said the next part.

“And to reiterate, I’ll be watching his monitor from outside.”

Again, he knew he had been an ass.

If he planned on coming to the hospital a second time, maybe he would bring her a coffee or something to smooth things over.

Maybe his assistant could send over a basket or something next week.

## Chapter 5

### ERIC

The baby had finished his bottle, and now Eric was holding him upright like Adrianna had instructed, giving him a pat on his back to help him burp. She had said to hold him up for twenty minutes, tapping his back intermittently. He fully intended to follow her instructions so as to not anger her further.

From where his chair was located, he could see her side profile as she worked on a computer outside his room.

He felt bad for taking up so much of her time. He could tell that she was busy in the room beside him as he saw her periodically getting up from the computer and checking on the other baby.

He had a completely different picture in his head of a NICU. He felt like an ass, thinking back to his angry comment earlier and how he had walked into the unit assuming it was like a nursery you saw in the movies, where babies were all swaddled and lined up in neat rows near a glass window.

This medical unit was nothing like the movies. It was quiet in conversation but alive with the sounds of crying babies, cooing nurses, IV drips, and monitor alarms.

Just when he thought he wasn't giving the nurses enough credit, he heard a panicked voice in the hallway speaking loudly, "Adrianna, help! Please! She's not breathing! She's not breathing!"

A young nurse across the hall had run towards Adrianna with an infant in her arms. He could see the blue face and lips from where he was sitting.

Adrianna turned around quickly, and without hesitation or panic, she gently grabbed the baby from the nurse's arms and said, "Oh my dear, you silly little girl, why did you stop breathing, my sweet thing?"

He could see her quickly place a reassuring hand on the young nurse's shoulder, and together they walked to the baby's cot that was nestled by the door of the other room.

He couldn't hear what they were saying anymore, but he could see her sit the baby up and give what looked like exaggerated back rubs while she was directing the scared nurse on the next steps.

The young nurse was shaking as she was hooking the baby back onto the monitor. Adrianna calmly continued to rub the baby's back while periodically looking at her face.

Adrianna pointed at the wall, and the nurse handed her what looked like a tiny oxygen mask attached to a small green balloon. The young nurse turned a dial on the wall, and Adrianna held it up to the baby's face while looking at the monitor.

Eric was on the edge of his seat, still holding his own baby, that had drifted off to sleep in his arms, leaving a pool of fresh spit on his shoulder. He briefly looked at his face to ensure he was breathing properly – which he was.

When he looked back over to the other baby, he saw that Adrianna was assisting the nurse in swaddling the baby back into the cot and was adjusting something on the monitor.

With red-rimmed eyes and rosy cheeks, the young nurse looked like she was about to cry.

Adrianna seemed satisfied with the status of the baby and led the nurse back to her workstation, allowing Eric to hear their conversation again.

Eric overheard Adrianna saying, "You did great, Amber. You knew something was wrong; you assessed the situation, you called for help, and you kept your cool. I want to remind you that you need to keep the babies on the monitor when feeding them - especially when she's a baby who has done this before. This way, if she stops breathing again, the monitor will alarm us to come and help you in the room, and you can start your intervention without spending time finding someone to help."

The young nurse now had tears down her face and was trembling.

“Remember your resuscitation training; try to review it again tonight. We wait for the babies to come around; if not, then stimulation. If they still don’t come up, then oxygen. Next time we will come to you by the time you need to intervene but remember you did well today, and I have confidence in you. You’re going to be a great nurse, and I’m very proud of you. That was very scary what happened in there, and you did great!”

The young nurse seemed to have calmed down now.

“Now go chart what happened, and I’ll be here listening if she does it again. Take a deep breath. You’re going to see a lot of this in your career!”

At that moment, Eric was certain he would be the one coming back with a gift basket for these nurses. Either way, it would be another reason to see Adrianna again.



## ERIC

A gentle hand on his shoulder brought him back to reality. He hadn’t realized that someone put the feet up on the recliner, and he and the baby had drifted off to sleep together.

Adrianna was gently lifting the baby from his arms. They were both a bit sweaty where their skin had touched for so long.

“I am finishing my shift soon. I just need to do a quick assessment, and then you can have him back if you wish.”

Eric rubbed his eyes and became aware that he still wasn’t wearing a shirt.

He looked at his watch and realized it was almost seven o’clock in the evening. He had been in the NICU for three hours.

“No, thank you,” he cleared his throat, “I actually have to be going as well.”

“When will you be back tomorrow? I can let the nurses know when to expect you.”

Eric was taken off guard. He hadn't planned on coming back, but as he looked at the baby who had just woken up with the heat of his body missing, he felt guilty.

"He's awake again. What happens next?"

"We try and pair him with a nurse with a lighter assignment who can hold him as needed. These babies require a lot of extra attention and sometimes need to be held constantly. Unfortunately, we don't always have the time, so unless family is here, we just try to settle him as a team and do the best we can."

The baby started crying again, short sobs, with long breaths that told him bigger cries were about to come.

"I can maybe come by tomorrow evening and do another bottle and, uhm," he looked around awkwardly, "skin-to-skin snuggle..."

She let out a soft giggle, and Eric hoped this was code for her forgiving his anger earlier.

"Of course, anytime. I'm on night shift tomorrow, so I'll see you in the evening if I'm assigned to him again. If not, it was lovely meeting you and congratulations on your little one."

She brought her attention back to the baby as she lifted him into her arms and started bouncing him, asking him if he was a stinky little boy and needed a diaper change.

He wasn't sure how she could go from blue babies one minute to bouncing a drug withdrawal baby the next - but he assumed it took a very special person to do so.

With her back turned to him, he replaced the gown with his dress shirt and started to button it back up.

He would try and stop by again tomorrow if he wasn't too drained from catching up on today's absence.

As he was walking out of the unit, he suddenly turned on his heels and walked back over to Adrianna. She was holding the baby closely on her chest while typing into her computer with her free hand.

"Oh, and Adrianna, do you drink coffee?"

She looked over at him, hazel eyes taken aback.

Eric felt the need to fidget but used all his willpower to stand firm on his feet. “I mean, you and the other nurses, of course.”

“Oh, yes, we do?”

“Great, I’ll bring some tomorrow evening. Thank you for today”.

She gave him a polite smile which was more than he thought she would after the way he treated her earlier.

With that resolved, he put his hands back in his pockets and went back to his car, exhausted. His brain felt foggy, and he wasn’t sure if it was from the nap or how Adrianna’s presence made him feel.

He shook his head. It was much easier to be around her when he was angry. He just needed to gain some distance and clarity, and he would be back to his old self.

## Chapter 6

### ERIC

“I just don’t believe it.” Miranda was shaking her head in disbelief.

“You keep saying that,” Eric replied in a dry tone.

“I know, but it’s true. I can’t imagine you holding a tiny baby to sleep on a Friday night. I mean - an *actual baby*, not like those young, pretty little things you always have around you.”

“First of all...” he was scowling at Miranda now, “I have a son, remember? This isn’t new stuff to me.”

Miranda flipped her hand at him in dismissal. “That was twenty years ago. You were like a whole different person back then.”

They were sitting around his kitchen island after Miranda came over with coffee and scones.

He had sent her a text late last night after he left the NICU, and she had insisted on coming over the next day to get the full details.

“I also have a little something for you ... or well... you know.” With a pleased look on her face, she pulled a sizeable blue gift bag out from behind her and put it on the table.

Eric started shaking his head to say no, but before he could get any words out, she was already speaking again.

“I know what you’re going to say, but I just couldn’t help myself. You said so yourself that he wasn’t wearing any clothes.”

“Because he was too hot.”

“Yes, but he won’t always be that way, and then when he *can* wear clothes - he won’t have any!”

“That’s what his adoptive parents can provide for him. You remember I’m not taking care of this child, right?”

Miranda wasn't listening to him at this point; she was too busy pulling little onesies and soothers out of the bag.

He grabbed it from her and started to open it.

"Jesus, Miranda, how much shit did you buy? There's so much stuff in here."

"He needs it all!"

"Shoes?"

Eric pulled out the tiniest pair of Nike shoes from the bag as Miranda squealed with delight.

"He needs shoes!"

Eric was shaking his head. "They don't even have soles on them!"

She laughed and grabbed them from his hands. "I regret nothing."

He was still shaking his head at everything she had bought.

"I'll bring it tonight."

Miranda smiled and tossed the little shoes back into the gift bag.

"So, you're going back then? If so, then I'm coming with you."

He was about to argue and say she shouldn't come, but he knew that was no use.

"Fine, you can carry in the coffees."



## ERIC

Typically, when a family brought coffee and treats to the unit, they would bring a big box of coffee with milk, cream and sugar on the side, and everyone would make what they wanted.



Despite what was the usual, Miranda had called the unit and asked for everyone's Starbucks order before they arrived. They had a total of ten drinks to deliver, and it took two of them to carry the coffees, scones - which Miranda insisted they also grab - and the oversized gift bag of baby clothes.

Eric felt as ridiculous as he thought they looked.

When they finally arrived at the closed unit and were cleared to enter, the nurses were overjoyed with the treats and coffees. They said it was the most thoughtful thing anyone had ever done, and they couldn't believe their luck to be on shift tonight.

Out of the corner of his eye, Eric could see Miranda's I-told-you-so smirk. Although he knew she was right, he would never admit it.

They made their way down to the end of the unit feeling like celebrities by the way everyone thanked them for their generosity.

Eric thought to himself that nurses needed to be more appreciated if this is what made their night.

He couldn't believe how excited everyone was over a simple Starbucks order.

He already knew that Adrianna would be their nurse tonight after he saw her name listed on the assignment board.

With her latte in hand, he set it at the same nursing station she had worked at the other night. Along with it, he placed a special scone he had picked out just for her.

He hoped his small gesture would erase the memory of him being an asshole yesterday. He kept telling himself that he was only interested in making amends because he wanted the best care for his grandson - but deep down, he knew that wasn't the only reason.

Grandson. Grandson. He repeated that in his head.

He needed to be careful about his boundaries with this child. Especially one that he wouldn't be involved with after the next few days.

He wanted the best for him now but wouldn't know what would happen in his future.

The word grandson kept bouncing around in his brain. He barely felt old enough to have a *son*, and here he was, fawning over his first *grandson*.

A thought struck him – depending on how things went for his son – this might be his only grandchild, and the opportunity may never present itself again.



## ADRIANNA

When Adrianna arrived on shift, she was happy that she wasn't charge or resuscitation nurse for the night. She was also pleased that she had the same assignment as the previous shift. Perfect for a night shift.

When she made her way to the back of the unit, she overheard commotion by the monitoring station that held a view of all of the monitors on the unit in one place. Underneath the big screens, there were several cups of various Starbucks drinks with nurses coming around and looking for their names on them.

“What's all this for?” She asked, but everyone was so busy looking for their names that nobody answered immediately.

Finally, someone answered from behind. “Apparently, one of the NAS babies has a hot lawyer for a dad, and he bought everyone coffees and treats. Did you get yours?”

Adrianna briefly scanned the drinks but didn't see her name on them.

“No, but I didn't tell anyone what I drink anyways, so I don't see how he would've known.”

The nurse in charge of the night was walking up to grab her drink and overheard Adrianna.

“Chai latte, I let him know. We work enough night shifts together to remember what we drink.”

Adrianna was about to say that they must have forgotten her order when she noticed that someone had put her drink and a treat at her workstation.

She smiled when she saw it. When she looked up, she saw Eric already in the room, looking over the cot. Her heart fluttered as she felt a pang of jealousy when she noticed another woman beside him. The beautiful woman was leaning close to him and smiling.

It was silly of her to feel jealousy over someone she had met just once. Someone, who she was quick to forget, hadn't been the nicest to her when they had first met.

She told herself that he was stressed, and many families lashed out at staff when they were under pressure, so she had easily forgiven how his words had stung - but she wouldn't easily forget how quickly his temper had risen and been directed at her. In case it happened again.

She quickly scrubbed in and got the shift report from the day nurse before she walked into the room to do her first assessment of the shift.

Eric and the other woman respectfully stepped back from the cot to give her space. She noted how they were both very quiet when she walked in. Either she had disrupted their conversation, or they were trying to make sure the baby didn't wake.

Adrianna smiled and peered down to see the baby peacefully sleeping. She would wait to do an assessment when he fully woke up - which was likely soon by the way his day had been.

Quietly she did a check on all the bedside equipment and settings on the monitor before turning to face Eric and his partner.

In a whisper, she said, "Hi guys, we can talk outside if you don't mind. The little guy had a rough day, so I'll give you an update in the hall if that's okay."

All three quietly left the room and reconvened in the hallway after Adrianna softly shut the door.

"Thank you for not going in and picking him up. We try to let the babies rest for as long as possible to help them heal."

Eric poked an elbow into his partner's side as Adrianna finished her sentence.

"I told you we weren't supposed to wake him, and you didn't believe me."

The beautiful woman at his side rolled her eyes at him.

"He's *adorable*. Exactly *how* am I not supposed to pick him up and kiss him all over?"

Adrianna studied their behaviour with one another. Perhaps they were brother and sister, but again, it shouldn't make a difference to her.

Mentally she scolded herself for thinking about this and reminded herself that it shouldn't matter. Should. Not. Matter.

"You're not supposed to kiss other people's babies either, Miranda."

The beautiful woman, who she now knew was named Miranda, opened her mouth to object but then thought better of it.

Adrianna nodded. "Thank you, Eric." She laughed softly and made eye contact with Miranda. "He's right about the kissing. It's not the greatest idea to kiss anyone's baby as they are immunocompromised at birth. Especially no kissing babies in a NICU anyways."

Miranda smiled warmly back, a hint of redness flushing her cheeks. "I can hold him though, right?"

"Of course you can," Adrianna said kindly. "As long as that's okay with Eric?"

She gave Eric a questioning look as realization appeared to wash over his face that he had forgotten to introduce Miranda.

"Adrianna, this is my colleague, Miranda. I will add her to the safe list for visitors because even if I tried, I don't think I could keep her away from here."

He gave Adrianna a wink, and Miranda laughed.

"Nope. You really, really couldn't." Miranda was smiling now as she put out her hand to shake Adrianna's.

“I’ve heard lovely things about you, Adrianna. Thank you so much for taking care of that adorable baby.”

Adrianna blushed slightly and looked over at Eric, who appeared to be a bit uncomfortable. She wondered if this meant that he was talking to other people about her.

Her heart fluttered a bit as she took in his appearance. He was dressed more casually today in a black athletic half-zip and navy pants. His attire reminded her of someone who was quite active and outdoorsy. She imagined him running on snowy trails in his athletic shirt, his chest muscles bulging as his heart pounded.

She noticed she was looking at his chest as she drifted off in thought and quickly reoriented herself to be professional.

She cleared her throat, and with a smile, she proceeded to give them an update on the baby’s day, saying he had been upset all day and had high scores throughout the night.

They were increasing the dose of his morphine which likely meant he would have an extended stay in the NICU, but it was all in keeping with substance withdrawal. They were still waiting for results from blood and urine samples to confirm which substances the baby was withdrawing from, but at the end of the day, the management would remain the same.

She explained that sometimes breast milk from the mother would contain the same substances that the baby was withdrawing from, and could help with withdrawal symptoms. The issue was that because the mother wasn’t involved, it made it a bit more difficult, but not impossible, to get him comfortable.

When she felt satisfied that she had given a proper update and all their questions were answered, she thought of something to ask but wanted to put it as delicately as possible.

“Eric, I wanted to ask if the baby has a name. I am not sure if you plan on naming the child, or the circumstances regarding your relationship after discharge, but I just wanted to ask. If you do have a name, then we will make up a card for the crib and call the baby by that name if you wish.”

“Oliver.”

Miranda and Adrianna were surprised by his quick answer.

“Of course,” he continued. “The adopting family can name the baby whatever they wish, but for now, we can call him Oliver.”

“Perfect, I’ll ask one of the nurses to write up a nice card for the crib.”

Right on cue, Oliver started crying, and Adrianna started towards the door.

“I’ll do my assessment while his bottle warms up, and the rest is up to you.”

Adrianna continued into the room and got started by putting a soother into Oliver’s mouth so she could listen to his heart and lungs. Then she took his temperature and checked his wet diaper.

“Eric, did you want to change Oliver’s diaper?”

Just as Eric was about to answer, Miranda stepped in front and asked, “Can I do it? Oh, please, I would love to.”

Eric nodded, and Adrianna began teaching Miranda while he watched. After the diaper was weighed and the bottle was ready, she looked over at Miranda, who was now snuggling Oliver, and handed her the bottle.

Miranda smiled, and Adrianna showed her how to hold him and the bottle at the same time.

Adrianna noticed Eric grinning in the corner while watching them, and found herself also smiling – it was infectious.

She noticed there was a gift bag on the counter in the room. It looked like clothing was sticking out the top of it.

Miranda must have caught her peering over at it and quickly told her it was from her, and she had made sure to wash all of it before bringing it in.

Adrianna smiled at both Eric and Miranda.

In just over twenty-four hours, the baby now had a name and new clothing.

Adrianna felt a pang of worry for Eric. Although he had been quite clear that Oliver was to be placed for adoption, Eric wasn't acting like most parents who did not want to be involved.

She just hoped everything would work out for Oliver's sake - that was all that mattered.

## Chapter 7

### ADRIANNA

Adrianna woke up with a start, wincing against the brightness of her bedroom. She had forgotten to pull down the blackout curtains, and now her bedroom was filled with warm sunlight.

At the end of the bed, she could feel pressure from Henry sleeping on her legs, and when she peered down, she could see that his head and front legs were resting on her. He opened one eye and saw her looking down at him.

That was all it took. He was suddenly wide awake and walking over enthusiastically to lick her face.

Rolling away in laughter, she checked her phone and saw it was two o'clock in the afternoon.

It wasn't a horrible time to wake up, but she would have preferred another hour or two since she had to work her last night shift tonight.

Yawning and making an exaggerated stretch with her arms and legs taking over the whole mattress - she slowly got into a sitting position by swinging her legs over the side of the bed.

The sudden movement gave her a heady feeling and a bit of nausea as her body readjusted to the daylight and lack of sleep.

She hated night shifts for this reason.

Moving back to her phone, she turned off the alarm she had set for five o'clock that evening and then dressed in black leggings and an oversized light pink sweater.

It was time to have a coffee, a bite to eat and more importantly, Henry needed a walk.

As if reading her mind, Henry jumped off the bed towards his leash at the front door.

She sighed; walk first, then coffee along the way, then food at home.



She opened the back door to check the weather and let Henry get his business done so they could enjoy a vigorous walk without stopping every few minutes.

Once he finished, she attached his leash, put on a cute ball cap to cover her messy hair, which she pulled out the back into a messy bun, and put sunglasses on to hide the bags that she knew were under her eyes. She didn't need a mirror to show how tired she was - she could feel it.

She tried to remember what she had read about night shifts. They prematurely aged you and shortened your life by ten years or something - the irony was that she was too tired to remember.

She laughed to herself as she and Henry caught their stride outside. If she was going down ten years earlier, then her coworkers were running the race alongside her. They were sadly all in this together.

About five blocks from her house, there was a local coffee shop that she frequented for their chai lattes. Henry knew the drill and would sit patiently outside while she went in line to grab one. Today she would grab him a treat while she was inside; something small without too much sugar would be perfect for him.

Quickly she ran inside to grab her latte, rushing as she always did because of the unfounded fear that someone would try and steal her dog.

She grabbed Henry a special treat with her latte and returned to find him being petted by a stranger who was trying to take his photo.

Smiling, she slowly untied the leash, and when the stranger finished taking photos and petting Henry, she congratulated Henry with his special treat and took the first sip of her latte. The caffeine felt glorious.

Together they started their walk back home, more slowly this time, so she could enjoy her latte while Henry sniffed every blade of grass he had missed on his first trip.

About a block from her house, she could see a car in the roundabout in front of her house, brake lights on, not yet in

park.

It was an expensive-looking car, sleek and black, with tinted windows and what looked to be expensive rims. As she got closer, she saw the Mercedes emblem on the trunk.

A tall man exited the car, looking around, likely looking for parking restrictions, but he wouldn't find any. Her place was just far enough from the hospital that parking wasn't limited because nobody wanted to walk that far for free parking.

She called out politely, "There are no parking restrictions if that's what you're looking for."

The tall man turned around, and her breath caught in her throat with recognition.

She was surprised that he was parking so far from the hospital. Surely with his salary as a lawyer, he didn't need to find free parking.

Eric's brows furrowed as he looked over, instantly softening when he saw her.

She was caught off guard as Henry suddenly lunged forward to greet Eric, and she lost her grip on his leash. Eric noticed and bent down to scoop the leash quickly as Henry danced around him for attention. His tail was wagging forcefully in anticipation of getting pet.

"No jumping, Henry, please," she called out after him. He was usually very well-behaved, but all it took was one time for him to wreck someone's expensive clothing.

"Cute dog."

She nodded at the compliment as she leaned forward to grab his leash back, their hands brushing softly together, sending electric twinges up her arm.

"Sorry about that. He gets a little crazy during my four days of work – it's too much alone time for him."

Eric was still petting Henry, who had now backed up into his legs to give better access to scratch his lower back and hind legs.

“That’s why I could never own a dog. My hours are too long - the poor dog would go stir crazy and likely destroy my house while I was gone.”

Without thinking, she blurted out, “Unless you lived with someone who could help take care of him.”

Thankfully he didn’t seem to put too much weight on her comment and just added, “Oh, no, I don’t live with anyone else. Just me and my running shoes.”

“Well, anytime you want a running partner, this guy would love it.”

Again, such a stupid comment. That would surely cross nurse-patient boundaries. Hopefully, he wouldn’t take her comment seriously.

“I might take you up on that one day. I don’t live too far from here. It wouldn’t add too much to a run if I took him out. He looks like he would love it.”

Henry was wiggling his back end furiously now, as if understanding that he could have a new running partner. She would have to break it to him later on that it would never happen.

“Are you heading into the hospital again? I feel like I just left there.”

He stood up straight now, raking his hands through his mid-length hair.

“I made the mistake of telling my mother about Oliver, and I’ve been told she’s waiting at the NICU doors to be let in, but needs me there to approve her entrance.”

“So, you’re taking your time and finding parking far from the hospital?”

“You got it.”

He looked sheepish, almost childlike.

“Careful, she might get attached.”

“You don’t know my mother - I’m less worried about that than anything else.”

Not fully understanding, but not wanting to pry further, Adrianna decided to change the subject.

“That Oliver is a pretty special little boy. I hope he had a better day today than yesterday. Poor guy just loves the snuggles; it’s hard for him to be without them.”

Adrianna couldn’t help but notice how the air seemed to change when Eric was around her. Time moved slower, and she was more sensitive to his movements, especially his proximity to her.

He was much taller than her, with dark brown hair and honey-brown eyes that seemed to look right through her. His angled jaw had only a shadow of a beard.

Her mind started to wander, picturing how his scruff would feel like brushing against her collarbone and neck if he kissed her. How his full lips would feel against her own, and how his sharp nose would feel as it trailed down her stomach with his soft lips.

She needed to stop this now. He was as much a patient as Oliver was, and she could lose her license if she ever acted on her thoughts.

He also had a temper she didn’t care for, although looking back, it had felt good to put him in his place when he put her nursing abilities into question. If there was one thing she was confident about, it was her ability to care for neonates.

His mouth pulled into a half smile, and the irrational part of her was paranoid he could read her thoughts.

“I’ll leave you to the rest of your walk. I should be going anyways. Perhaps I’ll see you tonight, but likely I’ll be in and out before your shift starts. Thanks again for all your care with Oliver.”

He walked past, and the breeze of his passing gave her goosebumps. She could smell the spice of his cologne hanging in the air after his departure.

She only had one more shift to get through and then would have five days off. Perhaps Oliver would be discharged before

she started her next set, or with her luck, she would be reassigned to the front of the unit and wouldn't see him again.

She would miss Oliver, but more distance between them would be better - Eric was too dangerous to be around.

Much too dangerous - especially when his car was parked in front of her house. She relished in the intimacy of him knowing where she lived.

She walked Henry to her front door, pausing to look back at him before she went inside.

She could only see his back, but a part of her thought maybe she had just missed him looking at her – and now he might know where she lived.

Not that it mattered anyways, but somehow him knowing where she lived gave her a personal connection to him that made her feel hopeful that he wouldn't be lost forever to her after tonight.

Scowling, she shook her head.

She wasn't thinking straight because she was tired and hungry.

She hoped there was enough time to have a nap before work – if only her racing heart would let her.



## **ERIC**

He felt like a stalker. He didn't know she lived so close to the hospital. It was silly of him to turn around to watch what house she went into.

He needed to get his head on straight.

Between the long hours in the NICU and making up for the missing time at work, his eighty-hour work week was becoming unmanageable.

His nights were stolen from him by dreams of babies crying and monitors alarming. His thoughts were consumed by adoption papers and cute nurses with long brown hair and soft hazel eyes.

He really needed to get it together before she complained about him. She probably thought he was unstable the way he had such labile emotional mood swings around her.

First, he accused her of being a neglectful nurse. Second, he told her he wouldn't be involved with the baby but then brought in a friend and a bag of baby clothing. Third, he now had his mother standing outside the unit.

He knew his mother though, and this wouldn't be a friendly visit. He just wished she had met him at home instead of coming to the hospital, but he knew she wouldn't have let him do that anyways. Sometimes it was best when she wasn't involved.

She was a good mother – if you were a child who needed protection. She wasn't motherly in the sense that she gave hugs and kisses and words of constant affirmation, but she would fight tooth and nail for her child if that was what they needed.

She fought to become a lawyer when many other women were taking care of homes and children, and she fought for every position she ever had. Even now that she was retired, her tenacity never left her.

Sometimes he wished for the mom that would be waiting at home with a hot meal and a hug, and not the one that had threatened to sue his high school during his senior year when they illegally searched his locker, found a small baggie of marijuana and wanted to expel him a week before final exams. He owed her for everything he had; he just wished she had softer edges.

Thankfully she would be gone before Adrianna arrived on shift, because if they didn't see eye to eye, he was afraid that neither would step down.

He had seen Adrianna's eyes flip to defence mode when he had heatedly targeted her nursing skills. She had defended herself in such a manner that he knew it wasn't the first time this had happened to her.

He didn't intend to ever insult her again.

She would have made a great lawyer.

There was something very sweet about her, but also raw and defensive. He could see her being the hug and hot meal mother, but also the cornered animal that would risk her life to save her babies.



## ERIC

Eric's mother was patiently waiting outside the NICU when he arrived a few moments later. She was well dressed as always, with white dress pants, a cream sweater and a string of pearls around her neck.

She smiled when she saw him and gave him a quick peck on the cheek as he rang the door for the unit to let them in.

Once inside, he directed her to sanitize her hands and phone and then brought her to Oliver's room at the end of the hallway.

Only once outside the room did they exchange their first pleasantries.

"We have to wait until he wakes up before we can hold him. Usually, the nurses need to assess him first, so I try my best to stay out of the way until they tell me it's okay."

She nodded in understanding and peered into the room through the glass door.

"He's quite large for a premature baby."

"He's not premature."

"I thought that is why he is here?" She had a puzzled look on her face.

"No, he's here for substance withdrawal."

"Oh dear, that is not right." She shook her head in dismay as she made locked eyes with Eric. "That woman should be formally charged for endangering the poor child. Will he grow

up normal? You know that children who grow up in unsavoury households tend to have a lot of behavioural issues.”

“I think in the right home he has a chance of having a normal life – it all depends on who adopts him.”

Another nod of understanding.

“I am glad to hear you say adoption. I was worried you were going to adopt the poor thing, and we all know how that worked out for you last time.” She moved her gaze back into Oliver’s room.

Eric could feel heat prickling his cheeks.

“*Last time*,” he reminded her, “I was twenty-three, it was my *own* child, and he did just fine.”

“Isn’t he in prison?” She raised an eyebrow at him without making eye contact. “I hope you reviewed those papers to ensure he can’t be liable for child support. His life is complicated enough without a mother and now a criminal record. The last thing he needs is for this...” she looked around to ensure they were still speaking privately, “*problem* to resurface in a few years.”

Eric looked over at the baby, insulted he was being referred to as a *problem*.

Through gritted teeth, he hissed at her, “Please refrain from calling my grandson a problem.”

“Oh dear,” she gently touched his cheek for the briefest of moments with her palm, “You sound like you’re becoming attached, my love. Perhaps you’ve spent too much time here and need to go home for a rest.”

He knew her coming here was a bad idea.

“Why are you even here, Mother? Did you want to hold him or even see him?”

“Oh goodness no, I’m wearing white, and you know how dirty hospitals are.” She smoothed her pants to demonstrate her point.

“So then what?”



“Eric, I don’t appreciate your tone. I’m here as I have a few medical questions to discuss.” She readjusted her purse on her shoulder as she jutted her chin out in disapproval.

“Such as?”

“Well, paternity, for one.”

“Mother!”

“Eric, where is your head? That should have been one of the first questions that you asked. If you were a lawyer for such a case, you would have advised a paternity test immediately.”

As angry as he was with his mother, she was right. He worked on many cases for child support payments, and even in happy marriages with planned children, he had sometimes advised paternity testing. Rarely were the results shocking, but usually just asking for such a test created a myriad of additional visits and mediation – resulting in a lot more money for the firm.

He sighed. “I will look into it. I know he has Elliott’s blood type and not his mother’s, but you’re right - that’s not enough to confirm paternity.”

At the end of the day, it didn’t matter whether the paternity test confirmed he was related to the baby or not - he wasn’t going to adopt the child.

Suddenly a fear crept in after he considered what would happen if he were *not* related. If this were the case, there would be no question of his adopting the child – even though he did not intend to. The thought of the choice being taken from him was unsettling.

“You run along, dear. I will ask questions. You look exhausted.”

Hearing cries coming from the room, he looked at the monitor and could see the elevated heart rate indicating the crying was because Oliver was awake and upset.

He heard a sigh and a chair roll as a nurse stood up.

“Awake again. I’m going to have to page the doctor. The poor thing hasn’t slept all day.”

The nurse who was speaking smiled politely as she opened Oliver's door. Eric noticed there was a swing next to the cot now. It looked similar to what his son had when he was younger but more high-tech.

"I am here if you need me," he called into the room after the nurse.

She popped her head back into the hallway, away from the shrill cries of Oliver. "Sorry, what did you say?"

"I can hold him when you're finished."

She looked relieved.

"Can you change his diaper also? He's due for his next dose of morphine right now. I'll go draw it up."

She left the room and quickly brushed past him to a medication cupboard, calling over another nurse to provide a second signature for the narcotic removal from their system.

His mother was clucking beside him.

"It's a poor shame. Morphine. That awful mother."

"We don't know her circumstances. Let's not be so quick to judge. I'm going to help Oliver. If you would like to come and hold your great-grandson, you're welcome to come in; otherwise, we are done here."

"Assuming he's related to us."

"Yes."

"Very well, I'll be heading out after I meet with the physician quickly. I'll save the holding for when it's confirmed he is a Forrever."

"Fine."

She turned on her heel and left towards the front of the unit, presumably to interrogate one of the physicians whose office was beside the front desk.

"Let them deal with her," he muttered as he walked over to see Oliver, who had tears staining his cheeks and was still screaming.

With ease from lots of recent practice, he changed Oliver's diaper and picked up his stiff little body to cuddle into him. He could feel the wetness of his cheeks on his neck as the poor baby screamed furiously against his shoulder.

The nurse arrived with his medication and a bottle in hand. "I think he's probably hungry if you're up for feeding him."

"Of course."

Oliver's cries were muffled in Eric's shirt. He noticed when he tightly wrapped his arms around him, it appeared that Oliver relaxed a little. It was sweet that he felt safe in his arms. He liked being the one to provide comfort to him – even if it was just for now.

## Chapter 8

### ADRIANNA

Adrianna yawned as she checked the assignment board. Two babies again, Oliver being one of them. Her heart skipped when she thought about her interaction with Eric earlier that day.

When she left her house for work, she saw that his car was gone, and assumed he wouldn't be back again tonight. It was the long weekend, and she was sure he had other luxurious plans like wining and dining an attractive date.

She looked down at her scrubs and shook her head. His first impression of her was when she had been in scrubs, and although she had cute colours, and they were tight in all the right places, they were still nursing scrubs.

Then this afternoon, he had seen her in a dishevelled state. It was surprising that he even recognized her – unless that just showed what a mess she looked like at work.

She questioned why she was concerned with what he thought of her. She needed to get this man out of her head, and fast.

He was an attractive man who had a well-paying career. If he was still single at his age, there was likely a good reason for it.

She also wasn't entirely convinced he was single, but he hadn't brought in a partner yet. Just his colleague Miranda, and they behaved more like siblings than lovers.

Miranda was lovely, and Adrianna liked her a lot. She hoped she would see her again.

Adrianna scrubbed in and met her colleague for the shift report. Everything was the same for Oliver. The only new update was paternity testing that was now ordered. Eric would need to bring in a special kit, and the nurses would take the sample as needed.

“Paternity testing? That's new.”

Her colleague looked around to make sure they were alone.

“Apparently, Eric’s mother was the one who asked Dr. Hajar to order it. I didn’t realize they were questioning who the father was, but I guess it makes sense.”

Adrianna shook her head. Poor Oliver. He was in a tug of war, except it sounded like everybody was fighting to pull away from him.

Hopefully, they would find a lovely family to adopt him.

“Why bother doing paternity testing if he is going to be adopted anyways? Just sounds like a waste of money.”

Her colleague raised an eyebrow and smirked.

“Maybe the hot lawyer is reconsidering? Or maybe if the paternity comes back quickly and he’s not related, then he will stop visiting. I’m not sure.”

“It’s still all very sad. Well, tell me about my second baby.”

“Oh, easy feeder grower, going home some time next week. Just needs to practice bottling before discharge and needs to gain a bit more weight. Oliver is a handful, so we made sure to give you a lighter assignment.”

As if on cue, a shrill scream filled the hallway.

“I put him in the swing because he was absolutely beside himself, but it doesn’t seem like it worked very well. He might need an increase in the morphine or some additional medications added. The carrier is also in the room, so you can hold him and at least get some charting done.”

Adrianna thanked her colleague and was turning to sign into the computer system when the nurse tapped her on the shoulder.

“Just a heads up that it’s Dr. Derek Cook on call tonight. Sorry if you need new orders for Oliver. I hope you don’t have to make any adjustments tonight.”

Adrianna’s stomach clenched.

“Oh, that’s fine. It’s not a big deal working together. I am sure we can be professional.”

“I know, but Carley is also on shift tonight, and I heard they are quite ... close.”

“He can do what he wants. We aren’t together anymore.”

Her colleague nodded and walked away before turning back and saying, “You’re a better person than me. I would be calling in sick if I knew my ex was dating a co-worker. See you tomorrow morning.”

Adrianna sighed. She knew dating at work was a bad idea before she did it, and now her work and private life were mingled and apparently open for discussion. Maybe it had been a mistake coming back to work so early.

The one positive was that at least with Carley on shift, her ex would be readily available overnight to write orders if she needed them.



## ADRIANNA

It was now midnight, and Adrianna was exhausted as she held poor Oliver in her arms and sang gentle shushes into his ear. He was slowly calming down, but if he vomited his bottle of formula again, then she would have to call the doctor to have his morphine dose increased.

She really didn’t want to do that.

First, she was rooting for the little guy to do better and had confidence she could settle him if she had the time. Second, Carley was working in the pod next to her, and she had already seen her ex hanging around more often than he typically would have been.

She didn’t want to deal with either of them right now.

Oliver let out a big burp as she gently patted his back. She took care to lift his face off her shoulder to see if he spit up anything. Luckily, so far he was tolerating his bottle well.

She had put a burp cloth on her shoulder, knowing better than to trust that she wouldn’t get spit up on her scrubs. It wasn’t

uncommon for her to finish her shift with formula and breast milk stains on her clothes. It would wash out, like it always did.

She looked over at the clock. It was time for her break, and her stomach was already grumbling that it needed food. Unfortunately, she knew that if she put Oliver back to bed now, he would get himself worked up all over again and would take even longer to settle.

His poor nose was red from rubbing against the blankets when he was upset, and he had developed a horrible diaper rash. She could feel his little body emanating heat through his thin onesie. He was snuggled into her neck, sniffing and sighing as she tried to trance him to sleep with soft tickles on his back and neck.

She wanted to eat, she needed to chart, and her other baby was due to eat soon and unfortunately took thirty minutes to finish her bottle.

“Do you want me to hold him so you can go for your break?” Alex was speaking softly over Oliver’s limp body. She was in charge tonight and smiled fondly as Adrianna nodded and yawned simultaneously.

“I don’t mind Adrianna, honestly. He’s super cute, and you look exhausted.” She tilted her head to the side in sympathy.

“Thank you. It’s so much easier when there is family to come and hold him overnight. The poor guy is trembling when he’s upset. He just wants to feel arms wrapped around him, and I would hate to have to increase his medications if we can settle him otherwise.”

“Maybe we can call someone in. Did you try and see if anyone could come tonight?”

Adrianna yawned again. “It’s way too late at night. I couldn’t call anyone now.”

Alex shook her head in disagreement. “Just remember that it’s their child, too. They can assume some responsibility. We can’t be on the hook for everything. What happens when he goes home? They’re going to have to do nights at some point.”

“Yes, except the family listed right now isn’t the one that is going to take him home.”

Alex raised her eyebrows in question, and when recognition hit, she sighed and nodded.

“Oh right. I forgot this is the adoptive case. Well, the long weekend is almost over, so perhaps they will call a foster family sometime this week.”

“Right.”

“Now go eat,” Alex said, smiling as she wrapped her arms around little Oliver, who was slowly going limp with sleep, “and let’s see if I can settle this guy for you while you’re gone.”

Oliver’s body had stiffened when they transitioned him into Alex’s arms, but he appeared to be settling slowly again.

“He’s exhausted. Hopefully he can just lean into it and fall asleep.”

Adrianna nodded and started walking down the hallway to the exit.

“Oh, and Adrianna,” Alex called out after her, “Take your *full* break. Seriously. I got this.”

Adrianna smiled and continued to the exit, briefly looking into the pod beside her and seeing Carley standing up to join her on break. Hopefully, she would meet Derek somewhere and would not share the break room with her.

Carley and Derek likely wanted to be alone and would probably go and sit on the picnic benches outside, where the lilac trees were starting to bloom.

Just like she had done with Derek when they were together.

For their sake, she hoped it was cold out. He didn’t deserve a nice warm weekend night. And neither did Carley.



**ERIC**



Eric opened his eyes to the complete darkness of his room. He wasn't sure what woke him at first, but when he felt the heavy arm across his chest, he knew that was likely the cause.

His date was sleeping soundly next to him, her arm across his chest, heavy with sleep. She was naked, of course, with most of the sheets stolen and wrapped around her body.

Usually, it would have been a turn-on to have a naked woman in his bed that he could rouse from sleep for a second round – but the first round had been enough for him, and he felt sort of empty.

The past few days had taken him entirely out of his regular bachelor routine of a clean house, delicious dates and even more savoury desserts.

Somehow this last date wasn't as satisfying as it usually was.

He shook his head.

This NICU baby was taking a mental toll on him.

He had a gorgeous woman in his bed, and all he could think about was Oliver crying alone in his cot.

He remembered when Elliott was a baby, and his ex, Chelsea, stayed at home. Since he was so busy with law school, it was Chelsea that did the childcare full-time. He wasn't even sure he changed more than a handful of diapers.

He was too busy with exams and late nights with friends.

Sometimes he would come home late after a night of drinking, and his slamming of the front door would wake the baby.

He remembered one time he went to the crib to try and settle Elliott, but nothing he did worked, and ultimately Chelsea had come in angry and snatched the baby from his arms, complaining that he was too drunk to care for a child properly.

She wasn't wrong. He had no idea how to care for an infant while being sober – let alone while inebriated.

As time passed, he found he held Elliott less and less, and the less time he spent with him, the more uncomfortable Elliott would be around him.

Eventually, he finished law school and articling and had his first lawyer position. Once the first real pay cheques came in, he took no time at all to find his own place and moved out, leaving Chelsea as the primary caregiver for Elliott.

He continued to support Chelsea and Elliott, monetarily anyways, but the new position took even more time than his schooling did, and he needed to put in the time to make partner.

By the time he did, Elliott had grown up mostly without a father figure, and he had been too wracked with guilt to try and change anything.

When Chelsea unexpectedly passed away, he increased the money he sent to Elliott so that he could continue living in the same place.

That had been two years ago. He thought Elliott was responsible enough at eighteen to live on his own and take care of himself.

Obviously, he had been wrong.

He wouldn't let Oliver turn out that way if he could help it. He would stay involved as best he could until a proper couple, with a proper father figure, could take over.

His phone rang suddenly, taking him out of his deep thoughts.

Quickly he picked it up, but his date had already started stirring.

“Mr. Forrever? I am so sorry to bother you. I know it's late, but I was wondering if you were free to come and hold Oliver for a bit. He's having a tough time tonight and-” the caller was interrupted by screaming in the background, presumably from Oliver.

“Adrianna?” He asked.

“Who is Adrianna?” His date was rubbing her eyes now, pushing herself into a sitting position.

Eric covered the mouthpiece of the phone and spoke softly, “It's nobody, Melissa. Go back to sleep.”

“I'm so sorry to interrupt you with your ...company,” Adrianna was stumbling over her words. “We can make do. My

apologies again.”

Before he could answer that he was free to come to the unit, she hung up.

“Who is Adrianna?”

“Nobody.”

“It’s not nobody if she is calling you in the middle of the night,” he interrupted her before she could speak further.

“It is nobody. I have to go.”

His voice was tight. Short.

He didn’t mean to be this way with her, but he didn’t owe her any explanation.

“You can make yourself comfortable and go back to bed. I won’t be back before morning. You can make it to work on your own?”

Her blonde hair was messy, and her lips were in a pout.

“Tomorrow is a holiday, but I’ll find my own way home, I guess.”

He didn’t know why she was giving him such an attitude. It was only their second time together.

He should have listened to Miranda - no more hookups with the women at his work.

Without further hesitation, he stepped out of bed and started to get dressed, all the while feeling her anger rising from the bedsheets.

“Goodnight, Melissa.”

“Right.” She turned her back to him and didn’t say anything else before he left.

He shrugged his shoulders and rubbed the lingering sleep from his eyes. A small part of him felt the need to say he would make it up to her – but he knew that was a lie.

He just hoped she would be gone by the time he came back.



## ADRIANNA

Adrianna felt embarrassed.

She shouldn't have called him in the middle of the night and woken him *and* his now-confirmed girlfriend.

Unfortunately, now she would have to call Derek and explain the need for the morphine dose increase.

She looked up and saw that he had strolled into the pod beside her, *again*. She knew for a fact there were only stable babies in that pod, and he had no reason to be around constantly.

Carley was a new nurse, so she wouldn't have any complicated babies in her assignment.

Taking a deep breath, she stood up with Oliver in her arms and traipsed to the other pod.

Derek was leaning over Carley's shoulder to look at something on her phone, and both of them were giggling.

"Dr. Cook? May I speak with you for a moment?"

He looked up and sighed heavily. His blonde hair was covered with a surgical cap, but slight wisps of hair had fallen out around his ears. He was wearing dark blue hospital-provided scrubs and looked all the part of a TV drama physician.

"Is this work-related?"

She was taken aback. Was this work-related? Was he kidding?

"Of course." She said through gritted teeth.

What. An. Ass.

"Very well then. What can I do for you, Adrianna?" His voice held an exasperated tone which only further irritated her.

Adrianna motioned for him to speak with her in the hallway.

He stood up straight, exaggerating his movements as if he were made of rusted tin and was too heavy to be inconvenienced to move for her.

“I wanted to speak with you about baby Lampert. He is the term NAS baby at the back. His scores have been high for the past twenty-four hours, and I think he might need an increase in his morphine-”

He interrupted her, pointing to her chest. “This baby?”

“Yes.”

“Looks fine to me.” He shrugged his shoulders, dismissing her concerns.

“Well, yes, because I’m holding him.” Oliver was starting to feel heavy in her arms as she stood her ground.

“So then, what’s the issue?”

“Well, I can’t very well hold him all night.” Her biceps were starting to burn as she readjusted his weight in her arms.

“So, you want me to drug the child so you don’t have to hold him?”

His words were stinging.

“I would never ask you to do such a thing.”

“Then what is this really about?”

“I told you.” She was clenching her teeth in frustration. She wasn’t sure how much longer she could continue to be professional. “His scores are high, and as per our protocol, if he has three scores in a row of more than—”

He interrupted her again with a dismissive wave of his hand, “I know the protocol.”

“Well, then you know that he needs an increase.”

“You’re upset about Carley. I get it.”

Her clenched teeth were now creating tension in her jaw, neck, and down to her shoulders.

“Are you serious right now, Derek?”

“Are you?” His baby blue eyes were staring at her, not breaking eye contact.

Oliver was starting to stir in her arms.

“If you just come and look at his last scores on my computer, I can show you.”

“Who did the scoring?”

“I did.”

He turned his shoulders away from her and motioned like he was about to walk away, in keeping with his disinterest in continuing the conversation. “Well, maybe we will wait and review in the morning once we have another set of scores from the next shift.”

“Are you questioning my judgment?” She shifted Oliver in her arms again as her hips were now feeling the weight of his body.

He laughed and half turned back toward her. “Maybe.”

If she were holding anything other than a baby, she would have thrown it at his smug face.

“Is there a problem here?”

Suddenly Eric appeared from behind them.

Derek looked startled and turned around, having to look up a couple of inches due to Eric’s height.

“Nothing that concerns you. May I ask who you are?”

“I’m the family member for Oliver, and it sounds like your nurse is asking for assistance, and you are refusing.”

“That’s not the case at all.” Derek was throwing his shoulders back in defiance, but he still appeared small compared to Eric’s athletic size.

“Sounds to me like negligence.” Eric appeared to grow larger in size, blocking more light from the hallway than Adrianna remembered.

“Excuse me?”

Derek was fuming, a tick noticeable in his jaw as he squared off Eric.

Eric didn’t back down.

“You heard me. Now, I suggest you listen to your colleague’s opinion, or I can have the charts reviewed by a malpractice lawyer who works with me at my firm, and then we can discuss this matter separately.”

There was a noticeable sag in Derek’s slim shoulders. He knew he was outmatched.

Adrianna stepped in.

“Dr. Cook, let’s reassess tomorrow afternoon. Now that someone is here to provide comfort, perhaps we won’t need to make an increase. Dr. Hajar is well aware of Oliver’s case and can weigh-in tomorrow once we have more information.”

Derek nodded as Eric continued to stare him down.

“Eric, you can follow me to Oliver’s room, and I can set you both up.”

Neither the pit bull nor the greyhound moved. Eric continued to stare down Derek until finally, someone interrupted and asked Derek to come and check a breathing rate of a baby in another pod.

Without a word, Derek brushed past Eric, leaving Adrianna and Eric alone in the hallway.

“You really didn’t have to do that. I had it covered - but thank you.”

Adrianna started down the hallway when Eric gently grabbed her by the shoulder and stopped her.

“If that ever happens again - you call me.”

“You mean, with Oliver.”

Eric looked angry. “Yes, and please make it known that I don’t want him making any medical decisions for Oliver.”

She suddenly felt like she had done something wrong and looked down at the tiles on the floor of the hallway.

“I can definitely do that. He’s a great doctor... usually.”

Eric’s hand was still firmly grasped on her shoulder. She could feel the heat of his touch travel down her arm and into her fingertips.

Oliver, on cue, started crying and Eric let his hand drop.

“Is there something personal, between you two?”

He was looking down at her with his brows furrowed.

“No.” She met his gaze and jutted out her jaw defensively. She would never disclose anything personal to a patient.

“Sorry to be so intrusive. His interaction with you just seemed so inappropriate.”

His concern for her well-being seemed misplaced. For a second, she thought she saw a glimpse of jealousy in his eyes but shook it off. He just wanted what was best for Oliver. He would have acted the same with any nurse in that situation.

Except, it wouldn't have happened with any other nurse - just her.

She could feel tingling in her cheeks as she thought about how piercing his eyes were when he first walked over to Derek.

It made her feel good to see Derek slink away for once, ego fragmented.



## Chapter 9

### ERIC

Adrianna set Eric and Oliver up in the recliner with a warm bottle.

After Oliver ate, he was much more settled and fell asleep quickly in Eric's arms. Adrianna had popped in a few times to check on them and had asked if he needed anything since his hands were filled with sleepy Oliver.

Although he said he was fine, at one point she insisted on coming into the room and noticed the footrest of the recliner wasn't extended. He had told her not to trouble herself, but she came over and pulled the lever on the side of the chair to allow the footrest to pop up.

It was a lovely gesture, but Eric was having trouble containing his thoughts. She had to bend down close to him to get the lever to move. He could smell the sweetness of her hair and could feel the softness of her long ponytail gently tracing his arm. He noticed the thickness of the air around him when she was near and felt drawn to her in a way he had never experienced before.

She left the room with a smile and gently closed the door, leaving a towel on the handle to let the door rest partially open so he could call out to her if he needed anything.

Now it was two o'clock in the morning and he was sitting alone with a sleeping baby in his arms, an angry and likely still naked woman in his bedsheets at home, and a nurse in the hallway that made his heart race more than he was comfortable with.

To top the night off – he had made a fool of himself earlier.

He had barged into the unit and acted like a jealous boyfriend when he saw that doctor standing over her. Had he not been in a hospital, he likely would have been much more physical. Luckily he had shown restraint, but now felt like a jealous fool.

There was just something about her sweetness that he wanted to protect, even though he knew she didn't need his protection. She had stood up to him when he was out of line, and she was holding her own with that doctor until he had stepped in and made a fool of them both.

Even after he had embarrassed them, she quickly said her peace and then returned to her natural, bubbly self. She had checked on him multiple times, offered water and a pillow, and asked if he needed a break from holding Oliver.

Looking into the hallway, he saw her finally sitting down at her computer with another nurse beside her. They both had recliners like he had, and looked relaxed with one another. The camaraderie of the unit reminded him of his relationship with Miranda. It was comforting.

With the lights off in the room and Oliver asleep in his arms, he realized how quiet it was overnight. He could hear some alarms quietly going off in the distance, but mostly the unit was calm.

After focusing on the quiet for so long, he heard the footsteps and rustling clothing of another nurse walking down the hallway, stopping to talk with Adrianna.

"I heard what happened earlier; I'm really sorry that Dr. Cook was so out of line. Are you okay?"

Adrianna softly responded, "It's fine, really. Don't worry about it."

"Carley told me it got a bit heated – I didn't realize there was still tension between the two of you."

Eric listened for Adrianna's response, convinced that if you could hear eye-rolling, that's exactly what she was doing.

"I don't think Carley is an expert by any means. I would rather everyone just stay out of it – *especially* her."

"What does that mean? I know they're kind of a thing now, but that doesn't have anything to do with you."

"Alex, I just don't feel like getting into it right now. Let's just leave it be."

“What happened to you - I mean – to *both* of you – was awful, and I am so sorry that it happened.”

“It happened to me. Not to him. He wasn’t there.”

“What do you mean?”

“He knew what happened. He knew I was in the emergency room, and he chose to see Carley that night instead.”

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t know that.”

Adrianna sighed. “It’s fine; it’s in the past now.”

“Six weeks is not a long time. We were all shocked when you decided to come back so early.”

“I needed to come back - you know that as much as I do.”

“A couple of weeks from now is your ...” Alex’s voice trailed off.

“It is. I’m fine, honestly.”

“Are you working?”

“With you. It’s on the, uh, last day of our set.”

“Okay, good. Let’s go for a coffee before work, okay?”

“Absolutely. Now don’t worry about anything else. Everything is fine.”

“I worry about you - you know that.”

Adrianna must have nodded to acknowledge her because Eric couldn’t hear any more talking between them, just typing on the keyboard and Alex’s shoes walking back down the hallway.

He felt guilty for listening to her conversation. He shouldn’t have been privy to the details of her life, but there wasn’t a way to avoid listening, and now all he could think about was the sadness in her voice while they were talking.

He wasn’t sure what exactly happened between Dr. Cook and her, or what next week was, but he was starting to also worry about her.

In a couple of weeks, he would be gone and wouldn’t be around to ensure Dr. Cook wasn’t out of line again.

Anger bubbled up again as he thought about it. About all of it – about her being mistreated, about not understanding her sorrow, and about caring more about her than he knew he should.



## ERIC

Eric left the unit sometime before the end of Adrianna's shift. He had given her a soft wave goodbye, letting her know that Oliver was back in the cot and sleeping soundly – if not a bit warm from being in his arms for so long.

She nodded and gave him a sweet smile with tired eyes.

Luckily his office was closed for the holiday today, and he could just head home.

His heart sank when he realized that his bed was likely not empty yet. He looked at his watch and saw that it was only seven o'clock. Perhaps he would grab a coffee at the hospital cafeteria before walking to his car.

Not wanting to look like a stalker, he had chosen a different street to park his car overnight. He enjoyed the fresh air and stretch of his legs.

He quickly grabbed a coffee, and as he was exiting, he could see Adrianna's ponytail swaying in front of him, heading in the same direction he was.

Without hesitation and without thinking clearly, he called out her name, only thinking better of it when she turned around and made eye contact with him.

"Hey, sorry, I was walking the same way as you and didn't want to seem creepy, like I'm following you home."

She smiled another tired smile and slowed her pace, allowing him to catch up.

"Sorry for ... interfering last night."

Another tired smile with a nod.

“It was silly of me, and I do apologize. I hope you’re not upset with me.”

She shook her head at him, looking at her feet as she walked.

“No, it’s fine.”

There was silence between them as they walked, but it wasn’t uncomfortable.

“So, what kind of car seat do you think you’ll buy?”

Eric was taken aback by her question, and out of the corner of his eye could see the hint of a smile drifting across her lips.

“There’s a lot to choose from, I’ve researched a bunch, but I’m not…” his voice trailed off as he realized what she had done.

“I’m just looking in case,” he said defensively.

A slight breeze passed between them, lifting the sweet scent from her hair to his nose.

“In case of what?”

“In case they don’t find anyone.”

She stopped in her tracks and turned to face him. They were about a block from her house.

“But they will find someone, Eric.”

She was peering up at him with deep hazel eyes that made him feel more alive than ever.

She stepped towards him, putting her hand on his cheek and looking into his eyes.

“You’re a lovely and very caring person, Eric. I don’t know you very well, and I hope I’m not overstepping, but I just want you to know – in case I don’t see you again – that I think you’re an amazing father, and I would hate for you to lose this opportunity with Oliver because you’re worried you won’t be good enough.”

His heart was pounding, both from her touch on his skin and her words cutting into him.

How could she see him so clearly? How was she able to tease out feelings he hadn't had time to work through?

Her words made him feel vulnerable and exposed.

"You're right; you don't know me, Adrianna."

She let her hand drop suddenly as if his words had burned her.

Without speaking, he turned to walk away, leaving her alone on the sidewalk.

He wasn't sure if he was angry that she was right or for letting himself get too close to both her and Oliver. Either way, he needed air and distance.

He was only a few steps away when she called out from a distance, "If you're upset, then it means I'm probably right."

Angrily, he turned and stared at her. He hated how beautiful she looked with the sun behind her, illuminating her like a goddess.

He was angry but could only think about how intensely he wanted to touch her at that moment. He felt the sudden draw to hold her tightly in his arms and let his anger dissipate with the softness of her body against the hardness of his.

Instead, he chose to turn around and walk away.



## ERIC

When he got to his car, he was furious and exhausted. He wasn't used to people telling him what was on their minds, and he wasn't sure he cared for it much.

He wanted to go back to where he left her on the sidewalk and grab her, pull her into him and kiss her smart mouth.

He imagined how her lips would feel and taste, how the breath out of her nose would tickle his cheeks, and how she would sound when he put his hands all over her body.

Facing the driver's side window, and with his hands resting on the car, he sighed and placed his coffee cup on the hood. He needed a run, a cold shower and maybe a nap.

"I'm sorry if I upset you; it wasn't my intention."

It was his head that turned first toward the voice, then his body to be aligned with hers.

Adrianna stood a couple of feet from him with her arms at her sides.

Without thinking, he walked toward her and grabbed her, pulling her close to him.

Instinctively she wrapped her arms around his neck as their lips touched.

His mouth took over, taking the time to taste her lips as they opened up for him. His hands were on her back, holding her as she sighed into him.

Pulling her closer until her breasts pushed against his chest, he turned with her and held her up against his car, only releasing his lips from hers to kiss down her neck. He trailed his tongue across her collarbone as his hands held her against the car door.

He didn't care that it was Monday morning in suburbia – he would take her here if he could. Right up against his car if he had to.

Her scrub top was cut low enough that he could see the top of the swell of her breasts.

Without hesitation, he trailed kisses down from her collarbone to the lowest spot the scrub top would allow before exposing her in public. His hands roamed freely and moved up to caress her breasts. He was surprised by how firm they were.

She let out a sigh and then suddenly froze in his arms. He could feel her body become rigid, and stopped touching her, releasing her slowly from his grip.

He leaned back, carefully shifting his weight onto his heels.

She locked eyes with him and then cautiously looked down at her chest. Two noticeable wet circles were on her scrub top, one on each side of her breasts.

With a gasp, she clasped her arms across her chest and mumbled, "I'm so sorry. I have to go."

She slid past him as he stood with his feet bolted to the ground, and took off down the street toward her house.

He wanted to go after her but knew he shouldn't.

He was so confused.

What the hell just happened?



# Chapter 10

## ADRIANNA

She took off running, the only sound she could hear over the ringing in her ears was the sound of her feet on the pavement.

Had he noticed?

Of *course*, he had noticed.

She needed to get home, and fast.

When she entered the house, she slumped her back against the door to shut it and slid down it until she was sitting on the floor. She covered her face with her hands and let it all out. All her tears came spilling into her hands – it was unstoppable.

Weeks of pain were draining from her heart and falling through her fingertips.

Henry trotted over to her and placed his head on her knees, his tail anxiously wagging across the tiles.

What had she been thinking?

She shook her head. The problem was that she *wasn't* thinking.

She was running off exhaustion after four days of twelve-hour shifts and then the emotional mess that happened last night with Derek.

Her heart was too fragile to continue with both work and a life outside of it. The lines were blurring, her heart was hurting, and she felt like she couldn't breathe.

What kind of nurse kissed a patient's family member?

The kind of nurse who couldn't even save her own baby.

Her tears were coming out in strangled sobs now.

She missed her baby so much. Flashes of images of her perfect little face and tiny hands raced through her mind.

It hurt too much to breathe.

She clutched her knees and rolled onto her side on the floor.

How fitting that she lay in the fetal position while she was crying over her own lost baby.

Henry licked the tears from her face as she laid on the cool floor.

She needed to get up and pump. She would not let her angel have died for nothing. She would continue to donate her milk to the NICU so that babies that *did* have a chance could heal faster.

She picked herself off the floor and hugged Henry. Gently she wiped the tears from her cheeks and clipped the leash onto his collar.

Life needed to move forward.

They would go for a quick walk, she would pump, and then they would both nap until she could wake up in a better mood.

There was no other way.

Once outside in the sunshine, she started feeling a bit better. Her nose cleared so she could finally breathe through it, and her eyes felt less red and swollen.

Without thinking, she turned down the same street he had been parked – but thankfully, his car was gone.

Her heart felt heavy.

She felt her cheeks blush with the memory of how sweet his lips had tasted, and how good it felt when she was wrapped in his arms. She had felt sexy, wanted, *needed*.

Part of her heart broke at the thought that it wouldn't happen again.

It couldn't.

She could feel her body telling her mind to stop overthinking it. He had a girlfriend, and she wasn't ready to be with anyone.

“No,” she said firmly aloud.

Henry looked up from sniffing a light post, and she laughed.

“Sorry, not you, baby.”

She sighed and shrugged her shoulders.

“One more block, and then we will go back home and take a nap.”

He trotted excitedly next to her, happy to be outdoors.

Thankfully she had five days off before she would need to face the repercussions of today.

Five days to settle her mind, and her heart.

Five days without him.

It felt like a lifetime.



## ERIC

Eric quietly opened his front door. It was early, and he wasn't sure if his bed guest was still sleeping.

He had hoped she left by now.

Quietly shutting the door behind him, he removed his shoes and started toward the kitchen, trying to be light on his feet.

That's when he smelled the bacon.

A few steps closer and he could hear sizzling.

Anger rose in his chest as he walked into the kitchen, seeing a back turned to him at the stove.

“I thought you left?” he grumbled.

Miranda turned around, “Is that any way to treat a guest who is *cooking you* breakfast?”

He laughed, a smile taking over his face.

“Shit, sorry. I thought you were Melissa.”

“Melissa?” Miranda made a face at him when she said the name. “Ugh, why did you even do that to yourself?”

“I like the torture, I guess. Also, I thought I said entrance to my place was strictly for emergencies?”

She laughed as she handed him a plate filled with eggs, bacon and buttered toast on the side.

She raised the plate in the air and pointed at the food and said, “Emergency”.

He put his hands up in resignation and took the plate from her.

“I thought I would do something nice for the man who spent the night in the NICU with poor Oliver. I was thinking of maybe going there tonight for a few hours to make sure he’s okay.”

She spoke softly, her demeanour turning serious for a moment. “I think about him a lot, you know.”

“I know you do.” He smiled at her in thanks as he stabbed his fork into the bacon. “This is delicious, by the way.”

“You need better cooked meals if this impresses you.” She was twirling her long auburn hair in her delicate fingers. “Have you given more thought to what you’ll do about Oliver?”

She wasn’t making eye contact with him when she asked; instead, she was focusing intently on wrapping her hair around her index finger.

“Nope, because there’s nothing more to think about. I already told everyone my decision.”

Her shoulders sagged with the weight of his answer.

“I was wondering if you changed your mind. This little guy has stolen our hearts, and I’m just not ready to let him go yet.”

“You’re not the only one who’s said that to me today.” Eric could feel the anger rising in his chest again. He wasn’t ready to talk about it this morning, but the words came out before he had a chance to stuff them down with his breakfast – which now tasted like sawdust in his mouth.

He pushed the plate in front of him before she could ask any more questions. The sound of the plate scraping across the marble island drowned out anything else she may have wanted to add.

“Were you alone when you came in this morning?”

“Nope, but I did get to wish her a good morning as I handed over her shoes and purse.”

Eric let out a snort as he stood up. “I have to shower. I won’t be long.” Thinking better of himself, he turned to her, “Thanks for breakfast. I owe you one. I’ll be back in a flash – that coffee you made smells delicious, and I really need one right now.”

Miranda simply raised her coffee cup in the air at him and winked. “It’ll be here when you’re ready.”

Once inside the shower, he lingered under the hot water and tried to gather his thoughts. It didn’t matter how hot he made it; it couldn’t distract him from thinking about Adrianna.

The past twenty-four hours were a blur.

He hadn’t even taken Melissa out for dinner; instead, he had dinner by himself, alone in his house as usual, and she had sent him a late-night text after she had been out for drinks with some friends.

He had offered to pick her up and drive her home, but she had insisted on coming to his place.

Thinking of being with her made him shudder. Although he had enjoyed her company – it just wasn’t the same. She didn’t make his heart race; she didn’t excite him. Not like Adrianna did.

He groaned as he came to the realization that Adrianna had known he was with a woman last night. He had forgotten about that until just now.

Was that why she was so weird?

He turned the shower knob to hotter.

Or perhaps she was weird because he had manhandled her suddenly out of nowhere.

By the time he got downstairs, Miranda was sitting on the couch in his living room with a book.

His skin was still pink from the heat of the shower, and his soft feet padded past her to grab coffee.

“You look like you live here.”

“No thanks. My place is much nicer.”

She smiled and moved her legs over to give him room to sit down when he brought over his coffee. The first sip was delightful.

For some unknown reason, coffee was always better when someone else made it.

“This is delicious. Thanks again.” He tipped his mug towards her in thanks.

She put her book down on the glass coffee table and turned towards him, her feet now crossed underneath her. It was childlike but endearing. He always thought of her like a kid sister.

“Let’s go outside for a walk or something. I heard the tulip festival isn’t as crazy today.”

He groaned. “The *tulip festival*? Have we jumped ship and turned sixty?”

She smacked him on the shoulder playfully. “Nobody else will go with me.”

“That’s because we all live here and aren’t *eighty years old*.”

Miranda rocked on her legs as she gathered her defence. “First of all, it’s beautiful. Second of all, stop talking in increments of twenty years.”

He sighed and leaned back on the couch. “If we go,” she started gleefully clapping her hands as he continued his negotiation, “then you can never, ever ask me again. Ever.”

“Deal.”

She was standing up now, all excited.

“It doesn’t take much to please you.”

“Ask me why I’m single.”

“Cute. Let me finish this coffee first so I can at least enjoy one thing today.”

She sat back down with her book, smiling as she picked up where she left off.

“And get your feet off the couch. What are you, seven?”

“How can I be seven, sixty, and eighty all in one day, sir?”

“It’s just the ever-changing charm that is Miranda.”

She winked. “Now shut up and let me read while you slurp your coffee like an old man. It’s going to be a great day!”

He rolled his eyes playfully but continued to sip his coffee. Surprisingly the shower had helped soothe his anxiety, although he was sure the coffee would put it right back in his chest in about twenty minutes.

He considered talking to Miranda about his kiss this morning with Adrianna but thought better of it.

He could hear his phone buzzing on the kitchen counter. Walking away from Miranda, he answered it in the kitchen.

“Hello, this is Eric speaking.”

“Eric, hi, it’s Dr. Cook. Do you have a moment?”

He looked at his watch.

Did he have a moment for the asshole that treated Adrianna so poorly?

“Possibly.”

“Thank you. I know you’re not impressed with me right now, so I’ll get to the point and make this quick. I spoke with our team this morning on our rounds, and we wanted to let you know that Oliver seems to have turned a corner. We expect he will be discharged in the next few days - possibly this week - if we can send him home with morphine and titration orders.”

Eric could feel a heavy weight on his sternum, pushing against his heart.

He cleared his throat. “What are the next steps, then?”

“That is why I am calling you. I know you’re a very busy individual, and you expressed concern about involvement until we could find a foster family. I reached out to Mary this morning, and she informed me that there is a foster mom ready to meet Oliver. CAS will set up an adoptive family, but in the meantime, the foster mother would like to come in and start the

learning process of caring for a NAS baby so she can be prepared to take him home this week.”

“That sounds great. What do you need from me?”

“Mary just needs you to sign some paperwork stating you will not be pursuing adoption, which I know you stated verbally, but the paperwork needs to be formally completed. Then if you would like to meet the foster, that is fine, but the rest is up to us.”

“When do I meet the adoptive parents?”

There was silence on the other line.

“I’m sorry, I am not understanding your question.”

Eric was getting frustrated. “When do I determine whether the adoptive parents are suitable?”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Forrester, but typically your involvement would end with the foster mother. The rest is up to Mary and the adoption agency. I am sure you can make arrangements with CAS to meet the adoptive parents in the future and maybe establish a relationship. Still, you wouldn’t be involved in any of the processes of the adoption.”

“Is that everything?” Eric wasn’t trying to hide the anger in his voice anymore.

“Yes, that is all I have to say. Thank you for your t—”

Eric hung up on him.

Things were moving quicker than he thought, and that was a good thing, right?

Then why was he feeling so uneasy about it?

Lack of sleep and caffeine. He was sure that was the cause of his uncomfortable feelings.

Another thought crept into his mind.

Did this mean he wouldn’t see Adrianna again? The nurses had explained their rotation schedule to him. As of today, she would have a stretch of five days off, so perhaps he wouldn’t.

He had better break the news about Oliver to Miranda. Perhaps they would head to the NICU for a goodbye and skip



this year's tulip festival.

He walked back to the living room but didn't have to explain anything; Miranda had overheard enough and had tears in her eyes.

"I still want to see him tonight ... to snuggle him goodbye, at least."

"Of course."

"I wish I could adopt him."

"It's for the best we aren't involved."

"Is it?" A single tear fell down her cheek.

"Let's not make this harder than it needs to be. Let's go for a walk in a few minutes, and then we can head to the NICU later on. If you still want to see him for the night shift, then I'm sure you can."

She sniffled and nodded.

"Okay?"

"Okay."

# Chapter 11

## ADRIANNA

Adrianna woke up at noon and decided to get up and start the day. She had only slept for three hours, but needed to reverse her waking hours to daytime again.

She followed the usual routine of slowly sitting up, swinging her legs over the edge of the bed and waiting for the nausea and sick feeling in her stomach to subside.

Her lips still felt swollen from where Eric had kissed her.

Her breasts ached when she thought of him. She put her hands on them and noticed they felt full again. She would barely have time to eat breakfast before she had to pump again.

Her goal was to make it to her due date before she stopped pumping. If she could continue beyond that, and her body would allow it, then she would consider it.

With the nausea subsiding, she put her full weight on her feet and walked over to the window to open the blackout blinds. The spring sunlight flooded into her room, and she smiled.

The best days were finally here - long hours of sunlight, warm sunshine, and hopefully time off to enjoy it.

Looking at her phone, she saw an unread message from Derek.

She tossed her phone back onto her bed, not wanting to read it yet.

He was the last person she wanted to deal with today.

It was time for something mild for her stomach and then a coffee and a walk for Henry.

“Did you want to go to the arboretum today, buddy? Maybe we can stop and get you some puppy treats! Does that sound like a good day?”

Henry was wagging his tail at her.

The arboretum was a beautiful park that was adjacent to Dow's Lake. It was the perfect walking area, and sometimes Farmer's booths were set up with special treats and fresh produce for sale.

It would be just her and Henry. Hopefully, that would get her mind off things for a bit.



## ADRIANNA

Adrianna was feeling tired as she walked Henry. Her breasts were aching again, and she needed to get home and pump. She needed to stay on a consistent pumping schedule, or her milk production would decrease significantly.

Had it already been another three hours since her last pump?

During that time, they had walked to the café for her second latte of the day and had walked through the arboretum and past the booths at Dow's Lake.

It was warmer than expected, and she brought Henry to a few watering spots along the way.

There was a large willow tree in the park they were walking through that was perfect for her and Henry to take a little break under.

Her breasts ached too much to wait until home to pump.

She took half an hour to sit with Henry under the tree to discreetly pump and cool off from the unseasonably warm temperatures.

Once finished, she must have stood up too quickly as she started to feel off balance. Her hands felt a bit tingly, and so did her face. She took in her surroundings and felt a sense of dread take over her.

Had she been here long? Which direction was home?

Feeling a wave of nausea run through her, she reached for her purse to pull out her phone, only to see the missed calls from

Derek on her Home Screen.

Goosebumps started erupting all over her as she felt the second wave of nausea flush her body. She needed to sit down - and fast.

Looking around for the end of Henry's leash, she noticed the haze around her feet. Was everything blurry?

She rubbed her eyes, but her vision remained unclear.

The air felt even cooler now as she wrapped her arms around herself and felt the sting of more goosebumps erupting on her arms.

How did it get so cold so fast?

The sweat that had previously been collecting on her forehead was now trickling down her face and piercing her with its chill. It felt like someone was tracing her skin with a pointy icicle.

Her heart started racing, and her mind became cloudy.

Where was Henry? Did he run off, and she hadn't realized?

Looking down, she saw his leash, but she had to squint one eye closed to cancel the double vision that made it look like she was walking two dogs with loose leashes.

She bent down to scoop the leash but was left with a biting headache and an empty hand.

Quickly she felt for the ground and slowly lowered herself to sit back down and lean against the tree.

When she opened her eyes again, she noticed that the blurry haze had regressed into a circle in the centre of her vision.

She blinked multiple times, but the blurry circle stayed as her head pounded.

She tried to open and close each eye, but the blurry circle stayed where it was. Feeling along the ground, she finally found Henry's leash and clutched it tightly in her hands for comfort.

She remembered reading about ocular migraines in nursing school, and although she had never experienced one before, she was convinced that one was happening.

It was either that or she was having a stroke.

Trying not to panic, Adrianna rested her head against the tree, continuing her sickly grip on Henry's leash. She told herself that she was safe, soon this would pass, and then she could walk home.



## ERIC

Walking in sombre silence, Eric and Miranda were now rounding the park near his home.

They had walked through the tulip festival, but there were too many people, and they both agreed that some quiet would be nice.

Eric had bought each of them a cold lemonade at one of the booths at Dow's Lake. It was an unseasonably warm day, and the sun was hitting them harder than anticipated.

As they rounded one of his favourite paths that wrapped around a willow tree, he suddenly saw something from the corner of his eye that his brain alarmed was abnormal.

Was there a person sleeping against a tree? Or were they passed out?

He saw the long brown hair and felt a sense of familiarity wash over him. When he saw the dog sitting beside her, he knew exactly who it was.

He signalled to Miranda, and together they walked over to the tree.

“Adrianna?”

Her head snapped up towards him and Miranda. He noticed she was squinting in concentration.

She didn't respond, and so he felt the need to explain who he was. Had she forgotten about him already?

“It's Eric and Miranda.”

She nodded, still squinting.

Miranda gave Eric a worried look as she bent down before Adrianna.

“Sweetie, you look quite pale. Is everything alright?”

Adrianna suddenly burst into tears and Miranda instinctively put a soothing hand on her leg.

“I’m sorry, I just can’t see anything right now, and I’m scared.”

Miranda flashed Eric another worried look until he got down on his knee beside them.

Adrianna continued to explain in between sobs and apologies for crying, “I think it’s a migraine, but I’ve never had one before. My vision is blurry, and I don’t think I can get home by myself.”

Miranda nodded to Eric and took up residence beside Adrianna, leaning her head against the tree with her.

“I get them all the time, and I remember the first time I had one. They can be terrifying, and often the headache afterwards is even worse. For me, it usually passes within the hour.” She looked over at Eric. “We can sit with you for a bit to see if it passes, and if it doesn’t, we can get you safely home, right Eric?”

Eric nodded. “Of course. I can even walk to get my car right now; it’s not very far.”

“Please don’t leave me here alone, please.”

The pleading in her voice made tears prickle at the corner of Eric’s eyes.

Miranda put her arm around Adrianna. “We won’t. Eric will get his car, and you and I will sit together. Here, you can have some of my lemonade if you don’t mind that I took a sip from it already.”

Eric slowly rose to his feet and headed to grab his car. He took a last look at Adrianna and Miranda. Thankfully they arrived when they had, or else Adrianna would have been afraid under the tree – all by herself.

Just like Oliver in the NICU, he thought.

Scared and alone, with nobody to hold him and tell him it would be alright.

Suddenly his world was becoming more clear, and expanding to include those around him and not only himself.

He didn't care for it.

Not. One. Bit.



## ERIC

When Eric brought his car to the park and retrieved Miranda and Adrianna, she admitted to feeling a bit improved.

As they neared her house, she said she could see the edges of her vision, but still, the center was blurry.

Wanting to help but not wanting to intrude, Eric let Miranda walk Adrianna into her place. She helped her lie down in her bedroom before returning to the car to retrieve Henry.

Eric had already taken him to pee while they were in the house.

Miranda unclipped the leash as she opened the front door, closing it gently behind an excited Henry, who immediately followed his owner's scent up the stairs.

"Poor thing, we should check up on her later." Miranda was shaking her head as she put on her seatbelt.

"Did you get her number? Is there someone we can call?"

Miranda looked up at him; her eyes looked misty.

"I have her number, and she said she didn't have anyone to call. I'm worried about her. She seems sad."

Eric drove through the roundabout and signaled right to turn back home when Miranda put her hand on his arm.

"Let's visit Oliver, and then maybe we can drop some food off for Adrianna when we come back this way."

Eric nodded and headed toward the hospital, the pit in his stomach feeling colder and harder the closer they got. He didn't want to count down the hours he had left with Oliver, but that's exactly what he was doing.

They drove the rest of the way to the hospital in silence. There wasn't much to say to each other, and they were both holding back tears.

After they parked, and as they were making their way into to the hospital, Miranda suddenly stopped walking and looked over at Eric.

“Remember psychology class? When did they say core memories started forming? At three years old?”

Eric shrugged. “No idea, how come?”

Miranda's shoulders sagged. “Just wondering if Oliver will remember us – even the littlest amount.”

She bit her lip, holding tears back, her voice barely a whisper. “I guess he won't then. He won't remember us.”

Eric put his arm around Miranda and pulled her into him.

“He's going to be fine, and so are we. Just picture the lovely couple getting a phone call that a healthy baby is waiting for them. It's going to be okay, I promise you.”

She sniffled in his arms, nodding yes that she believed him.

“Now let's go, and let's be brave and put on a happy face so we don't worry him. I think babies pick up on stress, so let's pull it together – for his sake – okay?”

Another nod.

Slowly they composed themselves and made their way to the NICU.

Eric swallowed down the lump in his throat as the familiar smell of the hospital washed into his lungs.

They would be brave, just like Oliver.

Once they arrived at the NICU, they were met with an anxious nurse who stopped them from entering Oliver's room.



There was a yellow sign on his closed door, and a cart off to the side with yellow gowns and masks.

Eric and Miranda both looked at each other in confusion. Inside his room, there was a nurse dressed in one of the yellow gowns with her face covered by a mask and goggles. Her hands were inside long green gloves that almost reached her elbows.

Eric was alarmed. It looked like the nurses were wearing hazmat suits.

“What’s going on?” He could hear the panic in his voice. When he peered back into the room, he saw little oxygen probes on Oliver’s face.

The nurse brought Eric and Miranda to the side and started to explain.

“We have to limit people to the room right now. Oliver started having some difficulty breathing this afternoon, so we have started him on some oxygen and are continuing to monitor.”

Eric could feel panic rising in his throat.

“What’s wrong with him? Can I see him?”

Miranda put her hand on Eric’s arm and squeezed tightly.

“We are putting a limit on visitors, so only two people can go in. Would you like for it to be both of you? If that’s the case, we will need to ask the foster parents to hold off until Oliver feels better.”

Miranda peered up at Eric, concern welling in her eyes.

“Yes, both of us. Myself and this is my friend, Miranda.”

The nurse nodded in acknowledgement but said nothing else.

He wished for Adrianna to be here more than anything right now. She would know exactly what to say to make him feel better.

“I’ll teach you how to put on the appropriate protective equipment, and when you’re done in the room, I will teach you how to remove it safely. I can also have the doctor come and speak with you later if you wish.”

Eric and Miranda nodded in unison and then followed the nurse to the cart to start putting on the gowns and gloves.

“Will he be okay?” Miranda was asking as she put on the pale-yellow gown meant to protect her clothing from whatever they presumed Oliver had.

“We hope so.”

Eric felt Adrianna’s absence more than ever now.

He needed her.

Oliver needed her.

Miranda and Eric gave each other a final look before they entered Oliver’s room. They felt ridiculous in their protective equipment - and also hot. Eric could feel his body heat radiating against the gown and gloves. Sweat started prickling on the back of his neck, and the gloves were sticking tightly to his hands.

It almost felt claustrophobic inside the suit. He was free to move, but every movement was restricted.

There was a nurse beside Oliver’s cot who was listening to his chest with a stethoscope.

Eric’s mask pushed hot air back onto his face, making it feel like he wasn’t getting enough oxygen. His goggles were starting to fog with his heavy breathing.

Oliver was only in a diaper, lying on his back in the cot, and wasn’t crying. He looked exhausted. His eyes were red-rimmed, his face looked pale, and he had oxygen probes under his tiny nose.

The nurse was pointing to his chest and was saying something to Eric, but he hadn’t been paying attention.

“I’m sorry. Can you repeat that?”

“We call these retractions.” She was pointing to the space between Oliver’s ribs. “You see how it sinks in when he takes a breath? That means he’s working a little harder to breathe.”

Eric could only nod in response. He didn’t know what to say.

Miranda spoke up first, and didn't hold back. "Can we hold him? Will he be okay? Do we know what's wrong?"

The nurse's eyes creased in the corners, making it look like she was smiling behind the mask, but it was hard to tell.

"We took a swab this morning to send off to the lab and see what's causing his symptoms. We think he likely caught a virus, and if that's the case, then there isn't much we can do but support him until he feels better."

"So, he will feel better then, right?" Miranda was clutching Eric's arm again as she spoke.

"Hopefully, in a few days. We are trying to limit his movement right now so we don't exhaust him, but certainly you can hold him. If the alarms start ringing, just know we are keeping a close eye on him. We need him on the monitor at all times."

She started to leave the room and then turned back as she sensed their hesitancy to touch Oliver.

"Why don't you both sit down, and I'll hand him to you. Then when you're done, I will be outside and can help you undress. There's an order we do it in so that you don't contaminate yourself when you leave."

She moved back to the cot and picked up a sleepy Oliver. It was the first time that Eric had ever seen him so quiet.

It was unsettling.

## Chapter 12

### ADRIANNA

Adrianna woke up in her bed with her head pounding. She opened her eyes and looked at her hands, relieved she could finally see clearly again.

Her phone buzzed next to her, but the screen was too bright to look at. She quickly answered and plopped the phone to her ear, her voice raspy as she said a scratchy, “Hello?”

“Why are you ignoring me?”

She rolled her eyes. “Why are you calling me?”

“I’ve sent you close to a dozen text messages.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“So what’s the story with that guy then? Are you guys dating?”

She laughed into the phone. “Derek, I have no idea what you’re talking about, and I also don’t know why you care. I have to go now.”

“He’s bad news, you know that, right?”

“I’m hanging up on you now. Thanks for the dating advice.”

He hung up first.

Feeling frustrated, she tossed her phone to the other side of the bed, but it started buzzing again.

She leaned back over to grab it and angrily answered, “What do you want?”

When she heard the silence on the other line, she quickly squinted at the screen and realized it wasn’t Derek calling.

“I’m so sorry to bother you. It’s Miranda. I wanted to let you know that we just dropped off some food at your door. I hope everything is okay.”

Adrianna blushed. “Thank you so much. Sorry, I thought you were someone else. That’s so lovely of you. Would you like to

come in?”

Adrianna felt like she should host, but was really hoping they would refuse. She didn't feel well enough to see anyone right now.

“We already left. We also spoke to one of the doctors at the NICU, and they gave us advice on what was best to take for a migraine, so we picked up some things from the pharmacy. It's in the bag with the food. Message me tomorrow to let us know that you're feeling better. I'm glad you're alive, and I hope you love pasta! Bye!”

Adrianna said goodbye and made her way down the stairs.

Her head wasn't throbbing as severely as earlier; perhaps the adrenaline from her phone call with Derek had somehow helped her headache.

It was the only nice thing he had done for her as of late. She jokingly thought she should be somewhat thankful he was such a jerk.

She quickly grabbed the food from the front door and brought it into the kitchen.

When she opened the bag she was immediately surprised at what they had brought her.

It was her favourite meal – fettuccine Alfredo. How did they know?

It was still perfectly warm, and the smell of the fresh cheese and garlic was making her stomach grumble.

Inside the same bag, there was a smaller one with two bottles of over-the-counter headache medications. She opened them both up and took a pill from each, swallowing it down with a large glass of cold water from the tap.

She didn't know what she did to deserve all of this, but she would definitely repay them - as soon as she felt better.

Henry was looking at her and licking his lips.

She looked down at him, “I'll give you some of the chicken, don't you worry. Let's go eat in the living room.”

Together they snuggled on the couch with a big blanket.

She would eat, pump, and then go back to bed. Hopefully, tomorrow would be a better day.

Today was only her first day off, and it already felt like she was further behind the exhaustion than she could handle.

Her heart and her body needed the next few days off to recover.



## **ADRIANNA**

The following morning Adrianna felt much better. Her headache was gone, her vision had recovered, and she felt stronger on her feet.

After her morning coffee and a walk with Henry, she was feeling more like her normal self.

The sun was shining, and the air was warm. It was just what she needed to return her headspace to normalcy. Well, her new normal.

Nothing would ever be the same after she lost her little girl, but she would resume life as best she could. She had to.

Her sister was messaging her for lunch plans, which she wasn't sure she had the energy for.

She quickly sent a thank you text message to Miranda for all of the help yesterday and asked her to extend it to Eric. She didn't have Eric's number, and thinking better of it, it was probably for the best.

She touched her lips absent-mindedly, remembering the way his soft lips had pressed firmly onto hers when they kissed.

Returning to her phone, she confirmed lunch plans with her sister, Melody. She needed to get Eric off her mind.

The best way to do that would be to sit across from Melody and hear about all the lavish trips she went on and designer items she 'had' to purchase for her new home.

It was exhausting to be around, but would serve as the perfect distraction. It would still be better than thinking about their kiss.

Adrianna brought up her soccer home page and looked up the section for goalie requests. She could also easily fill her evenings with a few games.

That would hopefully get her mind distracted from thinking about Eric.

That afternoon she met her sister for lunch at a restaurant Melody had chosen for them.

Within a minute of arriving, she felt underdressed in her tight black body suit and high-waisted leopard print skirt with a long slit up the side.

Had she known the place was a bit more upscale, she would have paired her outfit with a heel rather than her trendy flats.

Her heart sank when she came to the quick realization that unfortunately, the bill would be more than she could afford to spend on lunch.

Her sister was already seated when the waiter walked her over to the table.

Melody was wearing an expensive-looking turquoise blouse that was tucked into dressy black capris pants with black strappy heels. Her medium blonde hair was perfectly styled with a middle part.

Melody was sitting perfectly with her hands in her lap, the large diamond ring on her left hand visible from the front of the restaurant.

Adrianna had taken care to wear her coworker's clothing line for their lunch date, thinking it could be a conversation point and a bit of promotion for Betty x Bow.

Melody gave her a quick one-over look but said nothing. That was as close to a compliment as she could ever expect from her.

Melody gracefully stood up and gave a cold hug to Adrianna. Her arms never fully wrapped around her, and she immediately focused on fixing her hair as they sat down.

“Are we expecting someone else?” Adrianna asked.

Melody looked around, confused. “Why do you ask?”

Adrianna shook her head. What she wanted to say was that her sister appeared to be hyper-fixating on her appearance, but she didn’t want to bother getting into it with her.

The way it worked with Melody was that it always needed to be on her sister’s terms to have a relationship with her.

It was a superficial relationship – but Adrianna told herself it was better than no relationship at all.

Melody fixed her hair one last time as she glanced around again. “You just never know who could be at the table next to you – you know?”

“Right.”

Melody laughed and batted her blue eyes. “I guess you don’t have to worry about that so much.”

“Nope.”

“In my line of business, you always have to be prepared to run into someone important.”

Adrianna was already tired of where this conversation was going.

“Are you in politics now?”

Melody gave her a scornful glance.

“No.”

Adrianna fought the urge to smile. “Oh, I was confused when you said ‘your’ line of business. I thought you maybe changed careers.”

Melody looked offended, and Adrianna decided to back down.

“It’s as much *his* business as it is *mine*. You wouldn’t understand.”

“You’re right. I wouldn’t. So, what’s new?”

Melody seemed satisfied, like she had successfully shut down Adrianna.



Sipping on the martini she had ordered before Adrianna arrived, Melody leaned back in her chair, scrutinizing.

“Your face looks puffy.”

Adrianna tried her hardest not to roll her eyes.

“It does that sometimes.”

She was looking around for the waiter so she could order her own drink.

“No, I mean like bloated or something. Are you eating lots of sweets?”

Adrianna let out a big sigh. “Nothing more than the usual.”

Melody clucked discernibly. “You shouldn’t be eating *any* amount of that stuff. It’s terribly bad for you. Aren’t you a nurse?”

“Last time I checked,” Adrianna said dryly.

“I don’t appreciate your sarcasm today. What’s up with you?”

“I just finished four days of work, and just came off nights. It’s not an easy transition.”

Adrianna wanted to also add that she didn’t have the luxury of a husband who paid for everything so she could be a stay-at-home cat-mom.

“Well, that’s no excuse to be rude. Also, you haven’t mentioned my new hairstyle.”

Adrianna looked over at her sister, who was sitting in a pout. “It looks great.”

Immediately Melody smiled.

“Right? I love it.”

Adrianna rolled her eyes as Melody looked down at her menu. She couldn’t help it.

She also had no idea what was different about her hair.

“Okay, let’s eat. There’s a really good salad section here,” she looked at Adrianna from the top of her menu and arched one eyebrow. “You should probably look to order from there.”



## ERIC

Eric was exhausted as he sat at his work desk.

He was spending his days at work and his evenings and sometimes even the nights in the NICU with Oliver.

He and Miranda were taking turns, but it was still taking a toll on them both.

The one good thing was that the adoption process was put on hold while Oliver was recovering.

In the past few days, Oliver's oxygen requirements had decreased slightly, but he still needed the prongs on most of the time.

Today when Eric called at lunch for an update, the nurse informed him that Oliver had spent two hours without needing supplemental oxygen, but needed to be on his belly to do so.

The swab had come back positive for an upper respiratory infection, and since Oliver was slowly improving, they didn't need to start any treatment. They were cautious when they told him that although he was improving – he wasn't out of the woods yet. He was still having fevers at night time, and the morphine titration was off the table until he was feeling better.

He would be in the NICU until he could prove that he was stable on room air.

The results had also come back from the drug screening and were of no surprise – Oliver was withdrawing from a combination of methadone, nicotine and cocaine.

Miranda was going in to see Oliver this evening to give Eric a break. Eric would relieve her and do part of the night since he decided to take the next day off work.

He took the last sip of his cold coffee and saw his phone buzzing on his desk.

**Looks like you need some downtime, buddy. Come have a drink with me and my friends tonight after the game.**

### **It'll be a nice break - Marc**

Eric was about to respond that the last thing he wanted to do was go out for drinks in the evening, but when he looked outside and saw the bright sun, he knew a patio and a cold beer would likely make him feel a lot better. Maybe it would even add some normalcy back into his life.

Miranda popped her head in quickly and let him know she was leaving soon for the NICU. She also looked exhausted.

“I’m bringing this for him.” Proudly she showed Eric a small stuffed toy. He thought it was supposed to be a sloth.

“You’re not allowed toys in the crib.”

“They told me I could since he’s on the monitor, but not at home.” She triumphantly crossed her arms as she spoke. “I also slept with it last night and have had it with me all day, so it smells like me.”

Eric rolled his eyes, “He’s not a puppy.”

Miranda narrowed her eyes at him. “Research says otherwise. Babies have an acute sense of smell. That’s how they know who their mother is and how to find the nipple just after birth. I looked it up!”

Eric knew he was losing this argument and put his hands up in resignation.

With a smirk, Miranda kissed the little toy and then tossed it at him. He caught it deftly when it sailed a little too close to his head.

“Rub it on you or something. I have a meeting before I head out, and then I’ll come back for it.”

With that, she was gone. The only evidence that she had been there was the plush sloth in his hands.

Feeling ridiculous, he first put it close to his neck and then tucked it inside his suit jacket to let the scent of his cologne seep in.

If it would possibly help Oliver, he was up for it.

“Did you just rub a toy on your neck?”

The voice came from Melissa, who was standing in the door frame of his office with her arms crossed and her brows furrowed. She was wearing an even tighter dress than he had seen previously. Despite it being black, it really left nothing to the imagination.

Slowly she sauntered over to his desk and sat on the corner of it.

She put her hand out to receive the toy, but Eric held it close inside his jacket, safeguarding it from picking up her scent.

“It’s for a friend. Do you need something?”

She uncrossed and crossed her legs, showing off her slender thighs and black stilettos.

“Just wondering if you’re free after work.” She was running her fingers across her thighs as she spoke.

He reflexively glanced at her legs and then quickly pulled his eyes away and began gathering papers on his desk.

“I’m busy.”

She pretended not to pick up on the irritated tone in his voice. Leaning close to him, she licked her lips and purred, “I’m not wearing any panties right now.”

Eric sighed and pinched the space between his eyes. She still wasn’t getting the hint.

“Perhaps you should reconsider your attire in this professional setting. I have many things to do right now, and this isn’t one of them, so if you would please –” he finished the sentence by motioning with his hand toward the door, still not making eye contact with her.

Her body turned rigid, causing his attention to drift to her face. She looked hurt, and he felt bad for how she felt; however, he didn’t feel responsible for it.

Quickly she turned and left his office, almost hitting Miranda on her way out.

Miranda sighed, “I told you to leave that one well enough alone.”

She put her hand out for the toy, and Eric handed it safely back to her.

“I’ll message you when I get there. Don’t forget to eat something when you get home - you look pale.”

Eric self-consciously felt the sides of his face, wondering if he was losing weight. He hadn’t been as active as usual lately and hoped it wasn’t showing.

“I’m going to meet Marc tonight after his game for drinks if you want to come.”

Miranda was yawning, looking like she might decline, but did the same as Eric and looked outside at the beautiful sunshine.

“Yeah, maybe I will. The pub by the park?”

“Probably, I’ll let you know.”

“Sure thing, Captain. Maybe meeting some sweaty players after a good game is just what I need.”

She winked at him and left his office as he called out after her, “I *hate* when you call me that.”

“I know,” she called back after him.

Eric quickly closed his office and headed home to make something quick to eat. The last thing he needed was pub food.



## ERIC

By the time Eric had confirmed plans with Marc, he was feeling the weight of the day on him. He made a coffee at home, sipping it while he chose shorts and an athletic top to wear to the pub. It was unseasonably warm again this week.

The patio was packed when he arrived. Marc saw him first and stood up to allow Eric to sit in an empty seat close to him.

Eric made his way over as Marc introduced him to someone in the seat next to his.

“This is Adrianna - she helped us out tonight by playing goalie. Adrianna, this is Eric.” He winked at Eric after the introduction.

Eric and Adrianna glanced at each other awkwardly.

Adrianna put her hand out slowly, but Eric’s confused face easily gave them away.

“*This* is the woman I was telling you about. The awesome goalie we had sub for us a few weeks ago. I’m trying to convince her to join our team.” Marc watched as they awkwardly shook hands. “Do you two know each other or something?”

Adrianna said ‘no,’ and Eric said ‘yes.’

Marc looked at them, confused.

“It’s ok, Adrianna; he knows about Oliver.”

Sudden realization hit Marc, and he let out, “Oh, so is this *the nurse* you were talking about?”

Eric glared at him as Marc realized he was speaking without thinking first.

“I mean, not *the nurse*. Just, one of the nurses, you know.” He was shifting his feet now. “Which – one – I mean, which nurse are you?”

Marc seemed to have given up trying to save himself and quickly sat down and took a gulp of his beer.

Adrianna also took a moment to sip her drink. She was drinking a Caesar, licking the rim of the glass as she sipped the deep red cocktail.

Eric had to shake his head and look elsewhere. It’s how *everyone* drank a Caesar, but there was something about seeing her tongue slowly lick the rim of the glass that he found seductive.

She took another sip, looking up at him. “I didn’t realize you two knew each other. How did you and Marc meet?”

Eric cleared his throat and looked around for the waitress. He needed a drink.

As if reading his mind, Marc poured a beer from a pitcher at the center of the table and handed it to Eric.

“We have known each other since we were kids. How about you?”

“We just met a few weeks ago with soccer, but I recognized him from seeing him around the field.”

Eric could feel buzzing in his pocket and pulled out his phone to see a picture of Miranda in her full gear, holding Oliver closely.

In the background, he could see the cot with the stuffed toy in the corner of the mattress.

“How is Oliver doing? I don’t go back for another couple of days.”

Eric smiled and showed the picture to Adrianna. Her breath caught in her throat, “Oh goodness, what is he in isolation for?”

“Upper respiratory virus. They said he should be better soon, but everything is on hold for now – including the morphine titration. I think they said next week they might try and lower the dose again.”

Her hand was on her heart as she looked at the photo.

“Oh, the poor thing. He’s so lucky to have you all. Wait, is that a sloth in his cot?”

She was pointing to the stuffed toy that Miranda had brought in.

Eric could only nod before Adrianna said, “He is going to *love* that, especially if it smells like you guys!”

She was clapping her hands together in excitement.

Eric was staring at her, observing her reactions. She was genuinely excited for Oliver, and it made his heart ache.

He pulled his phone back in front of him, asking her, “Did you want to see other photos?”

Adrianna didn’t answer. Instead, she pulled her chair close to him and leaned onto his arm, smiling intently as she watched him swiping through photos.

“He’s just the sweetest baby I have ever met, honestly.”

Eric was beaming. He thought Oliver was pretty great, also.

“I’m sure you tell all the parents that.” He joked, nudging her with his arm.

She giggled softly as she pushed back into him with her shoulder, “Sometimes yes, but this time I truly mean it.” She looked up, and their eyes locked. “He’s perfect.”

Eric’s heart was racing again. She was so close to him that he was losing the ability to resist putting a hand out and touching her to confirm she was a real person.

Nobody could be so sweet all the time.

It made him want to ravage and protect her at the same time.

He took a sip of beer to distract himself.

“I’ll be right back, guys. I’m just going to find the washroom.”

As she stood and walked away, Eric couldn’t help but watch her. She was wearing a long sleeve athletic top with tight shorts that showed off her toned legs.

“You’re welcome.”

Eric looked over at Marc, who was beaming with pride.

“You didn’t plan this,” Eric said, glaring back at him.

“I didn’t, you’re right. But it doesn’t take away the fact that this is pretty perfect. She’s cute, and you should see her play. She’s one of the best goalies in the league.”

Eric couldn’t picture her being aggressive like a goalie. It just didn’t fit this calm, sweet woman who showered him and Oliver with endless patience and caring.

“You should come tomorrow night when she plays again. She already invited me to be a sub on her team, so I’ll be there.”

“Maybe.”

When Adrianna returned to the table, she looked tired and wasn’t as talkative as before.



They both decided to call it a night once they finished their drinks and left the table at the same time.

Adrianna pointed in the direction of where her car was parked, which was conveniently on the street next to his house, so Eric offered to walk her to her car.

They were making small chat as they walked, and although both of them were tired, the sizzling energy between them was palpable. Eric felt drawn to her, wanting to hold her hand as they walked – but he refrained.

He pointed out his house briefly as they walked past, but paid no attention to the person sitting on his doorstep. He had been so captivated by Adrianna's beauty as she talked about how she became interested in soccer as a child, that he hadn't heard his name being called or the footsteps following behind him.

As they got to Adrianna's car and he looked into her eyes to say goodbye, he felt a tap on his shoulder and heard an angry voice speaking behind him.

“You're just going to walk past me like I don't exist?”

He turned and saw Melissa, arms across her chest, face scrunched in displeasure.

Eric was confused and turned apologetically to Adrianna, who was already backing up to her car.

“I should go. It was nice to see you again, Eric.”

“Adrianna-” he wanted to explain further, but Adrianna politely waved him away.

“Your girlfriend looks upset, and I should really be going.”

She gave Melissa a polite wave and turned to unlock her car.

“She's not my girl-” he was interrupted by Melissa.

“Who is *she*?” Melissa asked, almost foaming from the mouth as she chewed on her words.

Eric turned around heatedly as he heard Adrianna start her car and pull out of the parking spot.

“What are you doing here? Why are you waiting outside my home?”

“It’s a good thing I was here, or who knows what you two would have done behind my back!”

Eric pinched the bridge of his nose, not knowing where to start.

“Melissa, I’m sorry if I gave you the wrong impression about us, but I’m not looking for a relationship right now.”

She huffed as she put both hands on her hips and stared him down furiously.

“Looks to me like you’re pretty infatuated with someone. I saw the way you looked at her,” she snarled.

Eric went to walk past, but she moved in front of him, blocking his way.

“I’m leaving now, Melissa,” he said through clenched teeth.

Melissa stood firm. “Why her and not me?”

Eric was clenching his jaw even tighter now. He was too tired for this nonsense. Through gritted teeth, he responded bitterly, “There is no *her*, and there is no *us*. You’re embarrassing yourself now. I suggest you go home.”

She was blinking away tears now but refused to back off.

“I’m prettier than her, and I won’t let you convince me otherwise. You’re going to regret passing me over, Eric.”

The way she said his name made his skin crawl.

“Okay.”

“I’m serious, Eric.” He winced at the use of his name again. It sounded like she was spitting venom as she said it.

“I don’t doubt that.”

Finally, she turned to the side and let him pass.

Unfortunately, Adrianna was long gone, and he wasn’t sure there was a point in trying to explain his situation.

Hopefully, this would be the last he would see of Melissa outside of work, but he had a sinking feeling that it wouldn’t be.

# Chapter 13

## ADRIANNA

Adrianna turned off the music in her car to finish the drive home in silence.

She felt silly for being so attracted to Eric and for letting him walk her to her car.

He *definitely* had a girlfriend. A much younger and much prettier - although angrier – girlfriend.

Her headache was returning because she wasn't drinking or eating enough, and coupled with pumping while she was at the bar was making her feel dizzy.

She was sad to see that it looked like her breast milk supply was decreasing. She either needed to pump more often or drink more – or both. Her heart sank at the thought that her body knew there was not a baby nursing and she wouldn't have enough milk to continue to donate.

It was her only connection to her little girl, and she wasn't ready to let it go yet.

Tears started flowing down her cheeks as she turned the last corner home.

For a brief moment she thought that perhaps socializing was too much right now, and she should cut back. But then her rational side took over and she realized that wasn't the reason why she was overwhelmed.

She was disappointed in herself for thinking Eric was doing anything other than being nice when he asked about her childhood. It had seemed like such an intimate question – and he appeared engaged when she was talking – but perhaps she read the whole situation wrong. He was probably just being nice, and she wouldn't stop talking about herself.

She groaned with embarrassment. He was probably just asking a simple question to fill the space before she got to her car, and she gave him a long-winded answer that he didn't care to hear about.

He must think she's conceited the way she talked only about herself – but he did *ask* the question.

She pulled her car into the small driveway and brushed away her tears as she turned the car off.

What she needed was some space. Being around him made her question everything about herself, and she needed to reset the tone to professionalism with him. He caught her off guard, and she was acting silly.

She laughed out loud, thinking about leaving him behind with his upset girlfriend. Perhaps she shouldn't have waved to her at the end, but she was just trying to be polite and show that there was nothing to hide and that their interaction was purely innocent.

Perhaps the girlfriend was picking up on her guilty thoughts. She had been looking at Eric, thinking about what it would be like if he kissed her – again.

Maybe his girlfriend was right. There was nothing innocent about how she felt about Eric, and she needed a break.

Shaking her head, she exited the car and repeated in her mind that he was just a patient's family member and nothing more.

If anything, they could be friends – but she knew that even that would be crossing the line, and it wouldn't ever be enough for her.



## ADRIANNA

Adrianna still felt tired the following evening. She had to work the next morning and had spent her entire day running errands. It was another warm day, and she felt guilty for not taking Henry for a long walk.

She had her soccer game that evening, with Marc coming to help their team.

Instead of driving, she decided to walk Henry to the park where she played soccer.

She arrived early and put Henry in the shade with a bowl of water and a toy bone. He would enjoy himself people-watching, and she wouldn't need to worry about him while she played.

While under the tree, she sat beside Henry and discreetly pumped before the game. She placed the milk in her travel cooler and tucked it neatly into her bag.

Making her way to the field, she took a deep breath of the humid spring air. It was a beautiful evening for a soccer game.

She looked at the field and saw that some of her teammates were already practicing.

The park was made up of soft grass and big trees, which were already displaying new buds, thanks to the warm temperatures and bright sun.

The only place that was turf was the field she played on each Friday evening. Thankfully with her schedule she didn't miss too many games – it was nearly impossible to find a replacement when she was working.

During the winter months, her team played at the same location, on the same turf, but a giant dome covered the field. It was dismantled in early April to make way for summer games. The first few games of the outdoor season were always quite chilly, but once you started moving, it was tolerable.

Adrianna stepped gently onto the turf and relished in the familiar sound and feel of the rubber pebbles pushing under her feet.

She sat on the sidelines next to a couple of her teammates who had just started to put on their gear. She wore the same equipment as her teammates – a jersey, shorts, shin pads, tall socks and cleats. The only difference between her and the other players was the colour of her jersey and the gloves she wore.

Once she laced up her soccer cleats, she stood up and brushed the turf pebbles off the back of her thighs and grabbed her soccer ball and a bottle of water from her bag.

She made her way to the goalie net, where her teammates were warming up, and smiled as she readjusted the gloves on her hands. It was so warm that she was already sweating inside them.

She started warming up when she heard her name called out. Briefly, she looked towards the sidelines and shielded the sun from her eyes with her hand.

Her heart skipped a beat at the sight of Eric.

She was expecting Marc - but wasn't aware that Eric would be watching her play.

She gave a shy smile and a brief wave before kicking her soccer ball to Marc. Deftly he carried the ball back over in front of the net and gave a hard kick.

In a swift motion, she sailed onto her side and blocked the ball easily with her arms.

She threw the ball back out and glanced over to see Eric watching her.

Would he be here the entire game? She wasn't sure she wanted him to see her play.

She felt unattractive in her gear and was worried he would distract her, but the minute her teammates started shooting at the net, she was immediately able to refocus and block all of them easily.

It was a hot game, so she had chosen the shortest pair of shorts she owned – and suddenly felt like she was on display.

Briefly, she looked over at the sidelines one last time. Eric was making his way over to Henry, who was wagging his tail at him from under the tree.

Perfect, she didn't need his distracting eyes on her the entire game.

She watched as he gracefully walked over to Henry, putting his hand out for Henry to smell first. He was wearing a tight grey athletic shirt that showed off his muscular arms and black athletic shorts that rode up and allowed her to see the taut muscles of his thighs as he bent over to pet Henry.

A ball sailed past her head and brought her attention back to the game.

That was the last time she would look to the sidelines. She needed to focus and get her mind *off* him.



## ERIC

Eric leaned down to pet an eager Henry whose tale was rapidly moving from side to side in anticipation.

He gingerly pet him before kneeling and taking a seat beside him. Henry gladly flopped on his back to give full access for belly rubs. Eric laughed and obliged him, with Henry's leg kicking wildly when he scratched the right spot.

From where he was sitting, he had the perfect view of the field without distracting the team by being an observer. He had noticed a look of fear on Adrianna's face when she recognized him.

Her look made him instantly feel like an intruder. He didn't want to be a distraction during the game but was curious about seeing her play.

Initially, he hadn't intended on coming, but Marc had insisted, and if he was being honest with himself – it didn't take much persuasion to see Adrianna again.

He could see her long legs from where he was sitting.

The game had just started, and she had already made some fantastic saves. She moved easily within the net and had a strong and very direct kick. He watched as she effortlessly caught any shots on the net and kicked the ball accurately back up to her forwards. It was impressive, to say the least.

He had no idea she was so talented.

At half-time, the teams switched sides, and Eric was able to see a different angle of the game – this time from the opposition's point of view.

The score was 2-0 for Adrianna's team, and he could hear grumbles from the opposing players that Adrianna was too good and they couldn't get anything past her.

Frustrations seemed to be rising, and a couple of players could be seen shouting at each other after the referee blew the whistle – but Eric was too far away to hear what they were yelling about.

He looked at his watch; there were now five minutes left. It was unlikely the other team would score fast enough to even tie at this point, but it looked like they were refusing to go down without a fight.

Eric rolled his eyes. Some people took recreational games way too seriously.

He could see the opposition changing their tactics by moving more players forward to try and score – but they didn't have the same skill level as Adrianna's team and ended up all jumbled near the net.

A few times, Eric's breath caught in his throat as he saw Adrianna dive and the other team didn't stop running at the net until they were almost on top of her.

Eric jumped up as he saw one player about to kick the ball *after* Adrianna had already saved it, and almost kicked her in the head.

He ran to the sidelines, where he could see the referee talking to the player and showing him a yellow card.

Thankfully within a couple of minutes, the referee blew the whistle twice to let everyone know this was the last play before they called the game.

Adrianna was awarded a free kick and took the opportunity to direct the ball to the other end of the field.

The forward, who had received a yellow card, received the ball and began carrying it back up the field. He was a decent player and outmatched his teammates, but was unlikely to make it to the net without assistance.

He made a pass to the other forward and charged at the net. His teammate passed the ball back up to him, but rather than



kicking it in, he decided to slide tackle Adrianna and took her out with his entire body.

Eric could hear the sick thud of Adrianna's body hitting the ground.

The referee blew the whistle as the ball went into the net. As the opposing team cheered their goal – tempers started flaring at the net between Adrianna's teammates and the other team.

Eric was about to run up to the player who had tackled Adrianna and give him a piece of his mind, but a hand on his back stopped him.

Marc, who knew him better than anyone else, shook his head in a way to say, "They've got it covered."

When Eric looked back, he could see the men on the team crowding the tackling forward.

They were as protective of her as he was.

A pang of jealousy hit him, but he shrugged it away.

That's when he noticed a separate crowd near the net and realized Adrianna was still on the ground.

Was that crying that he heard?

Eric took off running to the net with Henry arriving at the same time. He approached Adrianna just as a player was standing over her, trying to create space with his hands.

"Just everyone give her a minute, okay?"

Adrianna looked like she was doubled over on the ground, and Eric could hear muffled sobs from her direction.

In the crowd, he overheard a player saying, "He's a paramedic; he will know what to do."

Eric, not caring what anyone thought, rushed over and bent down beside the paramedic as Henry was licking Adrianna's cheek.

"Is there anything I can do to help? Adrianna, are you okay?"

Her face was covered in dirt, and her tears were leaving muddy streaks down her cheeks.

“My arm. It’s my arm.” She was sobbing, her face scrunched in a painful grimace.

Henry was sitting now, watching her carefully, wanting to lick her face again. Eric looked over at Marc, who quickly grabbed Henry’s leash and placed him a safe distance away, where he could still observe her but was safely out of the way. He was whimpering but remained still at Marc’s side.

The paramedic player spoke softly to Adrianna, “Adrianna, your friend and I are going to roll you over *very* slowly, and we won’t use your arm. Okay?”

She nodded, biting her lip.

Together they rolled her over, and then she started screaming.

“Something is wrong, something is wrong. I have to sit up; it hurts so bad, please, please.”

Adrianna was pleading with them, each word taking a slice out of his heart.

Eric followed the paramedic’s lead, and together they were able to sit her up.

“It’s pulling so bad. Something is wrong.” Adrianna was looking over at her right shoulder. The paramedic shifted his eyes to assess and quickly noticed how her shoulder was hunched forward.

“Sweetie, it looks like your shoulder is dislocated. It’s going to hurt like crazy until it’s popped back into place. We can try it now, as we call an ambulance, or we can drive you quickly to the hospital.”

The paramedic was inspecting her shoulder as she cradled her arm against her chest, trying to support its weight.

“Please try and do it now. It hurts so bad – I don’t think I can wait.”

Eric looked at the crowd and saw Miranda, who had just arrived and was standing next to Marc.

Without having to ask, Miranda offered an explanation. “Marc told me where you were. I was heading to your place to

update you on Oliver.” She was looking around and then saw Adrianna sitting on the ground. “Should I call an ambulance?”

The paramedic, overhearing this, quickly agreed with Miranda. “That would be great. I’m James, by the way.”

Eric rolled his eyes. Even in crisis, paramedic-James couldn’t help but be enamoured by Miranda, who smiled politely and bent down to Adrianna. “I’ll call an ambulance now, sweetie. Don’t you worry about a thing.”

Adrianna nodded and gave a half smile. She was still polite despite looking so uncomfortable.

James looked over at Eric, “How’s your stomach? Do you pass out easily?”

Eric looked offended as he answered, “No.”

“Good.” James was motioning for him to sit down on the ground. “Adrianna needs to sit upright and have something or *someone* against her to keep her back straight.”

Eric nodded.

“Adrianna, I’m going to have Eric sit behind you, and you’ll rest your back against his chest. Eric, I’ll need you to be still. Don’t let her push you back. Got it?”

Eric assumed the position, straddling his legs protectively on either side of Adrianna. He wasn’t sure where to put his arms, so he placed his palms on the ground beside her hips, creating a wall behind her.

She leaned into him, back straight, following James’ instructions.

“This is going to sound silly, but I need you to relax as much as possible. I’m going to move your arm gently to the side, but you will be doing most of the work by relaxing and allowing the head of your humerus to move back into place.”

Gingerly James grabbed her right arm, which she held protectively against her chest.

“I’m going to put your arm at ninety degrees and then slowly pull it towards Eric. Remember anatomy class? The humerus

head is stuck under your collarbone,” he was pointing to her shoulder, “and by moving it back, we are trying to release it.”

Adrianna sighed into Eric’s arms. He couldn’t see her face but could tell she was scared and in a lot of pain.

“Take a deep breath in, and as you exhale, we will slowly move the arm back. As soon as it hurts too much, we stop, okay?”

Another nod.

Adrianna jolted in pain with the first move of her arm, but as agreed, James stopped.

Over the next five minutes, they slowly breathed through movements, gently moving her arm back by millimetres at a time.

“Almost there, Adrianna, just one more deep breath in and out.”

Suddenly there was a collapse of her arm and an immediate sag in Adrianna’s shoulder. She sighed, and her teammates cheered as her shoulder looked normal again.

Adrianna motioned that she would like to stand up. Eric jumped to his feet behind her, and James cautioned her to move slowly as she stood up.

As she turned to face Eric, her face went white, and she fell forward into his arms, passing out. Eric supported her sudden movement and held onto her, looking to James for assistance.

James jumped into action, and quickly they brought her down to the ground again. Her eyes were half closed and fluttering.

Adrianna was coughing when suddenly James directed them to put her on her side as she threw up. Eric could feel the clamminess of her hands as he held her arms and wrist; her pulse was rapid under his fingertips.

She groaned but didn’t open her eyes and then suddenly stopped making any noise.

“Adrianna? Are you okay? Talk to me.” Eric didn’t like the sound of the panic in his voice, but he couldn’t control it.

Miranda was back now. “Should we sit her up?”

“No,” James directed, “In case she throws up again, we should leave her on her side. Are they coming?”

The sound of sirens answered his question.

Luckily, they were very close to the hospital.

The ambulance pulled onto the grass moments later, and James provided a thorough report on what had happened.

The paramedics nodded in acknowledgement and immediately laid her on her back, checking her pupils and pulse.

When she remained unresponsive, they proceeded to cut her jersey open and started placing ECG leads on her bare chest.

She was wearing a tight sports bra under her shirt, and Eric felt the need to look away. Her creamy skin looked untouched by the sun.

The paramedics gently rolled her onto a stretcher and then began loading her into the back of the ambulance. Once inside, they quickly inserted an intravenous line into her arm.

“I’ll come with you to the hospital,” Eric spoke as he stepped into the back of the ambulance.

The paramedics nodded, and Eric turned back to Marc and Miranda, who were nodding at him. Miranda was now holding Henry’s leash.

“I got him - don’t worry. Just update me when you can, please.”

“Thank you. His name is Henry.”

She looked at Eric, confused.

“The dog.” Eric pointed to a panting Henry who looked stressed.

“Oh! Henry and I will be fine, don’t worry!” She shooed him off with her hands as he continued into the ambulance.

One of the paramedics tossed a bottle of water to Miranda and winked at her.

“It’s for you, and also the dog. It’s a hot one today; get yourself in some shade.”

Miranda blushed, and Eric rolled his eyes a second time.

Everyone was a sucker for Miranda.

The paramedics directed Eric to where he could sit and not be in the way. Someone from the team threw Adrianna's bag into his lap.

He gave one last look to Miranda, who looked like she was explaining to the dog that everything was going to be okay, while gently trickling water into his mouth. He happily lapped up both the attention and the water as the heavy ambulance doors slammed shut.

“We aren't supposed to diagnose, but it's likely heat stroke mixed with shock. They'll run more tests at the hospital, but we have been seeing a lot of this today.”

Eric nodded and put Adrianna's hand into his.

He hoped that it was okay to do that.

Although he planned on returning to the hospital today, it wasn't in this fashion.

He couldn't afford to lose both her and Oliver in one day. The thought of Oliver put a pit in his stomach and brought back the heaviness of knowing one day soon, he wouldn't be in his life anymore. It hurt more than he anticipated it would.

Looking back at Adrianna, he felt the same pain.

It better be heat stroke.

He saw the paramedics hook a bag of fluid into the IV in her arm and fully open a valve on the line to have it rush in as fast as possible.

“Does she have any pieces of identification?” the male paramedic was asking him. He was staying in the back while his female partner walked around to the front and started driving.

Eric looked at Adrianna's bag sitting beside him.

He opened it to look for a wallet, but it was a large bag, and he had to pull out multiple items to get a proper look inside.

One item looked like a medical device with two sets of suction cups. He put that to the side and pulled out a black case

held together by a zipper. Undoing the zipper, he could feel coolness on his hands, and once inside, he found an ice pack and four small bottles of milk. He closed it back up and put it aside.

Finally, at the very bottom was a small wallet which he hastily scooped out and handed to the paramedic.

“Keep it with you for now; just let me know her last name and year of birth if you can find her ID.”

Eric was stuffing the removed belongings back into the bag when he caught the paramedic eying him.

“Does she have a child?”

Eric looked up, confused. “I’m sorry?”

The paramedic pointed to the cooler pack he was about to place back into her bag.

“Isn’t that breast milk?”

Eric’s heart stopped.

It didn’t make sense though. Panic started bubbling up from the butterflies he felt in his stomach. He could taste bile in the back of his throat and tried to swallow it down. Did she have a child? He didn’t know much about her, but then he figured something like that would have come up in all their talks about babies in the NICU.

The paramedic and Eric locked eyes as realization hit them. Was there a baby somewhere that needed milk?

It was at that moment that Adrianna could be softly heard saying, “There’s no child.”

Eric and the paramedic leaned closer over the stretcher.

Eric was holding her hand again.

“Adrianna? Can you say that again?”

“There’s no child,” she said flatly.

Suddenly Adrianna was trying to sit up.

“Where’s Henry?” she cried out.

“With Miranda. Don’t worry - he’s okay.” Eric reached for her hand again, having dropped it when she tried to sit up.

“Why am I in an ambulance? Why are you here?”

She was squinting at him, her eyes darting around the ambulance and then locking back onto his.

The paramedic stepped in with a kind voice.

“Adrianna, hi, I’m John. Everything is fine, and you’re okay. We are taking you to the hospital right now. I have an IV in your left arm, so try not to move it too much. I’m just running something called ‘saline’ right now because we think you suffered a heat stroke.”

Adrianna nodded as Eric interrupted the paramedic quietly by whispering, “She’s a nurse.”

The paramedic nodded in thanks and then returned his attention to Adrianna.

“Your blood pressure is a bit low - you’re hypotensive - and you’re tachycardic, but your ECG rhythm strips look great. Is there any important medical information we need to know? Any medications you cannot have?”

She squeezed Eric’s hand and then let it go.

“I’m breastfeeding at the moment. Well – I’m pumping milk. So, I would like to preserve that if possible.” Adrianna was shivering, her teeth chattering as she spoke.

Eric’s head was spinning. How was that possible?

He wanted to ask her, but it wasn’t the time, and she didn’t owe him any explanation.

Perhaps he should leave as soon as they get to the hospital so she could have her space – and privacy.

John grabbed a blanket and placed it over Adrianna as they rode in silence to the hospital. Thankfully, it wasn’t a long drive.



# Chapter 14

## ADRIANNA

Adrianna had insisted she didn't need to be on the stretcher, but when she lifted her head, she could feel it pounding in defiance.

She couldn't believe she had been so irresponsible that she didn't drink water during the entire soccer game.

It didn't take long for John and his partner Lucy to transfer her care to the triage nurses in the emergency room. Eric followed alongside the stretcher as she was pushed into a small room with a curtain that acted as a door.

"I should probably go. I'm sorry for invading your privacy. It wasn't my intention." Eric said, as he ran his hand through his hair, respectfully staying at the foot of the bed.

"Thank you for taking care of me. I feel so foolish - I'm so sorry for ruining your day."

Eric laughed, "Just some added excitement is all."

He walked closer to the head of the bed - closer to Adrianna. She was still hooked up to a monitor, and was worried he would be able to see her heart rate picking up in pace if he looked at it - especially since he was recently taught how to read the numbers.

Eric's phone buzzed while she played with her hands on top of her blanket. She was thankful it broke some of the awkward tension between them.

He pulled out his phone, furrowed his brow in concentration as he read something on the screen, and then looked up at her.

"Miranda is asking if it's okay that she gives Henry a hamburger patty. She's also asking what his favourite treat is because I think she's going to the pet store after she eats."

Adrianna laughed; Miranda was really kind.

"Yes, to the burger, as long as it's plain and he loves pizzles."

Eric raised an eyebrow. “Pizzles?”

“They’ll know what she means when she goes to the pet store.”

Eric shook his head and answered Miranda’s text message quickly before stuffing the phone back into his jeans pocket.

He was still giving her a look of concern from the end of the bed.

She felt a deep chill take over again and pulled the thin blanket close to her.

She could feel her teeth chattering. It didn’t help that hospitals were cold to begin with – coupled with heat stroke, she could feel her bones vibrating with the chill.

Eric suddenly turned through the curtain and was gone without saying anything. He returned a moment later with two warm blankets. He pulled the thin blanket off without asking and replaced it with the two warm ones. He threw the original thin blanket over the top.

“To try and keep the heat in,” he explained sheepishly.

The heat was penetrating her skin deliciously as she pulled them up to her chin, trying to smile, but her lips wouldn’t cooperate as they were shaking too violently.

“Thank you,” she chattered through trembling lips.

He leaned over her and gently touched the top of her eyebrow with his fingertips.

“Does that hurt?” he asked while frowning.

“A bit.”

“It’s not bleeding anymore. I hope it won’t need stitches.”

Her eyes opened wide at the thought of returning to work with stitches above her eyebrow, and having to explain what happened.

“Looks like the dirt stopped the bleeding. They’re going to have to clean it out for you.”

He let his hand drop, slowly caressing her cheek with the tips of his fingers.

A nurse came in and interrupted his touch. He jumped back a distance from the bed to allow the nurse space to work. It looked like he was getting familiar quite quickly with how hospitals worked.

“Hello, I’m Nancy. The doctor will be in shortly.”

She smiled briefly and walked over to the bedside, checking the IV insertion site on Adrianna’s arm. She followed the line to the bag hanging on a pole attached to the bed. It was now flat and almost empty, but slow drips still dropped into the chamber.

“Have you peed yet?” Nancy asked without looking up.

Adrianna shook her head no.

Nancy frowned, making notes on a clipboard she was holding.

“We likely need another bag of saline. I’ll get an order and hang a new one. That IV still feels okay?”

Adrianna nodded.

“You’re a nurse, right?”

Damn, word got around fast here.

“Yes, but for neonates.”

“Gotcha. Well, the plan is to treat for dehydration, so we will top you up with fluids and make sure you can maintain your temperature.” She glanced at the machine. “Last temp was a bit cool, so I’ll recheck once these blankets have had a chance to work.”

She walked over and pressed a button on a blood pressure machine, the cuff already on Adrianna’s arm.

The cuff puffed up tightly and then slowly deflated. Nancy turned the monitor so Adrianna could read the blood pressure, which was unfortunately still low.

“Once the doctor is in, they will decide whether you need x-rays for your shoulder, and you’ll likely be in a sling for a few weeks. You’ll need to discuss when you can use that arm normally again.”

She looked over at Adrianna, inspecting the small gash above her eyebrow.

“We will need to clean this out and dress it. I think just some steri strips will help. I doubt we need stitches. You have a headache?”

Adrianna blew out the air she had been holding deep in her lungs.

“Yes, a pretty good one.” She winced.

“I’ll bring you something good for it. You got someone to drive you home afterwards? It might make you a bit drowsy, but dehydration headaches are awful, and you usually need something a bit stronger than Tylenol.”

“I’m walking distance from here, so I’ll be fine.”

Nancy let out a chuckle, looking over at Eric. “Nurses are the worst patients. You okay to stick around and drive her home? I don’t expect her to be longer than a couple of hours.”

Adrianna was about to interrupt and say that wasn’t necessary, but her head was pounding too much.

“Of course,” Eric answered easily.

Nancy nodded, satisfied with his answer. She turned on her heel and left out through the curtain.

Once Nancy was gone, Adrianna closed her eyes.

Eric pulled up a chair beside her bed. She could hear the plastic and leather creak under his weight as he sat down.

She closed her eyes, feeling the exhaustion cover her like a heavy blanket. She desperately wanted to sleep but felt like it was rude if she did.

A sigh came from Eric, and she opened one eye to look at him. He was looking at his phone with his brows knitted.

“What?” she asked.

“There’s a dog on my couch.” He grumbled.

“He’s a very clean dog.”

Another sigh.

She giggled. “What now?”

“You never said a pizzle meant dehydrated bull... penis.”

She couldn't contain her laughter. It reminded her that her head was pounding, but she didn't care.

“Sorry about that.”

“I see from your laughter you're not that sorry about it. And don't worry, Miranda is also finding this hilarious.” His mouth was set in a line, and he looked dissatisfied but not completely unhappy.

He turned his phone to show her a picture of Miranda smiling and holding the pizzle for Henry to chew, both of them sitting on what must be Eric's couch in his living room.

“They look happy.”

Eric snorted and looked at his phone as it buzzed again.

He sighed and answered it, rolling his eyes as he put the phone to his ear.

“Miranda – absolutely not.”

There was silence while presumably Miranda was giving her side of the argument. Two lawyers debating – this should be entertaining.

“No, I'm not giving her the phone.” Silence. “Because she'll agree with you, and *I'm* saying no.”

Another deep sigh.

“*Fine*, but only because I need a favour from you.”

He proceeded to ask her to come pick them both up as he didn't have his vehicle with him.

The conversation ended with him agreeing to let her drive his car – which he didn't seem too thrilled about either.

Once he hung up, he leaned back, closing his eyes, not saying anything.

Adrianna couldn't help but ask, “Aren't you going to tell me what she asked you?”

He opened one eye to look at her and closed it again as he leaned his head back.

“She wanted to nap with Henry in my bed.”

Adrianna couldn't help but laugh again, hurting her pounding head once more.

“Haha, very funny. I'm glad you find this amusing.” Eric had a smirk on his face.

“So, there's Miranda *and* Henry in your bed?”

His phone buzzed again.

Another sigh from Eric as he once again turned the phone and showed her the photo of Miranda spooning Henry in his bed.

“Nice sheets.”

He half smiled at her.

“Take a nap you. You need it.”

She smiled and closed her eyes. She really did need one.

“Eric, if you don't mind, I do have a favour to ask you.”

Eric paused before speaking, “Do you have another dog that needs a bed?”

She giggled softly.

“No, but my breast milk needs to go into the fridge, or it will be ruined. If I fall asleep, can you ask the nurse if she can find a spot for it? You can ask me any questions you want. I don't mind.”

He stood up and gently touched the top of her head.

“You just worry about sleep and let me handle the rest.”

She didn't hear the sound of his feet leaving the room because she had fallen asleep so quickly. She didn't even wake up when the nurse came in and gave her medication through her IV.

She did know that Eric sat there the entire time. She could feel his presence, and oddly it was familiar and comforting.

Perhaps they could be friends.

She repeated to herself that, unfortunately, they could be nothing more. Her professional reputation depended on it, and her heart couldn't take another loss. That much, she was sure.



## ERIC

It was now after midnight, and Eric was exhausted.

Adrianna had just been discharged but was in no shape to go home alone.

He had spoken with Miranda earlier and made plans for her to come to the hospital with his car, and he would take Adrianna back to her place. Miranda would visit Oliver in the NICU, and he would relieve her the next morning.

He walked Adrianna out to the front of the hospital. She was drowsy and using him for support. He would have preferred to bring her out in a wheelchair, but she was coherent enough to refuse by saying she didn't want to feel like a patient. He tried to argue with her that that's exactly what she had been for the past few hours, but there was no use.

He had spoken with the doctor before discharge, and although Adrianna was well enough for release, she was at risk of vomiting in her sleep. Although it was unlikely to happen, it made Eric nervous enough to ask her to come back to his place.

She had declined, and so he promised to take her home.

Henry and Miranda were waiting for them in the car. When Miranda saw them come out of the hospital, she quickly opened the passenger door and helped Adrianna in.

Her eyes were half closed, but she managed to say thank you. Henry rushed from the back seat and poked his head around to lick her face. Adrianna lifted a drowsy hand to pet him and quickly fell back asleep before Miranda could shut the door.

“She’s really out of it.”

“Yeah, she is.”

“Are you going to leave her at her place?”

“I don’t think I have a choice. I don’t want to kidnap her and have her wake up at my place terrified.”

Miranda furrowed her brow thoughtfully.

“I’ll see Oliver for a few hours, and then I’ll message you with an update. If he’s fine, I might just take a cab back home. It’s been a long day.”

Eric nodded as he rubbed his eyes. He had to be back in the late morning to meet the foster mother. Now that Oliver was improving and had passed his five-day isolation period – the wheels were rolling forward with the adoption process.

Having missed a few days at work already, he was stressed about falling behind. Hopefully, he could get some work done in the office after meeting the foster mother.

Once Oliver was transitioned to the foster mother, he would have more time to devote to work.

He found it funny that before having Oliver in his life, all he wanted to do was be back at work. In the past couple of weeks, he had spent less time at work than when he was on vacation.

“Send me an update when you can,” Eric called out to Miranda as he walked to the driver’s side of the car.

“You too, Captain.”

Eric laughed. What started as a horrible name to tease him, had very quickly become a regular nickname. He was getting used to it.

He had already gone up to see Oliver a couple of times while Adrianna was sleeping in the emergency department. The NICU nurses let him know the foster mother would arrive the next morning just after medical rounds. Medical rounds were always at ten in the morning, and he planned to be there for the full medical update on Oliver.

He also let the staff know that Adrianna was in the emergency department with a dislocated shoulder and wouldn’t be in the next morning for her shift.



A few staff members went down to visit her, but Adrianna was sleeping and unaware anyone had come to see her. He tried to remember the names to tell her the next day.

Eric opened the driver's side and only had to back his seat up slightly as Miranda had long legs like himself.

The drive was quick to Adrianna's, and she slept the entire way. Once they pulled up to her place, he tried to wake her, but she was completely out. He grabbed her bag and looked inside for her keys - only to find none.

Frustrated, he walked out of the car and tried her front door to find it locked. Her keys must have fallen out of her bag in the park, and there was no way he was going to go looking for them now.

Shaking his head, he returned to the car and sat in the front seat and hung his head in exhaustion and frustration.

They would have to go back to his place.

Thankfully it was stocked with dog food, bowls, and even treats for Henry – all thanks to Miranda.

He pulled the car out of the parking spot and made his way back to his place.

Once back at his house, he took Henry for a quick pee and then let him inside. He smiled when Henry ran into the house with a sense of familiarity, but then groaned when he casually jumped on the living room couch. There would be more time and energy to correct that tomorrow.

He walked back to the car and tried to wake Adrianna again, but she only murmured nonsensical words in her sleep.

He gently unbuckled the seatbelt and scooped her and her bag out of the seat.

Once inside, he shut the door behind him with his foot and carefully made his way upstairs to his bedroom.

He turned the light on using his mouth and laughed, the switch still between his teeth. Miranda had changed the sheets on his bed. He hadn't noticed when she sent him a picture of her and Henry earlier. It made sense she would change them after Melissa had spent the night.

It was great that Miranda was so comfortable at his place, and although she was a wonderful friend - he really needed to change the PIN code on his front door.

Gently he placed Adrianna on the bed and frowned when he realized that she was still wearing a hospital gown. Her shirt had been ruined by the paramedics when they had cut it open.

He went to the top drawer of his dresser and pulled out an older t-shirt.

It was too bad Miranda wasn't here to help him dress her.

"Adrianna?" he spoke to her softly.

"Mhmm."

"I have a shirt here for you to put on so you can go to bed."

"Mhmm."

This time she sat up, eyes closed, and tried with one hand to untie the hospital gown.

He felt uncomfortable watching her struggle and moved behind her to help untie the back. Her right arm was in a sling that could be removed as needed to get changed. He would need to remind her of this.

"I have a shirt here for you, we can put it over top of your arm, or I can help you remove the sling-" he was cut off as she reached behind with her left arm and undid her sports bra, letting it fall in front of her.

He stayed at her back to maintain her privacy and grabbed the shirt, putting it over her head and the arm in the sling. She stood up and faced him, but he closed his eyes.

When he was confident she was covered, he opened his eyes to see her standing up and pulling her shorts down.

Thankfully the shirt he had given her was long enough to almost reach her knees.

He quickly pulled the bedsheets back as she hobbled towards the bed, eyes still closed, and crawled in with a deep sigh as her head hit the pillow.

He covered her with the sheets as Henry jumped up and laid on the end of the bed.

Henry peered up at him as he turned the light in the room off and moved to his side of the bed.

He would keep his clothes on and lay on top of the sheets until he was confident that she wasn't feeling sick, and then he would move to the couch.

Just in case, he set an alarm on his phone for the morning. A photo of Oliver being held by Miranda popped up with a quick message.

**Perfectly cute, morphine dose decreased. Needing lots of snuggles tonight, so we are going to take a nap together. See you in the morning - Miranda**

He replied quickly that they were all at his place and that - no thanks to her - Henry was now sleeping in his bed and that he would explain later.

Laying beside her, he closed his eyes, falling asleep to the rhythmic breathing of Adrianna and – was that the dog snoring?

# Chapter 15

## ADRIANNA

Adrianna opened her eyes, squinting against the bright light. Why were her black-out blinds open? She must have forgotten to close them again.

She went to sit up, but her head was still not back to normal, and her right arm was restricted in a sling. The memory of the night before flooded back. She clutched her chest and felt that she wasn't wearing a bra, and her breasts were aching in fullness. She looked down to check if she was leaking and saw two wet circles on a shirt she had never seen before.

When she looked around the room, she quickly recognized the bedspread from the photo Eric had shown her of Miranda napping with Henry.

She moved her feet and looked down to see Henry passed out on her legs.

Nervously she looked over to the other side of the bed, but to her surprise there was nobody beside her.

Slowly she stood up, taking care not to move too quickly. There was a note with some clothes on a chair in the room.

“Breakfast downstairs. Clothes from Miranda, hope they fit.”

That's when she realized she wasn't wearing anything on her legs.

Henry jumped off the bed to the smell of food. She heard his nails clipping down a flight of stairs, and echoing into the distance when he hit a landing.

Her breasts ached again, reminding her that she needed to find her bag and breast pump, or her breast were going to explode.

When she got downstairs, she could smell fresh coffee in the kitchen. Miranda was in the living room and smiled at her when she walked past.

“Oh, you look so cute! I'm glad the clothes fit!”

Adrianna blushed.

“Also, Eric wanted me to tell you that your work knows you are sick, and your breast milk is safe in the fridge. If you need to pump, your bag is in the front hall.”

Adrianna looked at her dumbfounded.

“Don’t look so surprised. I have lots of friends who have had babies, and I guess Eric is remembering some of the things he learned twenty years ago. I’ll be here when you’re ready. Coffee is in the kitchen - you can have coffee when breastfeeding, right? I know my friends said no coffee when they were pregnant ...”

Her voice trailed off.

Adrianna felt overwhelmed but managed to say a quick thank you before disappearing to collect her bag from the front hall.

Hastily, she made her way upstairs and spent the next twenty minutes pumping to relieve her engorged breasts. This was likely the longest she had gone without pumping.

She would have to pump this milk and toss it. She wasn’t sure *what* medications they gave her last night in the emergency department, but they were strong enough to make her forget taking her shorts and bra off. She didn’t need a baby exposed to that and knew the rules for donation wouldn’t allow for it anyways.

Unfortunately, due to her error, she would likely need to pump and dump for the next twenty-four hours.

She took the bottles into the kitchen and sadly wasted the milk down the sink. She washed the pump parts and her bottles before stashing it carefully back in her bag.

When she returned to the living room with a coffee, she looked around and asked Miranda where Eric was.

The energy of the room changed, and a sombre look came across Miranda’s face.

“He’s at the hospital. He’s meeting the foster mom this morning, and depending on how things go, he’s saying goodbye to Oliver.”

Miranda looked away from Adrianna and looked down at her hands.

“I said goodbye this morning. I spent the night with him last night, just holding and studying his little face.”

Adrianna put a hand on Miranda’s knee. “I’m so sorry, Miranda. He’s a lovely baby, and this can’t be easy on anyone.”

Miranda turned to Adrianna, her eyes glossy. “Did you know he smiled at me yesterday? For the first time – a *real* smile.”

“That must have felt nice.”

“It felt,” Miranda looked down at her hands again as a single tear fell down her cheek, “wonderful.”

Adrianna put her arms around Miranda and chose to say nothing.

There was nothing to be said.

Eric had made his decision with Oliver’s best interest in mind, and they couldn’t change that.

“Did you want to come with me while I take Henry for a pee? He’s a great listener, and I think the fresh air might do us both well.”

Miranda nodded as Adrianna released her from her arms.

She was so close to Miranda and Eric and had only known them for a couple of weeks.

Sadness crept in as they walked to the front door and clipped Henry’s leash to his collar.

She likely wouldn’t be able to say goodbye to Oliver either.

She blinked away tears. She wasn’t sure why this bothered her so much. In her position, there were several babies that she would care for over long periods of time, and often she wasn’t there to say goodbye.

She was feeling too attached to Eric and Oliver and knew it was for the best that they part ways, but she just couldn’t shake her intuition telling her that something didn’t feel right.



## ERIC

Eric parked his car closer to the hospital this time. In his hands, he held the signed paperwork to release Oliver to the adoption agency.

He had signed the papers this morning after Miranda had reviewed them to ensure everything was as it should be.

They had both sat in silence at the kitchen island.

He knew she would support him no matter his decision, but her sadness was palpable.

When he walked into the NICU, he was met with bright smiles, but everything felt different. He felt like the smiles were in sympathy.

Everyone knew this was the last day he would be here.

He clutched the papers in his hand and took a deep breath as he made his way back to Oliver's room.

Inside the room was Dr. Hajar, and beside her stood a slightly built older woman with grey hair in a tight bun.

The older woman smiled widely as he walked in and gave him a firm handshake.

Dr. Hajar gave a smile also. More sympathy?

“Good morning Eric. I want you to meet Sally. She's a very experienced foster mom and has helped out with several of our NAS babies.”

Eric nodded as Dr. Hajar continued, “Since Sally has experience with NAS babies, and Oliver is doing great, we have agreed to discharge tomorrow morning with morphine titration orders.”

“Tomorrow?” He was so surprised that his voice cracked as he spoke.

“Yes. We could even discharge today, but Sally needs some time to prepare for him. I'll leave you two. Please reach out if

you have questions.”

Dr. Hajar left the unit with a brief smile, and Sally and Eric were left alone.

Oliver started crying. Eric instinctively walked over to the cot when Sally put her hand out and stopped him.

“He needs to learn to self-soothe. You’ll spoil him if you pick him up right away.”

Eric looked over at her. “He’s crying to let us know something is wrong.”

She pushed her way to the cot, smiling.

“No, what’s *wrong* is he is asking us for attention, and what he *needs* to do is sleep.”

Eric could feel his cheeks becoming heated.

“I believe that style of thinking is quite outdated, and developmental research has proven that you cannot spoil a newborn.”

Sally looked unimpressed. “I have helped raise several newborns and have never had my methods questioned.”

Eric shook his head and picked up Oliver despite her frown as he did so.

Instantly Oliver snuggled into his neck and calmed down. He bent to pick up his soother when Sally snatched it out of his reach.

“No soothers.”

Eric laughed, “Are you serious?”

“Yes, as I said, he needs to *self-soothe*, which means he can’t use a *soother*.”

“He’s not breastfeeding. He wants the stimulation that he isn’t getting from bonding with his mother.”

Sally turned and threw the soother in the garbage.

Eric wondered if it was possible to be so angry you could see red, because that’s exactly what was happening.



“Is the name Oliver of special significance?” She had her chin up, in keeping with her stuck-up posture. She was wearing clothing his mother would have approved of – pleated white dress pants with a tucked-in blouse and black dress shoes.

“I chose the name.”

“I see. Is it on any legal documentation?”

“Not yet, no.”

“Oh, lovely. I will let the adoptive family know that it can be changed anytime.”

Eric spoke through gritted teeth. “*His. Name. Is. Oliver.*”

She looked at him and furrowed her brow in confusion. “But it isn’t.”

“What?”

“You just said that legally he has no name.”

Eric was about to argue with her when she went to grab Oliver from him.

“I can take it from here. He’s safe with me.”



## ERIC

Miranda and Adrianna were sitting together on the couch, distracting themselves by petting Henry, when the front door burst open, and Eric barged into the house.

He walked into the living room and stood in front of both of them. He was breathing heavily, and his face was flushed.

“Good - you’re both here. We have twenty-four hours to buy everything a baby needs, and we need to go now.”

Both of them dropped their jaws in surprise.

“Don’t ask me any questions. Just know that his name is *Oliver*; and I’ll be damned if I’ll ever not pick him up when he cries.”

He turned on his heel but then abruptly turned back, facing them again.

His face was set in a deep scowl. “Oh, and we are buying *lots* of soothers. Now let’s go.”

Eric looked down at Henry and motioned for him to come along with them. “You can come too. I’ll leave the AC on in the car. I have some legal documents you can chew on as I drive.”

# Chapter 16

## ADRIANNA

It was the next morning, and Adrianna and Henry were finally back home, waking up in her own bed this time.

The previous day had worn out her last bit of energy. She had declined to help Miranda and Eric when they wanted to spend the day shopping, but they kept saying she was the “brains of the operation” and they needed her advice on what items to purchase.

In the end, they had purchased the bare minimum, and she told them that anything else could be grabbed later.

They had a car seat, clothing, formula, bottles, soothers and bibs. Miranda was bringing over the bassinet today, and Marc was bringing over a fancy swing his older daughter was no longer using.

It was all coming together for him, and she was delighted to be able to provide support.

She knew their relationship had a countdown, and that was to today.

It was inappropriate for her to be so involved in the first place, and now with Oliver being discharged this morning – her role was finished.

Her role technically ended on her last shift with Oliver, and she was nervous that her involvement already could potentially jeopardize her license to practice nursing.

Then there was their kiss.

Thankfully there was no time to discuss the kiss that happened between them, and the more Adrianna thought about it – the more grateful she was that they both left it behind.

Adrianna was nervous for the day. She had let the NICU know that she couldn't care for an assignment independently right now due to the status of her right arm, but due to staff shortages, they requested she come in for the weekend. She

would act as charge nurse so she could help manage the unit but wouldn't need to perform any skills.

It would mean she would likely be present for Oliver's discharge.

She hadn't told Eric or Miranda that she would be returning to work so soon. It hadn't seemed necessary to update them.

Slowly she started getting ready for work, but her thoughts kept drifting back to Eric. Even if they could be friends, he would be too busy now with the baby.

She shook her head. She couldn't keep thinking like this. They *couldn't* be friends. She couldn't risk losing her license over an inappropriate *friendship*. Even if it were for something more than friends – it wouldn't be worth it.

More than friends? Her mind was racing, and her heart was skipping beats. Hopefully, once she was at work, she could busy herself enough not to think about him and how nice his shirt smelled when she had snuggled it in his bed.



## ADRIANNA

An alarm on Adrianna's phone rang as Derek walked over to her office at the front of the unit.

"You ready for rounds?"

She quickly turned off her alarm and swivelled the chair around to meet his gaze.

She was trying to balance a large binder on her lap that held the notes on all the babies in the unit at the moment.

"Geez, what happened to your arm?"

She tried to brush him off and hold the binder in one arm, but she wasn't doing a great job of it, and both she and the binder were losing balance.

Derek deftly stopped the binder from falling and steadied her with his other hand.

Adrianna regained her balance and noticed Derek was still waiting for her to answer what happened.

“I dislocated my shoulder while playing soccer.”

Derek shook his head. “I told you to stop playing that game. It’s too dangerous.”

Annoyed, Adrianna stood up and muttered under her breath, “Thanks for your concern.”

“I never liked you playing soccer on those co-ed teams. The men are way too aggressive with the women.”

“Well, lucky for me, I don’t have to worry about your likes and dislikes now.”

Derek huffed and rolled his eyes. “I’ll see you in the first pod. Good luck managing that massive binder. I don’t know why you nurses don’t just switch to a laptop like everyone else.”

Adrianna groaned. She actually would have appreciated it if someone had helped her carry the damn thing. As much as she hated the tone that Derek spoke to her in - he was right. They really should be moving to an electronic system. This binder was cumbersome, and right now, she just didn’t have the ability or the patience to hold it.

As she stood at the desk, staring at the massive binder and contemplating how to carry it, she heard a low rumbling moving toward her.

Looking in the direction of the noise, she saw Eric pushing a bedside table while coming her way.

“Hey, I figured you could use this for your massive binder. That thing is huge. You should really switch to a laptop. Want me to take out the pages you need?”

She laughed at the difference between Derek and Eric. They were as similar as night and day.

One let his scorned ego get in the way, and the other was thoughtful and caring, despite of it.

“That’s very kind of you. This should work perfectly.”

She attempted to pick up the binder again with one arm when Eric leaned over and grabbed it, placing it on the bedside table.

“Just let me know where you’re going, and I’ll help roll it for you.”

Adrianna was about to protest, but he started rolling it away, and the noise drowned out any words she would have spoken anyways.

Eric looked back for direction, and she pointed to the first pod.

He rolled the incredibly loud table into the room and watched as everyone turned to look at him.

Derek’s head snapped to attention as he saw Eric helping her. When she looked at his face, she saw the deep scowl for a split second before he was mindful and corrected his facial expression.

Eric smiled at everyone and said good morning to the team before nodding to Adrianna as he left the room to go and see Oliver.

Derek was looking at her suspiciously, and she didn’t care for it.

Adrianna cleared her throat and took a moment to collect herself before turning her attention to the room. Derek started the meeting, and together they discussed the status of each baby in the room with the rest of the medical team present.

After they finished, they moved to the second pod before it was Oliver and Eric’s turn.

When they finally reached Oliver’s room, Adrianna immediately noticed it was packed up and tidy.

Eric was ready. He looked so sure of himself in his casual attire. He was wearing a simple grey sweater that was tight on his biceps and black pants that showed off his muscular thighs.

He was sitting in the recliner with Oliver sleeping in his arms. Oliver was fully dressed in an outfit Miranda had likely chosen for him. He looked stunning in his little dinosaurs.

Adrianna smiled and started the medical update. Derek spoke briefly, and made sure to mention that Dr. Hajar had been behind all the medical decisions for Oliver.

Eric nodded, eyes firmly planted on Derek.

Adrianna was amazed at how easily Eric was able to command the room, despite being at a lower level and holding a small infant – there was no mistake about who was in charge.

Derek was speaking now, “I think that is everything then. You will have a follow-up in about a week to ensure everything is going well. We can give you the appointment before you leave, and your nurse today will confirm you are able to draw up and administer the morphine as required. Our team will follow you as an outpatient to ensure that we continue to titrate the morphine down.”

Eric nodded again.

“Okay,” Derek looked around the room at each team member, “I’ll write the discharge orders, and then you are free to go.”

Adrianna gave Eric a big smile and leaned down to see Oliver, whose face was squished into Eric’s chest, his breathing deep and rhythmic with sleep.

She brushed the top of his head gently.

“Good job, Dad. Best of luck.”

She gave Eric another reassuring smile and then followed the rest of her colleagues out the door to the next meeting. Her heart felt heavy as she said her final goodbye to the both of them.

She truly did wish them the best of luck.

After they finished rounds in the last room, she walked past Oliver’s room and saw it was empty.

It seemed so cold and lonely in that room now.

“Adrianna, am I taking the next admission?”

Rowena was walking up to her from the front of the unit.

“Oh right, you just did the discharge for Oliver, right?”

Rowena nodded.

“Yes, I think you’re first to admit. I don’t think there’s much on the board right now, so if you find your assignment light, then please do a walk-through and see if any of the new girls need help.”

“Sounds great. I’ll finish my charting, and I’ll do just that. Did you need help with anything?”

She was looking inquisitively at Adrianna.

“No, I’m fine for now, thank you.”

Adrianna felt bothered by the tone of concern in her voice. Reaching up to rub her forehead, she realized the bandage was still on it from her injury.

She must look like a complete mess to everyone. It was hard to look the part of charge nurse when she didn’t feel in charge of her own life outside of work. She would just have to do her best for the remainder of the shift. She rubbed her forehead again, feeling a headache coming on. Great.

Opening her eyes, she noticed the familiar hazy circle starting in her right eye.

Maybe if she went back to her office and shut the door, she could take some pain medication and drink some water, and it would go away.

Quickly she made her way to the office and closed the door behind her.

The hazy circle was now in the centre of her vision in both eyes.

“Shit, shit, shit.”

She blindly reached around on her desk for a bottle of water, knocking over pens as she did so.

Her purse was somewhere on the floor under the desk. She still had the medications that Miranda had dropped off the other night for her.

She crawled under the desk and started feeling around for her purse but couldn’t locate it. When she tried to open her eyes, her anxiety worsened as the hazy circle slowly expanded.

It was starting to frighten her.



A knock on the door startled her, and she hit her head on the desk as she tried to get up too quickly.

“Adrianna?”

Frustrated, she got up and went to sit in her chair but ended up sitting on the edge of the seat and lost her balance.

Derek caught her as she tumbled back into his outstretched arms.

“Adrianna! What the *hell* is going on with you?”

Adrianna broke down in tears, her shoulders shaking.

She heard Derek sigh deeply and felt his arms wrap around her.

She wasn't even sure why she was crying. It was probably a culmination of everything: she was sad about her goodbye to Eric and Oliver, she felt inadequate in her position, she missed her baby, her arm was in pain and completely useless and now her vision was completely distorted.

She cried harder.

“I can't even get home,” she sobbed.

Derek put her at arm's length. “What do you mean?”

“I can't see you.”

“Adrianna - I know, it's been hard for both of us, but I thought we agreed that seeing each other wasn't a good idea-” Derek was interrupted by her crying even louder.

“No! I mean, I can't see *anything*. I think it's a migraine again.”

She could hear her office chair roll close to her as Derek directed her to sit.

“Open your eyes,” he instructed.

“I'm too scared. What if it's worse than before?”

“Adrianna, please,” he commanded softly.

She opened her eyes and assumed she was looking at him but could only see the blurry edges of his face.

“Okay, good. Now follow my commands, okay?”

She couldn't help but roll her eyes, and he sighed in exasperation.

“Adrianna. Seriously.”

This time when he directed, she followed what he asked.

He moved her through a series of neurological tests, which involved moving her arms and legs in specific sequences, as well as silly facial expressions and memory recall.

“So, the good news is I'm not worried about anything neurological. You should still contact your primary care provider, but I think we can rule out a stroke or other neurological deficit.”

He was crouched at her legs now.

“Thank you.”

“I would suggest getting home. It's not going to resolve for a few hours, and considering this is a repeat event, you're likely fine to be alone. Get some rest, drink water, take some meds - you know - all that good stuff we always instruct to do.”

He went to stand, but she reached her arm out and grabbed him by his lab coat.

“Please, don't go yet. I don't know how to get home, and I can't find my phone.”

Derek sighed as she released his arm.

“Why can't you ask your boyfriend to come and get you?”

She could hear in his tone that he was sneering at her.

“I don't have a boyfriend.”

He huffed. “That's not what it looks like.”

She groaned in frustration, “For god's sake, just go. You're being ridiculous - I'll figure myself out.”

“Fine. Give me half an hour, and I'll bring you home.” Derek sounded inconvenienced, but at least he was offering to help.

Adrianna folded her hands in her lap, looking down. Tears started collecting in her eyes again.

“So you'll only help me if I'm single?”

Derek sighed, “Open your hand.”

She squinted up in the direction of his voice. He lifted her hand and placed a couple of pills into her open palm. In her other hand, he thrust her bottle of water.

“Take these and I’ll be back for you. I’ll let the team know to replace you.”

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“Just stop overthinking things. I’ll be right back.”

# Chapter 17

## ERIC

Miranda was waiting outside the unit for Eric and Oliver. She had insisted on dropping Eric off in the morning so she could come back and drive them home together.

Eric obliged and let her drive his car *again*, mostly because he wasn't exactly sure how to install the car seat, and was happy to have Miranda set this up for him.

She was all smiles when he brought Oliver out in the sunlight, already buckled snugly into the car seat. Oliver squinted against the bright light as the sun reached his pale blue eyes.

"He needs to be rear-facing, and the safest place is the middle of the back seat. I have the base in already, so all you have to do is clip the car seat in." Miranda was instructing Eric with a serious intensity he didn't see very often.

Eric leaned into the back seat with Oliver and did as directed. Surprisingly it was easy to clip in, and the base felt very secure in the back seat.

He stood back and had to laugh at the sight before him. What used to be a sleek sports car was now filled with a car seat and a confused baby.

Miranda tossed the keys at him and rushed to sit in the back seat next to Oliver.

"You drive. I'll keep this little guy company in the back."

Eric went to sit in the front seat when suddenly it struck him that he didn't leave the thank you card for Adrianna.

He could either drop it off at her place in the next few days, or better yet, he could leave it at the unit for her. He had taken the time to write something sweet and meaningful in the card for her, and he wanted to make sure she got it.

"I forgot something. I'll be right back."

Before Miranda could protest, he was making strides toward the entrance.

As he was about to walk in, he was surprised to see that Adrianna was coming out of the hospital. He waved to her, but she didn't acknowledge him and instead turned and looked behind her. Eric followed her gaze and saw Dr. Cook following closely behind.

Very closely.

Dr. Cook caught up to Adrianna, who was holding her hand out for him. He gently grabbed her arm, and together they started walking towards him.

Eric held the card in his hand, gripping it so tightly that it started crinkling in his palm.

Dr. Cook noticed Eric standing to the side and locked eyes with him. When they walked past, he gave a sinister smile with a wink and said, "Hey."

They continued walking away when Eric heard Adrianna asking, "Who was that?"

"Nobody," Dr. Cook replied without hesitation.

The words stung, and at that moment, that's exactly what Eric felt like – a nobody.

It couldn't have been said better any other way.

With flaring nostrils, Eric stomped back to the car, forcefully sitting in the front seat and slamming the driver's side door – forgetting for a brief moment that Miranda and Oliver were in the back seat.

Oliver stirred with the impact of the door closing but thankfully didn't wake up.

"Was that Adrianna and Dr. Cook?" Miranda was peering out the car window as Eric aggressively buckled himself into the front seat.

"I don't want to talk about it." Miranda could easily see the scowl on his face as he adjusted the rearview mirror.

Miranda huffed in the back seat and crossed her arms. "Why are you in such a bad mood all of a sudden?"

Eric looked up to see her face in the rearview mirror. He still had the card gripped in his hand and threw it on the front

passenger seat.

Miranda waited for an answer, and when Eric remained silent, she said, “I don’t think anything is going on between them, for what it’s worth.”

“Why do you say that?” Eric whipped around to face her.

“I’m not going to speak out of turn. It’s her story to tell, but I will say I’ve heard conversations in the hallways, and if they were an item at one point – they aren’t anymore, and I don’t think they will be in the future.”

Eric seemed mildly satisfied with this answer and turned back around to start driving.

“I know what I just saw.”

Miranda rolled her eyes, but Eric didn’t see it. “All I will say is, don’t jump to conclusions, and talk to her first. I know you like her, so just don’t overthink it.”

“She looked right past me, like I wasn’t even there.”

“Probably because she didn’t see you.”

Eric was getting angry again. “How is that even possible? I was *right* in front of her.”

“Eric, just leave it for now. She’s also leaving work in the middle of the day – and that’s not normal. What nurse’s shift ends after a few hours? Just don’t go all – angry Eric – and you’ll be fine.”

This time it was Eric’s turn to roll his eyes. “I don’t get angry.”

Miranda bit her lip, holding back a smile. “You’re right – you find any reason to walk away and do it.”

Eric sighed; there was no arguing that.

“Alright, point taken. Now let’s find a pharmacy to grab his medications, and let’s get home. This guy is going to wake up hungry any minute.”

Miranda nodded and repeated, “I know you like her. So just wait to hear her side of the story before you jump to conclusions.”

Eric knew Miranda was right, but he also knew what he saw, and he couldn't help but think about Dr. Cook's truthful words as he was driving.

The word 'nobody' was bouncing off the walls in his skull.

That's what he was to her - a nobody.

And now that Oliver was out of the NICU, and she said goodbye before he left – there was no other reason to contact her.

He hoped Miranda was right about Adrianna – but his heart was telling him it was over with her – before it even had a chance to start.



## ADRIANNA

Adrianna felt silly, useless, and completely vulnerable.

It was only a short drive to her place, but it felt like forever. She hadn't been in Derek's car for a long time, but it still felt oddly familiar.

The smell of the interior and the feeling of the leather under her legs brought back a flood of memories from what felt like an eternity ago.

She felt like a completely different person today than when they were together.

It suddenly struck her that the last time she was in this car was when he drove her to the emergency department – and then left her there.

“You know what I was thinking about the other day?” Derek's question brought her out of her cold memory and back into the present.

“What's that?”

“Remember when we rented that cottage for your birthday last year? You got so drunk that night.”

“You guys were giving me shots!” She protested with a hint of a smile in her voice.

“You could have said no.”

Adrianna shook her head, remembering that weekend. It was the last time she had drinks before they found out they were pregnant. The memories were bittersweet. It was also one of the last weekends they had fun together and were carefree.

The pregnancy had brought out a part of Derek she had not known was there.

It was a couple of weeks later that she had announced to him that they were pregnant. She hadn't expected it to happen so quickly – and apparently, he had not expected it to happen at all.

It was their two-year anniversary when she told him. She had cooked him dinner at her place and had surprised him with a gift. He had unwrapped it eagerly and had jumped with joy when he saw the onesie on it that said ‘World’s Best Dad coming this June.’

They spent the night celebrating their love and the life they had created.

His surprise to her was an engagement ring – and they laughed that they both had big moments planned for each other and had kept it quiet for so long.

“You’re quiet. Where did your mind just go?” he asked her.

She sighed, “Everywhere and nowhere, I guess. Just thinking about last fall and the big weekend we had.”

Derek leaned over and put his hand on her knee, finding her hand and gently squeezing before letting it go.

They drove in silence until Adrianna’s curiosity got the better of her, and she asked, “What made you think about that weekend?”

Derek shrugged. “I don’t know. I was remembering back to when you and I were both happy. You smiled a lot that weekend, and I remember thinking I needed to take a mental picture of how beautiful you looked when you smiled.”



Adrianna's head started spinning, and she felt a wave of nausea take over her.

"Pull over!"

He was about to object when he saw her gag and immediately pulled to the side just in time. She swung the door open as she started retching, just missing his car door.

When she was finally finished, she slowly sat back in the car seat, pressing the back of her head against the headrest while panting.

"Do you think you can make it another five minutes? Your place is just around the corner."

She nodded. She would take deep breaths to make it home. The good news was there was nothing left in her stomach to vomit.

"How is the vision?"

"I think it's getting better, actually." She opened her eyes briefly to assess but felt her head spinning and quickly shut them again.

They made it home without her having to vomit again.

He pulled up and parked the car.

"I'll help you in."

She wanted to protest that she didn't need help, but she knew that wasn't true. She had limited vision, her head was spinning, and her right arm was not in working order.

He came around to her side of the car and gently helped her out.

She couldn't remember the last time he was this sweet with her.

When they opened the front door, a frantic Henry joyfully jumped up at them.

"Henry, down, please," she was directing her voice into the entire room because she wasn't sure where he was.

He sat on his haunches and sniffed Derek, sudden recognition making him jump up all over again.

Derek was laughing and petting him.

“Does he need a walk?”

Adrianna nodded.

Derek helped her into the house and up to her bedroom. They briefly paused in the hallway next to the closed door that Adrianna always kept shut, before continuing to her bedroom.

“Is that still the way it was the last time I was, uhm, here?” Derek asked.

Adrianna nodded as she sat down on her bed.

“Are you going to sleep in your scrubs?”

She shook her head. “I’ll change when you leave.”

He sighed. “I can help you with that, you know.” He made eye contact with her and raised an eyebrow. “I’ve seen it all before.”

She refused his help as she looked down at her hands. “It’s different now.”

Derek was already walking around her room, not listening to her. He opened her closet door and took something off a hanger.

“You are so predictable. As if you still have this!”

She looked over at him to see that he was holding one of his old shirts that he had given her to sleep in after she had worn it all the time.

“It’s my favourite.”

“I bet it is.”

He helped her undo the sling and take off her scrubs, replacing them with the oversized white t-shirt and then put the sling back on.

“I’ll walk Henry quickly, and then I have to finish up a few things at the hospital, but I can come back after.”

Adrianna brushed him off. “That’s not necessary.”

He gave her a look like he wasn’t taking her seriously.

“I don’t think Carley would be happy about that.”

“You let me worry about that.” He winked at her and continued, “It’s kind of over between us anyway.”

“Oh?”

“We just want different things, and she’s pretty young.”

Adrianna huffed; she could have told him that.

In fact, she was pretty sure she did.

“I’m sorry to hear that.” She said, choosing the high road.

“Are you?”

She laughed. “I never said I wanted you to be miserable. I always said I wished you the best.”

Derek laughed. “I don’t think that’s the tone you used when you said that to me.”

She smiled because he wasn’t entirely wrong. She laid her head down as Derek pulled the covers over her and then went and shut the blinds.

He left the room, returning moments later with a bucket and a glass of water.

“Drink lots. There’s a bucket by your bed for – well, you know.”

He left again, presumably to walk Henry and then head back to the hospital. She no longer cared – she was waiting for sleep to relieve her pain and misery.

# Chapter 18

## ADRIANNA

The next morning she woke up early, having slept the entire previous day away in bed.

She looked beside her and was surprised to see Derek asleep on the other side of the bed.

She shuddered and inched her body to the edge of the mattress – as far away from him as possible without falling out of bed.

He must have come back after his shift and fallen asleep next to her. She didn't even remember him coming into the bed.

It reminded her of when they were together. Between her night shifts and his twenty-four-hour shifts, sometimes they only saw each other at work. It wasn't unusual for her to wake up to him in her bed and not remember him coming in.

The only difference this time was her waking up without his arm around her.

Quietly she got up and brought Henry downstairs to start her day.

She made sure to check into her unit and let them know that she wasn't coming in for the rest of her shifts.

She needed to sort out the mess of her life right now before she could even think of caring for others.

Her thoughts drifted to Eric and Miranda, who were likely at home with little Oliver right now.

She would make a point to text Miranda later and make sure everything was okay.

Adrianna let Henry out for a pee in the backyard and sat in her living room with a coffee. Derek was still upstairs sleeping and likely would be like that for a while. He probably only came to bed in the early morning.

Sipping her coffee, she started thinking about little Oliver again. And, of course, Eric.

Perhaps she would buy a little gift for Oliver and give it to Miranda. She had already said her goodbyes to Eric and didn't want to open up the conversation and have to say goodbye again. It was hard to put into words why she couldn't see him again, and she was hoping she would never have to.

Her phone buzzed on the coffee table, and she picked it up to see a picture of Miranda sitting outside her house with a latte.

**Hey, didn't want to wake you, but I'm outside with lattes. If you're up, come out! - Miranda**

**I am up. I'll be out shortly - Adrianna**

The last thing she needed was for Derek and Miranda to see each other. She knew her relationship with Miranda could easily be seen as inappropriate and was worried Miranda would think the same if she saw that she spent the night with a doctor from the NICU. Even though that same doctor was actually her ex-fiancé of two years.

Miranda didn't know about her past, and she was hoping to keep it that way.

Miranda must have read her text message at super speed because there was a knock on her front door within seconds.

Adrianna opened the door to a perfectly put-together woman with black leggings, an oversized white sweater and a Lululemon cross-body bag across her chest.

Miranda stepped inside and politely removed her white sneakers.

"Oh, I love this!" she exclaimed as she gazed around the place that was thankfully clean enough for company.

She was walking through the house with both lattes still in her hands.

"How old is this place? How long have you lived here?"

"I think it was built in the 1950s, and I bought it from my grandmother when she passed away five years ago."

“Well, I just love love love it. And sorry about your grandmother.”

She made herself at home in the living room and handed Adrianna her latte as they both sat down on the couch, legs pulled under for comfort.

“You’re looking cute today!” Miranda was pointing at Adrianna’s outfit. She was wearing a tight white tank top, an oversized blue plaid she had left unbuttoned and dark blue leggings.

Adrianna looked down at her clothing. “This? Oh, right, I was thinking of maybe taking Henry for a walk later or maybe even a run.”

Miranda pursed her lips. “Is that all you had planned today?”

Adrianna took a sip of her latte while looking at Miranda through the side of her eye. What she really wanted to do was escort Miranda out of her place before Derek came down the stairs.

“I mean, maybe. I do need to get some groceries at some point and do some laundry...” her voice trailed off.

“Oh good, so nothing that can’t be moved. We have to go buy a crib!”

Adrianna started to say no, but Miranda wouldn’t let her.

“Eric can do that himself, can’t he?”

Miranda looked shocked at her response.

“You *cannot* buy your own crib. Everybody knows that!”

Adrianna laughed and was about to say that she had bought her own but let it be.

“I didn’t realize it was a hard and fast rule. I guess I could come, but I can’t be out too long. Henry really does need a nice walk today, and my fridge is empty.”

“Done and done. We can stop and grab groceries on the way back, and Henry can come in my car. He’s been in there already anyways.”

Miranda continued the rest of the conversation with Henry, snuggling up to his muzzle and making soft cooing noises that he gleefully wagged his tail to.

“I did have something I wanted to talk to you about.” Adrianna was unsure if talking to Miranda about Eric would be out of line, but perhaps she would know the best way to approach him about the subject.

“Absolutely. I’m all ears. If it’s about how you and Eric have feelings for one another, then I already know about that.”

Adrianna stuck her tongue out.

“I don’t think he has feelings for me, and I don’t think his girlfriend would be happy to hear if he did. But no, I just wanted to say that I can’t be involved with him and Oliver after today.”

She was about to say that she already felt like she had said goodbye to Eric, but the lines were blurring if she wanted to remain friends with Miranda.

“Well first, he doesn’t have a girlfriend. And second, how come?” Miranda looked concerned and temporarily stopped petting Henry, who objected by pushing his head against her still hands.

“Oh, I ran into a woman the last time I saw him, and she looked pretty unimpressed when she saw me. And as for not seeing each other, well, nurses aren’t allowed to get involved with patients, and it would be inappropriate.”

“I think I know who you’re talking about, and no, she is definitely not his girlfriend. Also, he’s not a patient.”

Adrianna decided to drop the girlfriend topic as it wasn’t important anymore. “I know, but it’s overstepping boundaries, and I really shouldn’t have been involved outside of work in the first place.”

Miranda was looking at Adrianna with her soft green eyes.

“We can still be friends, though, right?”

Adrianna carefully considered before answering.

“I think so. Yes, that should be fine.”

“Great, and then in a year – you and Eric can fall in love with each other again – I mean – for the *first* time.”

Adrianna laughed. “What do you mean?”

Miranda stood up and dismissed the conversation with a wave of her hand.

“Oh, I’ve had lots of clients who met at work. Some were doctors; some were nurses. Isn’t there a rule that if you meet outside of work something like twelve months past the time they were a patient, then it’s all fine?”

Adrianna shrugged.

“It’ll all sort itself out. Now grab your latte, and let’s go find a crib because Eric is losing his mind over finding a nanny on such short notice, and I would like to do at least one nice thing for him today.”

It really was impossible to say no to Miranda.

“I just have to grab something from upstairs, and I’ll meet you at the car.”

Miranda was leashing up Henry as Adrianna quickly strode up the stairs, stopping at a closed door in her hallway.

Taking a deep breath, she opened the door and entered into the room. She hadn’t stepped inside of it for quite some time - almost two months, to be exact.

She walked across the white carpet and stood next to the crib in the far corner.

It was a small room with just enough space for a crib and a rocking chair on one side and a white dresser with a changing table on the other.

She walked over to the dresser and slid open the top drawer.

Inside, there was a variety of burp cloths, crib sheets and swaddle blankets. One item, in particular, was perfectly folded in the corner. She picked it up, and it unfolded as she lifted it from the drawer.

In her hand were the softest towels, two of them, each with a different coloured hood – one blue and one pink.



Her sister had bought her both as a gift before knowing the gender of the baby.

She ran her fingers across the pink one, folding it carefully and putting it back in the drawer.

The blue one she left out and folded it, holding it close to her chest.

Violet would have shared her towels if she were alive today.

Adrianna looked down at her flat waist, fighting back tears.

She should still be in her belly right now, kicking around and listening to her mother's soothing voice. She laid a hand on her belly, remembering the first few kicks she had felt for only a few weeks.

As sad as she was to have lost her, she wouldn't change it for the world. She loved her little girl more than anything and would try and remember her fondly. It was hard though, when memories were streaked with sadness.

It would get better with time. It had to.

A honk pulled her out of her thoughts. She peered out the window and saw that Henry had jumped on Miranda's lap and likely stepped on the horn.

Miranda was waving out the car window that everything was fine and was gently pushing Henry's fluffy body off her lap.

She closed the drawer and walked out of the room with the blue towel in her hands.

Oliver would love being wrapped up in it after a bath.

Quickly she ran back downstairs and made her way out to the passenger side of Miranda's car.

"What's that?" Miranda asked, pointing to the baby towel.

"Just a little something for Oliver. I'll grab some bath supplies while we are out and make a nice gift bag."

Miranda nodded as they drove off.



## ADRIANNA

Adrianna had enjoyed her day with Miranda.

They had found a nice crib and cute bath supplies to complete Oliver's gift.

Adrianna couldn't help herself and ended up buying children's Advil and a thermometer to add to the gift. They always recommended them to new parents in the NICU, and she figured Eric hadn't thought of that yet.

Thinking of him made her stomach feel like it was in an ever-tightening knot.

Miranda hadn't heard from him all day and figured he likely had his hands full.

There was just one last thing Adrianna thought he would need, and it was relatively inexpensive.

Miranda and Adrianna pulled into the last baby store, and Adrianna hopped out quickly to buy it.

Once back in the car, she smiled at Miranda and placed it into the gift bag for Eric and Oliver.

"Are you sure you want to be dropped off back at home? Eric would love it if you gave him the gift yourself."

Adrianna shook her head. "I really have to get back, but thank you for the offer. I hope he likes it."

Miranda nodded and made her way back to Adrianna's place.

Adrianna hadn't heard from Derek yet, so she assumed he was still sleeping in her bed. She had been hopeful that he would have left by the time she got home.

In bad timing, as Miranda was in sight of her place, the front door opened, and a yawning Derek emerged.

"Shit," Adrianna spoke out loud without realizing it, and started lowering herself in the seat so she couldn't be seen through the window.

Miranda got the hint and pulled the car over before they got too close to the house.

“Is that a man coming out of your place?”

Adrianna groaned in response, still flattened against the passenger seat.

“Oh my god, is that Dr. Cook?” Miranda was squinting as she leaned forward and stared through the windshield.

Adrianna covered her face with her hands. When she spoke next, her voice came out muffled, “I thought he would be gone by now.”

Miranda remained silent.

“It’s not what it looks like.”

Miranda peeled Adrianna’s hands from her face and gave her a sympathetic look. “It’s none of my business – you don’t need to explain.”

Adrianna could feel that her face was pale. “I feel like I should, though.”

Miranda gave her a warm smile. “If you want to, but it’s fine. Do you want to circle the block before I drop you off?”

“Yes, please,” Adrianna whimpered.

Miranda giggled and started driving in the opposite direction to give time for Derek to get into his car and leave without seeing them.

“He sure is cute, though.”

Adrianna laughed. “If you’re into the whole arrogant doctor thing – then yeah – I could see that.”

Miranda smiled. “I’m sure it’s the same as the arrogant lawyer thing.”

Adrianna knew that Miranda was single also, and was sure she had her fair share of dates with all kinds of accomplished men.

“Is Eric an arrogant lawyer?” Adrianna couldn’t help but ask about him.

Miranda chuckled as she answered. “He *sure* is – but he’s also very sweet and has a really big heart which he guards carefully.”

They took their time making their way back. As they drove back around, Adrianna could see that Derek’s car was now gone.

“He’s the kind of guy that has a tight inner circle, and it’s hard to get in - but once you are - he will look out for you with everything he has.”

Miranda pulled the car over in front of the house and turned to look at Adrianna, who was now righting herself in the passenger seat.

“You met his mother, right?”

Adrianna shook her head. “No. She only came in the one time, I think. She was gone before my shift started.”

“Well, she’s kind of like Eric with her family and friends, and I think that’s where he gets it from. The difference between them is Eric’s mom makes very rational and non-emotional decisions – which Eric can also do – but Eric also feels deeply and is able to show that side of him around the right people.”

Adrianna wasn’t sure why Miranda was telling her all of this, especially since she wasn’t planning on seeing him again.

She was about to ask why when she was interrupted by Derek calling her. The phone call went to Miranda’s bluetooth, and when Miranda tried to cancel it – it accidentally answered the call over her speakers.

She mouthed ‘sorry’ as Adrianna heard Derek’s voice flooding over the speakers.

“Adrianna? Are you there?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Oh. You weren’t home when I woke up, so I just wanted to make sure everything was okay this morning.”

“Yup, sure is.”

“Okay, well, I’m off to home. Don’t forget to drink lots of water today - I know it was a rough night for you. I’ll check in later.”

“Thank you, will do, but I’m good. No need to check in later.”

Derek made a point to dismiss the last part like he didn’t hear her.

“We will talk later, Adrianna. Bye.”

Adrianna hung up quickly before anything else could be heard.

“Rough night?” Miranda elbowed her teasingly.

Adrianna was about to protest when Miranda dismissed her with a wave of her hand. “It’s fine; no need to explain. I’ll bring the gift to Eric, and we will be in touch soon, okay?”

Adrianna nodded and smiled at Miranda. “Thank you for bringing me today. It was great.”

She was about to open her car door when she noticed someone sitting on her step. Her hand froze on the car door handle.

“On second thought, maybe I will personally deliver the gift.”

Miranda looked at Adrianna’s house and saw what had caused such an alarm.

“No problem. I’ll bring you and Mr. Henry back in a bit, and hopefully by then, you’ll have less visitors.”

Miranda drove off, and Adrianna’s heart sank. She didn’t know why Carley was on her front step, but was thankful she had just missed Derek’s car sitting outside her place.

Whatever was going on between Derek and Carley – she wanted nothing to do with it.

# Chapter 19

## ADRIANNA

Miranda quickly dialed Eric's number on speakerphone as they drove to his place.

"Hello?" Eric answered in a raspy voice. He sounded exhausted already.

"Hey, Captain."

"I hate when you call me that."

Miranda winked at Adrianna.

"Just checking in to see how you're doing?"

A high-pitched cry could be heard in the background, followed by a frustrated Eric speaking loudly, "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"Never mind, we were just calling to see if you slept okay-"

More screaming in the background. You could hear Eric making shushing noises that didn't seem to be helping.

"I'm sorry, what did you say? Miranda? Did you say 'we'?"

"Nothing, see you soon!" Miranda laughed and hung up the phone, and looked over at Adrianna. "Maybe we should bring food with us. It sounds like they're probably *both* hungry."

Adrianna nodded.

There was a big difference between having a baby in the NICU and visiting for a few hours at a time, and actually taking the baby home.

Miranda and Adrianna quickly stopped for Chinese food and then made their way back to Eric's place.

Adrianna's heart picked up its pace as Miranda pulled into the driveway. She could feel her stomach clench behind her rib cage. Trying to steady herself, she took a deep breath, but it just made her lungs feel squished up against her diaphragm and didn't seem to be helping.

She knew that when she stepped out of the car that everything was going to change. Blurred lines, intense feelings, and complicated relationships.

Her hands were clammy as she held the gift bag on her lap with her one good arm.

“You coming?”

Miranda’s voice was muffled as she spoke from outside the passenger window.

Her hands were filled with various pieces of clothing and toys that she was somehow balancing in one trip to Eric’s door.

Adrianna wiped her clammy hands on her pants in an attempt to dry them. After taking another deep breath, she nodded to herself that she could do this and opened the car door.

Henry launched off her lap and out the passenger door before Adrianna could let him out the back. He triumphantly trotted behind Miranda as they made their way to the house.

Miranda pushed the front door open with her foot as Adrianna ran up to help her.

The door opened to comically expose a pale Eric with a crying baby in his arms. Miranda instinctively put the items down and pulled Oliver quickly into her arms. Henry took the opportunity and ran inside and made himself at home in the living room.

Eric looked surprised to see Adrianna but was too distracted and tired to say anything.

Poor Oliver was crying so hard that his cheeks were streaked with tears that started collecting on Miranda’s collarbone.

Not to be phased by a crying child, Miranda started talking to Oliver and pointing out items to distract him, only to have him thrust his head back in a shrill scream that bounced off the walls.

Eric and Miranda both looked over at Adrianna with panic in their eyes.

Eric spoke first, “Does he need to go back to the hospital?”

Miranda was next. "He's so sweaty in my arms right now. Maybe he has a fever? The poor thing. He sounds like he's in pain."

Adrianna put her gift bag down and sighed, resigned to the fact that she couldn't simply drop off the gift and then head back home.

The cries were so loud that she had to time her questions to them.

"Eric, when was his last dose of morphine? Miranda, let me see if I can settle him, and then I can hand him back to you."

She was trying to be careful to balance her words. She wanted to inspire confidence so they could care for him on their own, and not criticize too much so they would be able to make future decisions confidently - when she wouldn't be around anymore.

With her one good arm, she awkwardly grabbed a sobbing Oliver from Miranda's hands while looking at Eric. "Has he been awake for long?"

"He hasn't slept since my mother called," he turned his wrist to check the time on his watch, "which was three hours ago."

Adrianna nodded. "When is his next dose due?"

"In 4 hours."

"Oh. When did you feed him last?"

Eric wiped sweat from his brow. "He just took a full bottle about thirty minutes ago."

Adrianna tucked Oliver into her chest and asked Eric where the diapers were. Miranda was one step ahead and was calling to her from upstairs, "I made a diaper station up here."

Oliver and Adrianna went upstairs together with a tired Eric in tow.

She followed Miranda's voice to an empty room with a desk in the corner. It looked like an office room with everything pushed to one side. Luckily there was at least a changing pad on top of the desk.

"Nice nursery on short order."



Eric smirked as he raked his hands through his hair. His black t-shirt slightly lifted as he did so. Adrianna quickly diverted her eyes to look at Oliver as she gently placed him on the change pad.

Oliver was screaming so loudly that it sounded like he was running out of air. His eyebrows were bright red with the fury he was wailing with. He had his hands clenched into tiny fists as he pulled his little legs into his chest.

Not phased by his screaming, Adrianna found a soother and popped it into his mouth. Moving quickly, she unzipped his pyjamas and put a small cloth on top of the diaper, looking at Miranda.

“Just like I showed you before, you want to cover him with the cloth when you open the diaper because as soon as the air hits him, he is going to pee everywhere, and it looks like Dad likes his things clean and, you know, pee-free.”

She winked at both Eric and Miranda before undoing the diaper.

Sure enough, as soon as she opened the diaper and covered Oliver with the cloth, you could see the fabric quickly become saturated with urine.

She waited for him to finish peeing and then opened the rest of the diaper.

“Oh buddy, that’s a massive poopy. Good job!”

Quickly she wiped him up and put a fresh diaper on him.

“Is there a onesie I can put on him?”

Eric and Miranda both jumped, and one of them handed her a onesie a couple of seconds later.

“The pyjama is super cute, but it might be too warm for him right now.”

She dressed Oliver, and with her foot, she carefully maneuvered the office chair into the middle of the room and sat down, rocking Oliver back and forth while holding him tightly.

He continued screaming and repeatedly spit out the soother, but she just put it back in his mouth and tucked him in tightly to

her, rocking back and forth, and making humming and shushing noises in his ears.

Finally, after several minutes of soothing, the sobs began to lessen until Oliver finally relaxed in her arms and let his body go heavy with sleep.

“Miranda, can I hand him to you?” Adrianna was whispering while still rocking Oliver.

Miranda jumped at the opportunity and quickly traded places with Adrianna.

Once sleeping Oliver was carefully placed in Miranda’s outstretched arms, Adrianna and Eric walked out of the room to stand in the hallway.

“Thank you for that, seriously. I don’t know what I’m doing.”

Eric sounded defeated, and the sadness in his voice cut to her core.

“You’re doing great. We just need to set you up for success.”

He snorted. “You mean he can’t sleep in an office chair?”

“Not yet.”

Adrianna gave him a soft smile, and without thinking, she wrapped her one good arm around him. She wasn’t expecting Eric to pull her in tightly and hold her for several seconds.

She broke the hug, shyly taking a step back and nudging him on the shoulder.

“You’re doing great. Let’s get you fed, and we can continue setting things up so at least one of you two can sleep tonight.”



## ERIC

Eric watched Adrianna adoringly as she unpacked the Chinese food they had brought, and she asked him where to find plates to serve up. He had to make a point to avert his tired eyes in fear she would read his feelings through them.

How she took control of Oliver's care was admirable, and somehow she still allowed room for him to grow and learn. She was instilling this confidence in him as a father that he hadn't felt for a very long time.

For the first time, he felt like he could be a father – and a good father at that.

But with it, she was also bringing out feelings he wasn't sure he had ever felt for anyone else.

Typically his dates were over quickly. Both parties satisfied their need for physical connection and went on their way once the need was filled.

Only one previous time, he had spent several months with the same person. It didn't turn out well because she had wanted more from him on an emotional level.

Adrianna tried to make conversation as she noticed him staring at her. "How is the nanny search going?"

The doorbell rang him out of his thoughts, and he left Adrianna to answer it.

The door flew open to a huffing Marc with a swing in his arms and an overflowing basket in the other.

"I have things for you."

Eric looked at him dumbfounded.

"Oh, don't look at me like that. You know Miranda told me that he's here." He gave a winning smile. "You're a horrible communicator."

"I meant to call you," Eric said apologetically.

Marc waved him off and asked him where he could put the baby things he brought.

"Lucy wants it back when you're done, but we won't need it for another eight months."

At that moment, Adrianna walked out of the kitchen, and Marc stopped in his tracks.

"Good to see you again, Adrianna. How's the arm?"

Blushing, she awkwardly lifted the arm in its sling. “I can actually get around pretty well. I’m probably using it more than I should, but one of the doctors in the emergency suggested moving it more often than not, so I’m just trying my best.”

Eric started getting nervous. Marc’s mouth was way too big to be trusted around Adrianna for long periods of time. Even short periods of time.

“Miranda is upstairs with Oliver. You can bring that stuff into my office. It’s turning into the nursery.”

As Marc made his way up the stairs, Eric quickly called out after him, “And don’t be loud!”

Marc looked back and rolled his eyes. “I have a baby, you know.”

Eric shook his head and ushered Adrianna back into the kitchen.

“He seems happy for you. That’s very sweet.”

“Don’t listen to a word he says.”

Adrianna laughed. “You didn’t tell him about bringing Oliver home?”

Eric sighed; he had only told his mother that morning that Oliver was now home with him.

“He knew about me adopting him, just not that I had taken him home. That I left to Miranda.”

“Are he and Miranda close?”

“You could say that.”

Adrianna wanted to ask more questions, but Eric suggested they eat before they had to relieve Miranda – both from Oliver and now Marc’s company.

They took their plates to the dining room table and sat in silence, listening to soft murmurs of giggling and furniture scraping across the floor upstairs.

Eric sighed and ran his fingers through his hair again.

“He’s going to wake him up, and then I’m going to kill him.”

Adrianna smiled, playing with the food on her plate.

“You know it’s all going to work out, right?”

Eric put his hand close to hers on the table and began lightly stroking it with one finger.

“I don’t think I could have done this without you.”

He focused on his single finger, caressing her skin.

“I’m happy I met you, Adrianna.”

When he looked into her eyes, he could see a hint of sadness there, and noticed she was blinking away tears.

“You did this all on your own – without me. You are going to be great,” they heard something fall upstairs, “and it sounds like you have an excellent support system. Miranda is amazing, and Marc seems lovely as well.”

Eric nodded. It looked like she was about to break bad news to him.

She took a deep breath and exhaled through pursed lips.

“I’m not sure if you are familiar with how nursing licenses work – especially those who work in the vulnerable sector, but...” her voice trailed off, her eyes darting to the white walls of the room for a moment before her deep hazel eyes connected with his again.

“Nurses aren’t allowed to have friendships outside of work with patients,” she took another breath and swallowed the last part of the sentence, “or their family members.”

Eric’s breath caught in his throat as his hand froze on the table. He slowly pulled his arm back to his lap.

“I’m sorry, but it just isn’t professional of me to continue to be friends with you right now. I can be available by phone if you have a quick question about Oliver, but I can’t be in your life any more than that.”

Eric nodded, but he wasn’t happy with what she was telling him.

She was right, though; he had seen it in his career before, where people met through work or other relationships that

started with power differentials. Understanding didn't lessen the anger he felt bubbling up inside. He had thought that by her coming today that she would continue to be in his life.

When Eric remained silent, she felt the need to continue talking. "I'm really sorry, Eric. Truly, I am."

He gave her a half-hearted smile and pushed his plate forward.

"I get it. Let's finish the nursery quickly so you can get out of here."

He stood up and left her at the table by herself.

He knew he was being cold, and that she was just protecting herself, but he felt hurt and somewhat abandoned.

She had instilled this confidence in him, this sense that everything was going to be alright. He had this naïveté that she was going to be there alongside him the entire time.

What was he thinking?

Thankfully Oliver didn't have time to become attached to her.

The last thing he needed was for Oliver to feel abandoned – again.

He stalked up the stairs and could hear Adrianna following softly behind.

The air between them changed, and he felt like he was breathing in the palpable tension.

Once in the nursery, she gave her advice on what additional things were needed for the baby.

Eric was quiet the entire time. He noted that Miranda seemed to have an understanding of the tension between them as she gave Adrianna a knowing look and a comforting smile.

Marc was oblivious to everything, and was flirty as always, with both Adrianna and Miranda. Adrianna ignored him, and Miranda teased him right back, which luckily helped lighten the mood.

When everything was said and done, Marc clapped Eric on the back and said goodbye as Miranda placed a sleepy Oliver

into the crib with the white noise machine carefully turned on to full volume.

Adrianna started putting her shoes on at the front door when Eric approached her.

“I’ll drive you home.”

Adrianna shook her head. “Honestly, it’s fine. I can walk or call a cab.”

Eric nodded at Miranda, who gave a nod back. “You drive her home. I’m here if Oliver wakes up.”

Henry gleefully jumped down from the couch when he heard his leash being picked up by Eric, who quickly clipped it to his collar. Henry willfully trotted in excitement as Eric led him to the car.

Thankfully it was only a short drive to her place because the silence was deafening.

Eric was the first to speak.

“I am doing an interview next week.”

“What?”

“You asked if I had a nanny yet. I am doing an interview next week.”

“Oh, right.” She was looking at her hands clasped in her lap as Eric focused on the road ahead.

“I’m off work for a couple of days next week. Miranda is going to continue helping me since she’s on vacation, and then after that, I’m on my own.”

“She’s a good friend.”

“She is.”

More silence.

He had this overwhelming need to touch her, but kept both hands tightly wrapped around the steering wheel. He wasn’t sure if he was more attracted to her because she told him this would be the last time he would be so close to her, but either way, he needed to respect her wishes to keep his distance.

“Thank you for the gift. I’m sorry I never opened it before we left.”

Adrianna became animated and jumped in her seat.

“Oh no! I got something I think I need to show you how to use.”

“I’m sure I can figure it out.”

“I have one inside. If you can come in quickly, I’ll show you how to use it.”

Eric’s anger was dissipating as he looked over at her. His heart betrayed him and leapt at the thought of spending just a few more moments with her.

“If that’s okay with you.”

He pulled onto the street by her place and carefully parked close to her house. Henry began to jump in the back seat with recognition.

As soon as Adrianna opened her door, Henry leapt into the front seat and jumped out the passenger side, racing to the front of the house.

Adrianna shook her head, “I hate it when he does that.”

She sighed as Eric laughed, both of them having nothing to do but simply follow him to the front step.

She quickly unlocked her door, and Eric snorted behind her.

“What’s so funny?”

“I guess you found your keys?”

Adrianna shook her head and continued into the house.

“Safely underneath a tree in the park.”

Eric felt awkward as he stood at the front door, unsure what to do next.

“I won’t take up your time. I know you need to go back and see Oliver. Just have a seat in the living room, and I’ll be right there.”

She bounded up the stairs in her tight leggings. Eric was trying hard not to watch her perfect curves bouncing as she



walked away.

He heard her enter a room and made his way into the living room, and sat on the couch. Henry flopped near his feet with a toy in his mouth, joyfully suckling on it. He wished he could be as relaxed as Henry was.

Being in her home felt so intimate. A sweet scent reminded him of how her hair smelled when he hugged her earlier that day.

His mind started wandering back to the sight of her going up the stairs in her tight leggings. He couldn't stop picturing the shape of her legs, the curve of her bottom, and her small waist with her long brown ponytail cascading down her back.

He turned toward the sound of her feet coming into the living room. She was wearing a tight-fitting tank top that had moved down a bit, and he could see the top of her breasts peeking out.

He swallowed hard and tried to remember why he was in her living room in the first place.

In her hand, he saw what looked like a long piece of folded fabric.

“I got you a wrap similar to this one, so I can show you how to put this on, and you'll be able to do the same with the one you have at home.”

He looked at her, confused. “What is a wrap?”

She handed him the long fabric she had in her hands. It was very soft and made of stretchy material.

He moved the fabric in his hands, still confused. “What is it for?”

“It's a carrier.”

He looked at her, still not understanding.

“You hold the baby in it. Against your chest.”

He looked down again at the material in his hands.

“I'll just show you. Here, stand up.”

Eric did as he was told and stood up as she walked close to him.

“You have to look for the middle of the fabric. Often times you’ll see a tag like this. See this here?” She was pointing to a green tag in the middle of the grey fabric.

He nodded.

“So you line it up on your stomach. Here, hand it to me, and I’ll show you.”

She grabbed the fabric, pushed the tag into his abdomen, and wrapped her good arm around him. He was so large compared to her petite frame.

Even if she had the use of both of her arms, she wasn’t sure she could get her arms around him properly.

Her breasts pushed against him as she motioned for him to grab the other side of the fabric and bring it to the front.

He looked down to see them perfectly pressed into him and averted his eyes. He could not get turned on right now. She was so close to him that she would be able to feel his arousal.

He wasn’t sure she knew the effect she was having on him, and he cleared his throat, trying to distract himself from her touch.

She moved around to his back, still holding the fabric to his abdomen and linked the material to pass over the top of his shoulders. Once he had a piece over each shoulder, she moved to the front of him again, and started tucking in the fabric to the loop she had created over his abs.

His breath was caught in his throat as she started sliding the fabric down his legs and explaining to wrap it around his waist one more time before tying it in the back.

“All done. Now you just have to put little Oliver into it and you’ll be good to go.”

“Perfect, except there’s only one problem.”

She looked up at him, not understanding.

He was amused and laughed.

“I’m never going to remember how to do this.”

She sighed in frustration.

“Of course you will. Here, I’ll unwrap you and show you again.”

She motioned to put her hand around his waist to untie the back when he grabbed her wrist and stopped her.

“If you touch me like that again, I’m not going to be able to control myself and will end up taking you on this couch, right here, right now.” He didn’t mean for it to come out as a growl, but it did.

She stilled her arms as he spoke.

## Chapter 20

### ADRIANNA

Her wrist was still wrapped inside his long slender fingers. His grasp was firm but not threatening.

She looked up and met his amber eyes with hers. “What did you just say?”

His grip remained firm on her wrist. His jaw locked as he stared intently at her, and then down at her breasts, which were visible just above the tight white tank top.

“You can’t keep touching me like that.” His voice sounded hoarse.

He finally let his grasp on her go. Her wrist slackened with the lack of weight, feeling cool with his touch now gone.

He turned away from her, slowly taking the wrap off his body and balling it up in his hands.

“You find me attractive?”

The words came out of her mouth before she could think about what she was saying.

Turning back toward her, she could see his brows were furrowed. He gave her a confused look as he dropped the wrap on her coffee table.

“That can’t be a serious question.”

She could feel the heat rising into her cheeks but stood firm on her question. “Of course I’m serious.”

With one quick motion, he was standing above her, using his fingers to raise her chin so she would look into his eyes.

“I think you are the most attractive woman I have ever met.”

She blew air out of her nose and rolled her eyes, but he gripped her jaw more firmly, “I’m serious, Adrianna.”

“Then prove it.”

She heard what sounded like a growl come from his throat as he licked his lips. “I don’t think you know what you’re getting yourself into.”

Her mouth was dry as she continued to match his intense gaze. “What do you mean?”

He let his hand drop from her chin and pulled her close, his forehead touching hers when he bent down.

“I mean that if you let me start – I won’t be able to stop. I won’t stop until you’re screaming my name on this couch.”

She could feel the blood rushing through her veins and pulsing in her ears. Nervously she let out a laugh and watched as he raised one eyebrow at her.

“Why are you laughing?”

Nervously she giggled again, putting her hand on his shoulder. “I just think maybe you have been watching too many movies.”

He quickly wrapped her hand into his.

“Are you telling me that you have never had someone make you feel so good that you screamed their name?”

Her breath caught in her throat, and she had to swallow before speaking again. Meaning it to come out firm, her breath caught, and her voice whispered, “No, because that doesn’t exist in real life.”

He stiffened when she spoke, maintaining his firm grasp on her hand.

He leaned down close to her and spoke softly, “Then they weren’t doing it right.”

Adrianna could feel her breath quickening and prickles of sweat under her arms. All she could muster in response was a meek, “I don’t believe you.”

“You don’t have to ‘believe’ it if it becomes a reality.”

He dropped her hand and took a step back. “I should probably get going now.”

He turned his back to her. She desperately wanted him to stay but was fighting herself over what was appropriate or not. This was the first time in her life that someone was making her feel sexy and wanted – and he was about to walk out her door forever.

“I want you to show me.”

Eric turned quickly back towards her. “You don’t mean that.”

Licking her lips, she swallowed down her nervousness and tilted her chin up toward him. “I do.”

He was standing close to her now, his chest slowly rising with excitement. “What about your nursing license?”

“Nobody needs to know. Then after today, we won’t see each other again, so it won’t be an issue.”

She couldn’t believe what she was saying aloud, but she had never wanted someone’s touch on her so badly.

Before she could say anything else, she felt his lips firm on hers. His kiss was strong, just like he was. The breath from his nose was coming out heavy as their kiss intensified.

His hands began roaming her body as she shifted her weight to lean into him. His touch created goosebumps on her skin as his hands moved to her hips. With one hand on each side of her hips, he pulled her close so she could feel how excited he was to touch her.

She let out a soft moan as he deepened the kiss.

He broke their kiss and took a few steps backward to sit on her couch. She followed him as he motioned for her to straddle his lap.

As soon as her weight was on his lap, he started a trail of kisses from her neck to her collarbone. Slowly he was lapping up all of her, moaning as she pushed herself against him.

He kissed the top of her breasts slowly, paying attention to one before moving on to the other. Her nipples hardened under his touch and were easily visible now under the white tank top.

He began kissing back up to her neck as his fingers deftly pulled off the sling and dropped the straps of her tank top to her shoulders. With one tug, he pulled her top down so she was sitting on him in only her bra.

A moan escaped his throat as he stared at her breasts in the white lacy bra that she was wearing.

She used one hand to unclip her bra in the front. He carefully maneuvered it off her shoulders and pushed it onto the floor.

When he started to lick her nipples, the sensitivity of them made her throw her head back and moan as he pulled one of her hardened nipples into his mouth. Suddenly, she felt the familiar tingle on her nipples as milk was released.

She froze, not knowing what to do, and slowly dropped her head to look down at Eric as he came off her nipple.

“I’m so sorry.”

“It tastes sweet.” Eric swallowed and licked his lips while smiling at her, seemingly amused.

She pursed her lips, her cheeks flushing bright red.

“Now, where were we?” Eric suddenly picked her up off his lap and gently laid her back on the couch.

He slid his hands over her bare breasts and softly kissed the skin in between them. Slowly, he trailed down her flat stomach and began pulling down her pants. She lifted her hips to help him as he eased her leggings off her and onto the floor.

He was staring at her from above, taking the look of her in. She felt the heat of his gaze and had the sudden urge to cover herself up with her arm. She chose not to.

She was wearing white lace panties that exposed the small tuft of hair she maintained underneath them.

Eric continued the trail of kisses down her stomach and over the top of her panties, letting the hot warmth of his mouth seep into her skin underneath.

His tongue started roaming the skin between her thighs and the panty line, trailing up and down until he moved her panties aside to expose her fully.

“Are you okay to continue?”

She nodded.

He looked into her eyes as his tongue connected with her wet folds. His tongue made small movements at first, until she became desensitized to his touch, and then he moved to long strokes that nearly sent her over the edge.

Her legs began to shake as she could feel an orgasm coming, but he anticipated this and slowed his pace, teasing her by circling her most sensitive area until she finally gave in and screamed his name, begging him to let her climax.

Finally, he gave up teasing her and pushed one finger inside while sucking her harder.

Within seconds she repeated his name over and over as she climbed higher and higher, until she finally came crashing down on him with the most intense orgasm she had ever had.

Her legs were shaking as he slowed his touch, milking the last of her pleasure with his tongue.

When he was sure that she was satisfied, he pulled her panties back in place and laid beside her.

She grabbed him and pulled him on top of her, frantically pulling his mouth onto hers until she could taste herself on his tongue.

“I want you inside me, please.”

He pulled away from her, staring into her eyes as he pushed a few tendrils of fallen hair behind her ear.

“I have to get going.”

She furrowed her brow. “Right now?”

He laughed. “Well, for one, I have to get back to Oliver. Two - I’m not exactly *prepared* for us to do anything else.”



She was trying not to be upset that he was leaving. A large part of her was not used to being the centre of attention. She couldn't think of another time when the pleasure was just focused on her.

He rose from the couch and took a moment to adjust himself in his pants. Adrianna stood up beside him and wrapped her good arm around him, "I could always return the favour."

He smiled, leaned down and gave her a soft kiss on her lips, different from the deep kisses he had given her earlier. "I would love that, but it's not necessary. I enjoyed myself – especially the sound of my name on your lips."

She blushed and looked down, suddenly very aware that all she was wearing was skimpy underwear. As fast as she could dress with one arm, she quickly put on her clothing and followed him to the front door.

He was turning to leave when she grabbed him again, enveloping him in a big hug. She felt his arms wrap around her back and sighed. She felt small and safe.

"Thank you for everything, Eric. I wish you and Oliver the best. I truly do." Her voice cracked at the last part as tears formed in the corner of her eyes.

She took a deep breath and swallowed her emotions, blinking away her sadness as best she could.

He took a step back and stared down at her from an arm's length away.

"Why are you making it seem like this is goodbye forever, and I'm never going to see you again?"

Her sadness crept up again and burned the back of her throat. She wasn't sure she had the ability to go through her reasons with him again. She had thought he understood when she told him they couldn't see each other anymore.

She started to explain as best she could, again, "Eric, I would but, it's just not appropriate and I can't afford to lose my license-"

He cut her off with another soft kiss on her lips. Her brows knit in confusion.

He was looking down at her softly, placing a single finger on the side of her cheek. “Adrianna, I was serious when I said you’re the most amazing woman I have ever met. I am not going to let you go that easily.”

He took a step out the front door, turning back to add, “I’ll see you in twelve months, Adrianna.”

# Chapter 21

## ERIC

Eric relieved Miranda when he got in. She raised her eyebrow when she saw the smile on his face as he walked in the door but chose to say nothing.

He thanked her for her help, noticing the dark circles under her eyes. He wanted to ask her to spend the night and help him but knew it was selfish of him to do so.

She gave him an update on Oliver: when he had last eaten, how fussy he had been, and the tricks she used to get him down for a nap.

“I just love him, Eric. Thank you for bringing him into our lives.”

Miranda reached up and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. “I’m going to go have a bubble bath and a glass of wine, and then I’m going to bed early. Text me if you need anything.”

Eric nodded and thanked her again.

As soon as he said goodbye and went to check on Oliver, there was another knock on the door. Marc burst through smiling with a case of beer in one hand and a sleeping bag in the other.

“What the-” Eric was about to protest when Marc waved him off.

“Don’t even try and send me away. I know what it’s like for the first few nights, and *trust me*, you need the help.” He gave Eric a crooked smile.

“For payment, I expect to be fed dinner, and I won’t put out at the end of the night.”

Eric sighed. “I’ve got steak I can throw on the barbecue in a bit.”

Marc nodded and made his way into the living room, asking Eric what his preference was for the first or last shift of the night.

They decided that Eric would do the late night and early morning as he was so tired he wasn't sure he could stay awake long enough after supper.

Marc opened a beer and handed it to Eric as they sat down on the couch.

“So, Adrianna stopped by?”

Eric swallowed the beer, enjoying the feeling of the cool liquid rushing down the back of his throat.

Oliver started to cry before he could speak. He sighed, “Why don't you help me with this wrap carrier thing first, and then we can talk.”

Together they tag-teamed Oliver's care, with Marc heating a bottle while Eric gave meds and changed his diaper. Marc helped Eric put the wrap on. Finally, the two of them were sitting back downstairs, having their second beer while Oliver was sleeping softly against Eric's chest.

He was so comfortable that even the smoke from the barbecue hadn't woken him up.

“I don't know how my wife does it. There are two of us, and I'm exhausted.” Marc was resting on the black leather couch, his head thrown back in exhaustion.

Eric lifted the corner of his mouth in acknowledgement.

“When does the nanny start?”

“I have a meeting with someone early next week, so hopefully within two weeks.”

Marc stared at Eric, eyes wide and unblinking.

“What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

Marc shook his head, taking another swig of his beer. “You're a tough guy, but there's no way you'll last two weeks on your own.”

Eric laughed. “I'm a divorce lawyer – I *think* I can handle a *baby*.”

Marc let out a humph in disagreement.

“That’s different. That’s not a 24/7 job. You are going to need help.”

Eric looked down at Oliver’s face in the carrier, making sure he was still breathing properly and wasn’t too warm. All he wanted to do was lie down, but that still felt like it was several hours away.

Marc was still talking as he looked over at him. “They eat every two to three hours, and then there’s diaper changes and a nightly bath and the medications... and then trying to get them to sleep in their own bed which – well, good luck with that.”

“I forgot about all of this stuff.” Eric’s voice was coming out strained as he ran his fingers through his hair. He wasn’t sure if he actually forgot or just hadn’t had much involvement with his son during the early stages. He had tried to be there for him, but always felt useless and more in the way than anything else.

He had no idea how much work it was and how much effort his ex had put into child care. No wonder she was so tired and angry with him when they were together.

“Maybe ask Adrianna if she can help.”

“No – she was very clear she can’t be involved with me. I’ll have Miranda for this week.”

“Give me your phone.”

Marc grabbed Eric’s phone off the kitchen counter before he could protest.

“Marc, what are you doing? Don’t do anything stupid, seriously. I promised to respect her wishes and leave her be.”

Marc was ignoring him, too busy sticking out his tongue in concentration as he typed into Eric’s phone.

“Seriously, she works full time. She doesn’t have time for a second job. There’s also the other small issue that she only has one arm in working order right now.”

Marc waved him off and put the phone back on the counter.

“You worry too much. Now let’s eat, I’m hungry, and we have a long night ahead of us.”

Eric finished serving up and forgot about his phone. Together they ate in front of the living room TV, watching a hockey game.

Oliver was perfectly content for Eric to navigate around his head to eat. Small pieces of food would drop onto his head now and then, and Eric would carefully pick them off with his fingers.

He chuckled to himself. Did his parents go through this also?

Eventually, halftime came, and Eric could feel himself fading.

“You get him ready for bed, and I’ll clean up down here and meet you with my sleeping bag,” Marc yawned while he spoke.

“Why did you bring your sleeping bag?”

“I thought I could pass out in the nursery or down here. I’ll figure it out. You just get him in the crib so you can sleep.”

Eric was too tired to argue.

“I have the baby monitor set up in the bedroom, so you’re more than welcome to just sleep in the bed with me. Bring your sleeping bag if you want.”

Eric made his way halfway up the stairs when the doorbell rang.

Marc motioned for him to go up and settle Oliver, and he would answer the door. Eric obliged and made his way to the nursery as Marc opened the door.

When the door opened, Melissa was standing on the front step with wide eyes staring at Marc. For a second, it looked like she was questioning if she was at the right place and took a step back to read the house number.

“Who are you?” Marc asked dryly.

Melissa put her chin up in the air. “I was going to ask you the same question. I am Eric’s girlfriend, and I’ve come to speak with him.”

“Nope.” Marc blocked her from coming into the house and went to shut the door when she stuck her foot inside.

“No to what? That I’m his girlfriend or that I’m coming in to speak with him?” Melissa’s cheeks were flushed with anger as she stood her ground.

“To both, I guess.” Marc shrugged and left the door pushed against her foot.

Marc’s nonchalant attitude was firing up Melissa. She looked like she was just about to wind up and start screaming when Eric came down the stairs with his shirt off, holding a half-naked Oliver in his arms.

“Marc, can you come and have a look at this? I think he might be getting a diaper rash.”

His eyes settled on Melissa, who was staring at him wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

Marc took the opportunity to gently push her foot back from the door.

“Listen, honey. It’s a bad time. We are trying to put the baby to bed, and it’s going to be a long night, so perhaps you should leave – and not come back.”

He shut the door softly and locked it behind him, before making his way up the stairs. He was shaking his head at Eric, “You’re welcome.”

Eric laughed in response and made his way back upstairs.

That would definitely be the end of Melissa meddling in his life. There was no way she wouldn’t get the hint now.

Luckily Oliver settled easily in the crib. When he finally put his own head down on the pillow, he was pretty sure his eyes were closed before he had time to pull the covers overtop.



## ERIC

At one in the morning, he woke up to Oliver’s cries and a tired Marc standing at the side of the bed.

It took him a moment for his mind to reorient to his new life with a baby and his best friend spending the night like they were kids again.

Rubbing his eyes, he took a minute to stretch before he sat up and accepted a wailing Oliver into his tired arms.

“I’m just going to pass out here. The sleeping bag is in the nursery. He just ate, but he won’t fall asleep.”

Marc threw himself down on the empty side of the bed, not even bothering to go under the blankets.

Eric started making shushing noises and walked into the nursery. His vision was still blurry with sleep as his eyes were slow to adjust to being awake again so soon.

His office looked completely different as a nursery. They had moved his office to the smaller third bedroom to allow room for a proper rocking chair in the room. His office chair wouldn’t cut it for late-night feedings.

Bouncing Oliver in one arm, he rubbed his eyes with his free hand and sighed. He needed a soother and then, hopefully, Oliver would settle.

Together the two of them started rocking in the chair, with Eric’s chest holding the soother into Oliver’s mouth so he would stop dropping it.

After fifteen minutes of shushing and rocking, the two of them fell asleep together in the chair.

An hour later, Eric woke up with a sore neck. He checked his watch and saw it was only three in the morning. He still had the rest of the night until Marc could take over again.

Oliver was deep asleep in his aching arms. He looked around in the dark and could see the outline of the sleeping bag on the floor. He stood up to bring Oliver to the crib, but heard immediate protests. There was no way Oliver would let Eric place him in the crib now - he was way too comfortable in his arms.

The problem was Eric was so tired and could only think of sleep at this point.



In a moment of weakness, he lowered himself and Oliver carefully to the floor. Marc had a couch pillow on the ground, and it looked like the most comfortable thing Eric had ever seen in his life.

With an arm wrapped around Oliver, he laid on his side and pulled him close, making sure Oliver was still lying on his back. He pulled the covers up to his waist and let his body heat warm the both of them.

The last thing he heard was a deep sigh from Oliver as they both drifted into the best sleep they ever had.



## ERIC

Miranda cast a shadow over both Oliver and Eric, who were sleeping soundly on the floor.

She had come in the morning to check on them and found the house a disaster, and both Marc and Eric passed out.

There was a dirty bottle next to Eric's head. Little Oliver was tucked safely into his extended arm, and the sleeping bag was pulled up just high enough to cover Oliver's waist.

Miranda reached down to pick up the dirty bottle when Oliver started to stir. Eric opened one eye, blinking in confusion as to where he was and what he was holding.

He took a deep breath of wakefulness and looked down at Oliver, who was in a deep stretch with his arms overhead. Oliver looked around the room, blinked twice, yawned and then let out a shrill scream.

Before Eric could do anything, Miranda scooped Oliver off the floor and carried him to the changing table.

"It's a mess in here." Miranda was speaking loudly to be heard over Oliver's cries.

Eric sat himself up, arching his stiff back that had been lying in the same position for too long.

“I know. Where’s Marc?”

Oliver started screaming again, so Miranda just nodded her head in the direction of his bedroom.

After a quick diaper change and a bottle in his mouth, there was finally enough silence to allow Miranda and Eric to talk.

“Your phone is downstairs. I answered a call for you. You’re not going to like it.”

Eric was still sitting on the floor, resting his weight on his hands.

“What is it?”

“Your nanny interview is cancelled. She said she could maybe start in four weeks but not sooner. Something about having to finish up with her current client, and even then, she wasn’t sure about it.”

Eric groaned and put his head in his hands. He was so tired, and nothing was working right. His brain felt sluggish, and his mouth was dry.

“I’m on vacation this week, so I can continue helping – but I don’t know what your plans are. Aren’t you supposed to be at work in an hour?”

Marc walked into the room, making exaggerated stretching and yawning noises.

“I’m off to work.” Marc was speaking with his mouth open as he yawned.

Eric and Miranda rolled their eyes.

“Don’t you work from home anyway?” Miranda asked.

“I have to go to the office once a week now. Thank you very much,” Marc answered defensively.

“Is that where you’re heading to now, the office?” Eric was teasing Marc now.

“Funny. I do actually work, you know. I can get a full day’s work in at home.”

Eric and Miranda smiled at each other. They didn’t have the luxury of working from home like most people. There were too

many meetings that needed to be in person to be effective.

Marc shook his head at both of them and gave one final stretch. "I'll leave my sleeping bag here and can come back again tonight if you need me."

The doorbell rang suddenly, and all three of them looked at one another, confused.

It was seven in the morning.

He really hoped Melissa wasn't back again.

Eric was walking down the stairs when he heard a scratch on his front door.

When he finally opened it, he was alarmed to see an excited Henry run in and up the stairs. Adrianna was on the front step and had a worried look on her face as she spoke. "I'm so sorry. I got your message late and came as fast as I could. Is Oliver okay?"

Eric sighed and looked up the stairs at Marc who was grinning gleefully.

Marc continued smiling at them as he made his way past and out the door. "See you tonight!"

Eric was about to apologize and say Oliver was fine when Miranda started screaming for help from upstairs.

Eric and Adrianna ran up the stairs as fast as they could and flew into the nursery, where Miranda was holding up a silent Oliver, who was red and purple in the face.

Adrianna threw her sling off and immediately grabbed Oliver, swinging him in her arms so that his belly was facing the floor and his head was lower than his legs. She forcefully smacked him between his shoulder blades until finally a clump of unmixed formula came out, followed by a lot of liquid that came rushing in behind it.

Oliver started screaming in protest as Adrianna quickly lifted him back onto her shoulders.

His face was turning back to a normal shade of red as he continued to scream. Adrianna popped a soother in his mouth and sat down with him as they both caught their breath.

Eric looked at Miranda, who was shaking and crying.

“I don’t know what happened. I had just given him the bottle, and after a few sips he started coughing and then just went silent. I lifted him up and looked at his face and saw that he wasn’t breathing. I’m sorry I screamed but I didn’t know what else to do.”

Adrianna looked uncomfortable as Eric walked over and gave her and Oliver a hug.

“Your shoulder – you shouldn’t be doing that.”

Adrianna nodded and winced in agreement. He could tell that she was in pain, and gently lifted Oliver from her arms and walked over to Miranda.

“It’s fine. He’s fine – see?”

Miranda looked over at Adrianna, who was sitting in the chair, looking pale.

“That’s why it’s so important to really mix the formula before you give him the bottle. You can always buy the pre-mixed formula - then you wouldn’t have to worry about this happening.”

Miranda nodded, still shaking.

Adrianna continued, “It’s likely a defect in the nipple of the bottle, also. But regardless, it might not be a bad idea that Oliver gets checked out to ensure he didn’t aspirate any of the powder or the liquid.”

Miranda walked over and hugged Adrianna, who winced at the pressure on her shoulder, but wrapped her good arm in reciprocation.

“I’ll give you guys a first aid and CPR lesson later, and then you’ll be confident that you can do this yourself if something like this ever happens again. He’s fine now, though.”

Miranda nodded and took a step back.

“I’m just so happy you were here. Please never leave us again, seriously.”

Eric nodded at Miranda to echo her sentiments.

Adrianna smiled. “How about you repay me with a cup of delicious coffee in the kitchen, and I’ll make up another bottle of formula for Oliver. Let’s also throw out that nipple.”

Miranda nodded and grabbed little Oliver from Eric’s arms, snuggling him so hard she almost popped his soother out. She then made her way downstairs, leaving Eric and Adrianna alone.

“Is your shoulder okay?” He asked while scooping down and picking up her sling.

“It will be. It didn’t dislocate again, so that’s good.” She gave him a reassuring smile.

Eric couldn’t help himself and grabbed Adrianna in a hard embrace. He bent his head and kissed her deeply before pulling away and looking at her as he spoke softly, “Thank you, Adrianna.”

She blushed and looked down at her hands. “I’m just happy I was here to help.”

Eric lifted her chin to look at him again and gave her one last gentle kiss before offering to put her sling on.

She let him help her, wincing as she lifted her elbow to fit snugly into the fabric.

“I can’t wait until this is healed properly.”

He smiled and walked her down the stairs.

“Same.”

## Chapter 22

### ADRIANNA

Eric called his office to let them know he would be off for the remainder of the week and then called the pediatrician's office next to see if they could see Oliver. It was a group of pediatricians that he had been referred to from the NICU. He wasn't sure which physician he would be seeing, but was assured that someone could see Oliver that morning.

All three of them were in the kitchen. Adrianna was sipping on the coffee that Eric had made, enjoying every delicious mouthful.

She had barely slept the night before as she had tossed and turned for most of the night. She was worried about her medical appointment today, leaving her unit short-staffed, Eric, Oliver, Derek and now Carley.

"Do you have a security system in the house?"

Eric and Miranda paused when she directed the question at Eric.

They all had their hands free at the moment as Oliver was safely in a bassinet in the living room, where they could watch him closely.

"I have a camera at the front door only to see who's coming and going," Eric answered as he poured himself another cup of coffee, offering to top up hers and Miranda's – to which they both eagerly nodded 'yes.'

"Why do you ask?" Miranda asked while taking a sip of coffee from her mug.

"I just think it's probably a good idea that I have one since I live alone. You never know, right?"

Miranda nodded in response. Adrianna assumed she knew why she was asking, but she gracefully never let on if she did.

Derek had been messaging her consistently since he had spent the night, but thankfully had been too busy to stop by again. She

hoped it would stay that way, but she was worried about Carley trying to make another visit.

She figured a doorbell camera would afford her some security.

“I can show you the one I have, and you can see if you like it or not,” Eric offered.

Adrianna smiled and nodded. “That would be lovely, thank you.”

Together they looked at his phone while he showed her the app, and let her know where he had purchased it.

She could see tiny screenshots of everyone that had come and gone over the past couple of days.

Briefly, she thought she saw a video of the same woman who had interrogated him at his car the other day.

“She didn’t come in, just so you know.”

“Who didn’t come in?” Miranda came over and poked her head over Eric’s shoulder.

Eric clicked on the video without anyone asking him to, and sure enough, the video showed her standing at the door with her face in a pout and then storming away.

Adrianna gave him a reassuring smile and didn’t ask any further questions.

Miranda made a disapproving face and raised her eyebrows, urging Eric for more information.

He briefly told the story of him holding Oliver on the stairs while he had his shirt off, and Marc refusing her entry into the house.

“Now that you say something, you two would make an adorable couple!” Miranda exclaimed with glee.

Eric chose to ignore her comment and looked at his watch and then looked back at her. “We should probably get going. The clinic said they could see us this morning if we were one of the first patients.”

Adrianna took a last sip of coffee and stood up also.

Eric looked at her and quickly said, “You can finish your coffee if you like. We shouldn’t be long. No need to rush out.”

She thanked him for his hospitality, but she also had a doctor’s appointment to attend. Her family doctor wanted to check her arm, and she needed a medical note since she wasn’t at work.

She needed to mention the recurrent migraines as well.

Adrianna and Henry made their way to the front door as Eric followed them out.

Standing at the door, with her hand on the handle, she could feel the tension of Eric’s presence. She felt the familiar pull towards him, and the overwhelming need to touch him.

With one hand, he lightly caressed her free arm, looking softly into her eyes.

“Thank you again, Adrianna.”

She didn’t have any words to say back to him. She didn’t want this to be another goodbye and somehow felt like it wasn’t, but in her heart, she knew it should be.

He bent down and gently kissed her cheek, lingering for a sweet moment afterwards. She could smell his cologne and secretly hoped some of it would be left on her skin so she could smell him after he was gone.

“You don’t have to thank me,” she whispered.

“I owe you. Remember that.” He smiled at her.

She opened the door and left, promising herself she wouldn’t look back even though she could feel his eyes on her as she got into her car.

Her day went by quickly, but her thoughts of Eric and Oliver were a constant presence. She just needed a few days to reset, and hopefully things would go back to normal. The only issue was she wasn’t sure what normal meant for her anymore.

Based solely off Eric’s recommendation, she purchased the same camera system he had.

With Henry safely at home, and the doorbell camera carefully installed, she sat in her doctor’s office waiting room in



anticipation of her appointment.

When her name was finally called, a nurse brought her into an exam room and took her blood pressure, asking if there was anything new from her previous visit.

Her heart skipped a beat when she thought about the last time she had been there. It had been her six-week postpartum visit where she had insisted her doctor clear her to return to work.

That was almost six weeks ago.

That means she was almost at her due date. She had hoped the day would go by without her noticing, but the more she tried to ignore it, the more she was aware of its presence.

How fitting that she was now back at her family doctor's office with a dislocated shoulder and new migraines after convincing her doctor that she would be fine.

The nurse finished her medical history and left her alone in the room to wait.

She had a wonderful family doctor and was very thankful for him. He followed her during the entire pregnancy, even when she had been transferred to an obstetrician. It was extra visits, but she was happy to continue seeing him.

Adrianna heard the familiar gentle knock, with Dr. William opening the door a moment later.

He was dressed professional-casual, which was the best way she could describe him.

He always looked well polished with a dress shirt and black pants, but would wear funky black shoes with a slight heel. She loved it.

Dr. William greeted her with a big smile, asking her how she was feeling as he looked at her shoulder.

“Soccer accident.”

He nodded in acknowledgement.

“Did you hit your head?”

She shook her head.

“You have a cut on your forehead, though?”

Oh right. She had forgotten about that.

“I think it was a cleat that hit my head, but just the skin.”

”Hmmm,” he said, murmuring in thought. “Did the headaches start after this incident?”

“No, before.”

“How many incidents of headache?”

“Two.”

He did a full neurological assessment on her, just as Derek had. Afterwards, he examined her shoulder and inspected the sling.

“Your shoulder looks great, but I suggest a better sling than what you have. I’ll write you a prescription for it so your insurance will cover it.”

He took a thoughtful pause and then added, “I have to say, I am not surprised that your shoulder dislocated.”

She looked up at him, confused by his comment.

“It can take time after pregnancy for the relaxin hormone to leave the body and for everything to return to normal. Your ligaments are still loose and limber, which is why I had suggested taking some more time to recover.”

He had a look at her head as he spoke next, “As for the vision changes, I would think it’s likely migrainous in nature. I don’t think we need to investigate further unless they change or you develop new symptoms like confusion, loss of consciousness or permanent vision changes.”

She nodded in agreement.

“As for the cause,” he took another pause, sitting in his office chair and putting a hand on her knee, “I think they are likely caused by stress and possibly dehydration. I think the solution is that you need more time off work.”

She tried to protest, but he stopped her with a gentle squeeze of his hand.

“I’m worried you aren’t taking care of yourself, and you didn’t give yourself enough time to heal.”

Adrianna started crying. “I can’t stay home. Not in that house with her little room down the hall. I need to be busy.”

He looked at her empathetically and quietly asked, “Have you considered therapy? We spoke about it at our last visit, and you weren’t interested, but I think it would be helpful.”

He handed Adrianna a box of tissues from the corner of his desk and leaned back towards her. “I think if you return to work and don’t give yourself time to heal, these headaches will become more frequent, and you will be forced off work eventually anyways.”

She sighed, her shoulders sagging. She knew he was right.

“How much time do you think I need?”

“What about I write you off for three months, and then we go from there?”

“Three months?” Her voice sounded strangled.

“You can always go back before then if you feel better, but I think you would be surprised by how fast the time can go by.”

She blew her nose with the tissue. “Okay.”

“In the meantime, you could always volunteer somewhere different from your work. Different than your trauma. Maybe work with an animal shelter or a wildlife centre.” He paused and then thoughtfully added, “Nothing with babies and birthing – at least for the time being.”

Their conversation ended with a follow-up with him in a couple of weeks and a referral for both physiotherapy and counselling.

She left the clinic feeling lighter on her feet. Her shoulder still hurt, but hopefully the new sling would help her heal more comfortably.

Now all she had to do was put some hard work in, and hopefully she would come out better on the other side.



## ERIC

Eric and Miranda checked in Oliver and then anxiously sat in the waiting room. It was quickly filling with parents and their small children, and the volume of noise in the waiting room was reflecting this.

The clinic was conveniently located just one floor above the NICU, so Eric felt like he was in somewhat familiar territory.

Oliver was still sleeping in the car seat; which Eric had carefully placed on the floor in front of them when they had sat down. Miranda was gently rocking the car seat with her foot to ensure he kept sleeping until they made it into the exam room.

A nurse called Oliver's name, and it was the first time Eric heard Oliver's official last name – Forrever.

All three of them meandered through a tiny maze of hallways behind the front desk until they were directed to a small exam room.

The nurse asked for a basic history and then asked for Oliver to be undressed so she could do a head circumference, weight and length. Oliver wasn't too happy to be woken from his deep slumber, but Miranda was able to settle him afterwards with a swaddle she kept in the diaper bag

“Don't dress him back up yet,” the nurse requested as she was leaving the room. “Dr. Cook will need to do a full exam before you can do that. He won't be long.”

Eric and Miranda looked at each other.

He had forgotten that Dr. Cook was a pediatrician with his own separate practice.

“It'll be fine. Let's not get worked up just yet.” Miranda was offering comfort, but Eric had already resigned himself to the fact that he wouldn't always be able to choose Oliver's doctor.

He had to remind himself that Dr. Cook was a physician, after all, and was obviously good at his job if he covered shifts in the NICU.

Dr. Cook came in a moment later and seemed surprised to see them. He likely remembered them from Oliver's former last

name in the NICU – which was his birth mother’s last name until Eric officially adopted him.

Eric explained what happened while Dr. Cook listened intently.

“That is very fortunate that you had someone who was CPR trained on site. This was a friend, you say?”

Eric wanted to respect Adrianna’s privacy, so he just nodded and said, “Yes, a friend.”

He wasn’t sure why this part was relevant, but Dr. Cook didn’t press for further details, so he figured it didn’t matter.

Dr. Cook examined Oliver, listened to his lungs, and carefully checked his reflexes.

“He looks great, and his lungs sound excellent. I don’t think we need to investigate further, but if Oliver develops any symptoms, then please call or bring him to the emergency department. We would be looking for symptoms such as a fever, wheezing, difficulty breathing etc.”

Miranda looked at Eric. “Adrianna showed us how to tell if they have difficulty breathing, so we know what to look for in that regard.”

Dr. Cook’s head flipped up sharply when Miranda said Adrianna’s name, but he didn’t say anything.

Gently he handed Oliver back to Miranda so that she could dress him.

Dr. Cook looked over at Eric as he sat down and started typing on the computer in the room. “I’ll give you our after-hours number so that you have it in case something happens outside of our working hours. We always have one nurse and one physician on call.”

He handed Eric a card and then stood up.

“It’s still good you brought him in today to make sure he’s okay. I am sure it was scary this morning, but I am happy there was *someone* trained to help.”

He seemed to pause when he said ‘someone.’

“We encourage all parents and caregivers to take a first aid or CPR course. The front desk can give you this information when you make your next appointment - which should be in a week, so that we can reassess how the morphine titration is going.”

He gave them both a friendly nod goodbye and then left the room.

Miranda finished dressing Oliver and put him in the car seat before they made their way out of the office.

It was a beautiful day out. The leaves were finally coming in on the trees, birds could be heard overhead chirping and singing, and the sun was shining warmly on all of them.

He knew he wasn't supposed to be seeing Adrianna, but he wanted to thank her for saving Oliver's life – again.

“Would you want to do a barbecue tonight in the backyard? We could grab a few drinks and some food.”

Miranda smiled warmly at him. “That sounds amazing. Especially if you're doing the cooking.”

Miranda opened the back door and put Oliver's car seat in. “I'm going to sit in the back with him so he knows I'm close.”

Eric chuckled lightly as he got in the front seat and started the car. When he could see in the rearview mirror that both Oliver and Miranda were safely buckled, he pulled out of the parking spot.

“What do you think about inviting Adrianna tonight?” he asked Miranda, looking in the rearview mirror for her reaction.

He caught a glimpse of her immediate smile. “That's a lovely idea! We have to thank her somehow anyways. Maybe we can pick up a little something for her, too.”

“Oh, and Eric?” Miranda added thoughtfully.

“Yes?”

“You should invite Marc and Lucy.”

Eric furrowed his brow.

He really enjoyed Marc and Lucy's company, but found their daughter a handful.

She had only just turned a year old, and he had missed her birthday party when Oliver was in the NICU.

Eric nodded in agreement. "I still have her Barbie at home."

Miranda winked from the back seat. "I thought you were keeping that all for yourself."

"Funny."

## Chapter 23

### ERIC

Once Oliver was asleep in his crib, and the baby monitor was safely linked to Eric's phone, they all sat outside in the sun.

Miranda had made a salad, Eric made hamburgers and hot dogs for everyone, and Marc and Lucy brought drinks.

Miranda had reached out to Adrianna, and to Eric's surprise, she had actually agreed to come over. She offered to bring dessert even though there was so much food he wasn't sure anyone would eat it.

The doorbell rang, and Miranda jumped up to answer.

Adrianna's soft voice could be heard coming through the house, with Miranda exclaiming, "You baked a cake with one arm?"

When Adrianna stepped outside into the backyard, everyone cheered, and Eric stood up to offer his seat to her.

She blushed and looked around timidly. She jokingly said, "Did I forget it's my birthday?"

Eric put his hand on her shoulder and then addressed the small crowd. "No, just our appreciation for you saving Oliver this morning."

Her cheeks were turning crimson, so Eric directed her where to sit and pulled a chair up beside her.

"Your backyard is gorgeous." Adrianna was in a trance, looking around at the beautiful landscaping. It was a decent sized backyard, more than you would get with a modern build.

There were great big trees at the end of the yard that provided shade and beautiful pink and white flowers planted near the house.

The fence looked newly stained with beautiful vines crawling across, and although the leaves weren't full yet, you could easily picture what it would look like mid-summer.



“You must be out here all the time.”

Marc scoffed, and Miranda jokingly nudged him with her foot.

Lucy was sitting on the other side of Marc with their daughter asleep in her arms.

Eric rolled his eyes at Miranda and Marc.

“I think what they’re *trying* to say is usually I only get out here a couple of times in the summer. It depends on how busy work is, and for some reason, summer is busy for divorces and mediations.”

“I’m Lucy, by the way.” A beautiful Asian woman looked over at Adrianna and smiled warmly. “And this sleeping girl is our daughter Annabelle.”

Adrianna smiled back. “She looks very comfortable.”

Lucy laughed as Eric stood up and offered drinks to everyone. Lucy declined as she was pregnant, and Miranda stood to help him serve up.

“Do you like Moscato? The boys are drinking beers if you want, but I brought a delicious wine if you want to try it!”

Adrianna agreed to the Moscato, and Eric and Miranda walked into the house to grab the drinks and plates to serve supper.

Once inside, Miranda asked Eric if he was going to give the gift to Adrianna in front of everyone.

Eric shook his head. “I was thinking of giving her the card I had wanted to give her earlier, and the gift at the same time. Later though, when we have some alone time.”

Miranda winked and walked outside with the two glasses of Moscato for her and Adrianna.

Dinner was served shortly after, with Oliver sleeping long enough for them to sit and eat together.

They all sat around a beautiful glass table under a canopy in the backyard.

When it started to get a bit cooler out, everyone helped clean up and moved back indoors to sit in the living room.

Oliver started stirring upstairs, and Miranda offered to check on him.

“How is he doing?” Adrianna asked.

“Good. We saw Dr. Cook today, and he said he looked great. We will continue with decreasing the morphine dose as planned.”

Eric looked over at Adrianna as he mentioned Dr. Cook, but she gave no expression that his name meant anything to her.

She clapped and sighed in relief. “That’s wonderful news. I’m happy for all of you guys.”

Miranda came down the stairs with a crying Oliver and handed him to Eric. “Can you hold him while I get his meds and a bottle?” She looked at Adrianna and quickly added, “Which I am going to shake *vigorously*.”

Everyone gave a nervous laugh as Miranda left the room.

“I hope she’s not being too hard on herself. It could have happened to anyone.” Lucy was talking as she readjusted her daughter on her lap.

The little girl had woken to eat some supper and then had quickly fallen back asleep again, her new Barbie still held tightly in her one hand.

Annabelle started crying in her mother’s arms, and Lucy stood up, resigned that it was past her bedtime and she needed to get home.

“Let’s go out for coffee sometime, just the three of us girls. We can leave the boys behind with the babies.” She winked at Marc as she made her way to the door.

Marc also stood up to leave. “If you need me, just call me.”

Eric thanked him but declined his offer. Miranda was going to spend the night tonight.

She returned with a warm bottle, shaking as vigorously as she said she would, and grabbed Oliver from Eric’s arms. He was

falling asleep again, but she knew he wouldn't last long without his medication or bottle.

Marc and Lucy left as Miranda deftly held Oliver and put the bottle in his mouth, giving him the morphine quickly in the side of his mouth as he drank.

“Wow, you guys are pros already!” Adrianna exclaimed as she smiled at both of them. “The real dream team right here.”

Miranda smiled as Oliver greedily drank at the bottle. “I should've been a nurse instead of a lawyer.”

Eric couldn't help but huff when she said this, making Miranda turn to him, scornfully saying, “I would have been a great one!”

“You hate blood.”

She rolled her eyes. “Nobody *likes* blood.”

“Sorry, I stand corrected. You *pass out* when there's blood.”

She rolled her eyes again and looked at Adrianna, “Don't listen to him. That's not true.”

Eric leaned over excitedly as he spoke next, “Yes, it is! Remember when I hurt my finger when we were in law school? I almost had to pick you up off the sidewalk – with my injured hand!”

“That's because it was almost broken *off*.” She looked over at Adrianna. “It was all bent the wrong way, and there was blood *everywhere*.” Miranda was making a face as she remembered his crooked finger.

“That's what happens when someone slams the car door on your finger.”

Miranda winced in memory. “I didn't see his finger there.”

“She's lying. She was mad at me and slammed the car door on my finger on purpose.”

Eric was smiling as he told this last part, raising his eyebrows as he tried to get a rise out of her.

“Okay, I *was* mad, but I would never have done that on purpose.”

“Uh-huh.”

Miranda scowled. “He’s just as bad as Marc for making up stories, don’t believe him.”

Adrianna was laughing at both of them, looking like she was enjoying herself.

“Thank you both for the dinner,” she smiled, “and entertainment. I should get going, though.”

Miranda looked over at Eric, who stood up to walk Adrianna out. He gave her a knowing nod, letting her know he had not forgotten about the gift.

“I’ll walk you out.”

Adrianna put on her shoes and opened the front door. Eric grabbed her gift from the top of a shelf near the entrance and followed her out.

“Do you have a moment for a quick walk? I thought we could go sit and watch the sun go down at the park.”

Adrianna nodded.

Together they walked for a couple of blocks until they found an empty bench that perfectly faced the sunset.

As they both sat down, Eric pulled out the gift and card he had been keeping at his side so she couldn’t see.

“I wanted to give you something to say thank you for everything. Not just this morning.”

Adrianna’s jaw dropped as she saw the small black box and the card in his hands. She was about to protest when he interrupted her.

“I won’t take no for an answer, so if you don’t take it now, then I’ll have to leave it on your front step.”

She smiled warmly at him, her eyes crinkling slightly in the corners as she did so. She took the card first from him and was about to open it when he stopped her.

“Maybe read that at home, but open the gift now.”

She laughed kindly and put the card down beside her. “Usually, it’s polite to read the card first.”

He ran his fingers through his hair and looked at the ground. "I know, but I won't be able to sit here while you read it. So read it at home, and then you can message me about it if you want."

She laughed and grabbed the little black rectangular box he was holding out in his hand.

She slowly opened it, her breath catching in her throat as she saw what it was.

"I can't accept this."

"Of course you can."

She took the gold necklace out of the box and held it in the light. It was shining against the red and gold background of the sunset.

It was a very dainty necklace, not very long, with gold letters 'A E I O U' on it.

"I know you can't wear jewelry at work, but I remembered one of the nurses had said necklaces were okay."

Adrianna was speechless as Eric motioned for her to turn around so he could put it on.

He could see goosebumps on her neck and shoulders as he ran his fingertips lightly over her skin, tickling her neck as he found the clasp.

"A for Adrianna, E for Eric, O for Oliver, and so you'll always know that I am forever in your debt, I O U because 'I owe you.'"

"It's beautiful. And very clever. Thank you so much. You really didn't have to."

Eric smiled at her, looking deeply into her eyes. "It is not nearly as beautiful as you."

He leaned forward and gently kissed her soft lips.

"We should get you back to your car."

Adrianna nodded, her fingers still gently touching the chain around her neck.

As they walked back to the car, Eric joked that if she wanted to take it off, she could call one of them to help her since it would be impossible to remove it with one arm.

“I don’t plan on ever taking it off,” she said to him as they said goodbye at her car, and he gave her one final kiss on the lips.



## **ADRIANNA**

As Adrianna drove home, she heard a notification on her phone but ignored it.

She felt like she was on a high and couldn’t remember the last time she had been so happy. So elated. So joyful.

It felt so normal being around Eric. She knew she shouldn’t see him, but it was hard when she felt like she fit perfectly into his life – and he into hers.

When she got to her front door, she could hear Henry whining. He was due for a walk and wasn’t happy she didn’t take him to the barbecue.

Once inside, she quickly dropped her belongings, including the card, on the bench at the door and clipped the leash to Henry. This would be his last walk of the day before they went to bed.

She was excited to take a hot shower and cuddle into bed with a book. She couldn’t remember the last time she looked forward to being alone.

Perhaps it was knowing she had the summer off and didn’t have to worry about early mornings for a bit.

Her heart sank in her chest when she thought about work.

She would miss being busy and would miss her coworkers, but it did feel good not to have to see Derek for a while.

The night air had a slight spring chill but was refreshing. She breathed in the fresh air deeply and felt rejuvenated.

After walking for only a few minutes, Henry started pulling on the leash while barking at someone heading in their direction.

Adrianna wanted to correct him, but he was insistent on alerting her to the person coming their way.

Henry continued barking and pulling. Adrianna started to pull back and scold him when the stranger walked underneath the street lamp, and she could see that it was Derek.

Henry gave one final pull as she let his leash drop so he could run the last couple of feet toward him.

Traitor, she thought.

Derek bent down and grabbed the leash, smiling as he pet Henry.

When he looked at Adrianna, his expression changed quickly to a scowl.

“You don’t answer your phone?”

Adrianna felt the pockets of her jeans and realized she had left her phone at home. She had so much fun tonight that she hadn’t checked it once.

“It’s at home.”

“I was checking in to see how you’re feeling.”

Adrianna groaned internally as she grabbed for Henry’s leash.

“Thank you, but it’s not necessary. I’m okay.”

“Did you see your doctor yet?” His concern for her was growing, and she didn’t like it.

“Yes, I did.”

He raised his eyebrows at her, urging her to explain further.

“He said it’s likely from stress and dehydration. He’s written me off work for the next few months.”

Derek looked surprised but just nodded in response.

“He said he wants me to start ... counselling.”

“I think that’s an excellent idea. I think it’s also good for you to be off work for a bit.”

She rolled her eyes at his last comment, but he didn't notice. What he meant to say was that it was easier for him if they didn't have to work together.

"I should keep walking. Henry needs the exercise."

Suddenly a thought came to her mind, and she looked around. "Where is your car?"

He brushed her off. "It's always hard to find parking at your spot, so I parked down the street."

He grabbed her by the arm and started leading her in the opposite direction, back toward her place.

She thought his comment was strange. She had never heard of anyone having a hard time finding parking, but didn't want to dwell on it. She couldn't see why he would lie about that.

Together they walked back towards her place but ended up taking a long loop around.

"So, how's the arm?"

She shrugged, it wasn't hurting so bad, and the new sling was working great. "Not bad."

"Must be hard to do CPR with one arm?"

She stopped walking and looked up at him. He had a smirk on his face and was trying to read her expression.

"Why would you say that?"

He shrugged. "Just saying, it would be hard to do CPR with one arm. It's good you're off work for a bit."

She squinted as she looked at him, but then continued walking. Did Eric mention that she was at his place this morning with Oliver? She doubted he would do that.

"Right. Guess I don't have to worry about that for a while."

"Another five weeks or so."

She shook her head. He always had to add in his medical opinion even when she already knew the recovery time. She just said, "You got it," in response.

"How is Carley?"



“No idea.”

“She came to my house the other day.”

That made Derek stop in his tracks. “Did you talk to her?”

“No.”

He seemed to exhale in relief and started walking again.

“That’s good.”

They were near her house now, and she wanted to go inside without inviting him in.

“Did you want a tea or something? I think I’m just going to head straight to bed.”

Derek looked around, almost nervously, before responding to her.

“I would love some, but I should get going.”

She was relieved to hear that he didn’t want to come in.

He was staring at her and not saying anything. She was about to ask him what he was thinking when he glanced down at her neckline and pointed to the chain around her neck.

“Is that new?”

Adrianna touched her neck reflexively and felt the cool chain with her fingertips.

“Yes.”

“Is it from a child or a kindergarten teacher or something?”

Adrianna didn’t understand his comment. “What do you mean?”

Derek looked at her inquisitively. “It’s all the vowels. I don’t get it.”

Adrianna just shrugged and didn’t offer any more information.

“You don’t ever wear jewelry.”

“I’ve never had any to wear.”

He was starting to get the hint that she was done with the conversation and leaned down and kissed her cheek before

turning and walking back in the direction he said he parked.

He failed to mention that they were together for two years and he never bought her any jewelry to wear – except the engagement ring he asked to have back when they broke up.

She had given it willingly.

# Chapter 24

## ERIC

Eric was walking around the house, consoling Oliver as he cried. He was getting pretty good at doing things with one hand, like warming bottles and putting in a load of laundry.

Oliver's favourite position was being held upright and tucked under Eric's chin. He didn't seem to care for Eric's scruffy beard and would cry out if he didn't shave it closely.

Unfortunately for Eric, he was already drowning in other tasks for Oliver, but despite not having time to even take a shower, he somehow managed a close shave every morning.

Miranda had just gone upstairs to nap, having done the late-night shift with Oliver.

Tonight, she would go home to her place and get a proper sleep.

He was going to get her something for being such a good friend, but he knew what she really wanted most was to be an important person in Oliver's life.

If there was a male name for Miranda, perhaps that could be Oliver's middle name. He would need to remind himself to look that up later.

Eric found himself daydreaming about seeing Adrianna and was holding back from inviting her over again.

It was the end of the week, and he knew that had she not been injured, she would be playing soccer at the park again. Marc had let him know what time the game was since he was still helping their team out as a sub.

He had yet to venture out with Oliver and was thinking maybe he would take him to the park to watch Marc play for a little bit.

Oliver wasn't yet engaging with his surroundings, but he was happiest in the wrap carrier that Adrianna had given him.

It ended up being one of the most important items he owned, and he was becoming a professional at putting it on properly.

In his card, he made sure to add an addendum to thank her for the additional gifts she had given him. The towel, in particular, was Oliver's favourite to be wrapped in after his bath.

She always knew what was best, and he admired that about her.

Together, he and Oliver went into the living room with a warm bottle. The bassinet was still in there for times they wanted to keep a close eye on him.

On his ever-growing to-do list, he needed to add on a call to his mother. She had left a few messages asking for an update and was still asking for the results of the paternity test.

He regretted doing the test as it made no difference now that he had officially adopted Oliver. Every day when he checked the mail, he worried he would see the dreaded manila envelope and the results would be waiting for him.

He wasn't sure if he was strong enough to throw out the envelope without opening it, and was scared the results would change his heart if it found that Oliver wasn't related to him.

Oliver finished his bottle and let out a big burp as Eric lifted him onto his shoulder and gently patted his back.

"Good job, buddy!" he exclaimed as he rubbed his back, and little Oliver's head rolled to the side.

He had noticed over the past couple of days that he was becoming less rigid and was losing some of the faux head control he had because of the withdrawal rigidity.

Hopefully, this meant that the drug withdrawal symptoms were slowly working themselves out of his system, and he would be back to normal soon enough.

A normal that poor Oliver didn't even know existed yet.

Eric heard creaking on the stairs and looked over to see a tired Miranda slowly making her way downstairs.

“Are you wearing my shirt?” he asked, staring at her long thighs that were just barely covered by the length of the t-shirt.

She mumbled something unintelligible as she stalked past him on the way to the kitchen.

“There’s a fresh pot of coffee in there, and I hope you’re at least wearing shorts under that.”

“I’m not,” she called back to him flatly.

He shook his head. He needed to turn that third bedroom into her own room so she would leave his stuff alone.

The doorbell rang as he began to gently lower Oliver into the bassinet. He winced as he felt Oliver flutter, and held his arms completely still until his little body settled and he could place him fully onto the mattress without waking up.

Once he was sure Oliver would stay asleep, he tip-toed to the front door to answer it, but Miranda had beat him to it.

At the front door, his prim and proper mother was staring blankly at a half-naked Miranda, who seemed un-phased as she sipped her coffee.

“Good morning Mrs. Forrever. Please come in. I’ll grab you some coffee from the kitchen.”

Eric rushed over and grabbed the mug from Miranda’s hands, whispering harshly, “No, you’ll grab *pants* first.”

Miranda grabbed for the mug, but Eric held it out of her reach until she scowled at him and gave up.

“Fine. I’ll be right back,” she said in an exaggerated tone as she turned towards the stairs.

She looked back at Mrs. Forrever’s face and then back to Eric, “They’re just legs, you know. We all have them,” and then continued up the stairs.

Eric sighed and put her mug down on the living room table.

“Come on in, Mom. Sorry I didn’t call you back - I’ve had my hands pretty full.”

Without saying anything, she stepped into the house and gave Eric a look so that he would close the door behind her.

She was holding a brown envelope in her hands as she watched Eric step behind her to close the door.

“Of course, you were busy, darling. I won’t be long. I wanted to discuss the paternity results with you.”

Eric looked at his mother’s hands and was confused as to what would be in the envelope she was holding. “I haven’t received them yet.”

“Oh, I know that.”

He wasn’t understanding. “How do you know that?”

“Because I called and had the address changed to mine.”

Eric’s mouth was about to hit the floor as he looked at his mother in shock.

Miranda was coming down the stairs and was staring at both of them.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, sensing something wasn’t right.

“Apparently, my own mother doesn’t trust me, and changed the address for the paternity results. I am *assuming* she came here to tell us the results, and that is what she has in her hands.”

Eric’s mother gave a faint smile and motioned for everyone to head into the living room. “Exactly, Eric. Now, shall we open them?”

As they all sat down, Eric felt unsettled.

He looked over at little Oliver, who looked precious as he slept deeply in the bassinet.

“Actually mother, I have decided I don’t want to know the results. So, if you don’t mind, we can throw out the envelope.”

“Nonsense, dear.” She dismissed him with a wave, her tennis bracelet bouncing as her arm moved. “We paid for a

test, and we will follow through with the results as we planned.”

Every time she said ‘we,’ Eric was wincing. As he remembered, none of this was his decision.

She began opening the envelope when Eric put his hand over hers.

“What happens if we find out he isn’t related to us?”

She looked up at him, considering his question, and answered him matter-of-factly, “Then he wouldn’t be related to us.”

He sighed, pinching between his eyes in frustration. “I get that, but what does that mean for us? Will it change anything?”

His mother clucked her tongue as she narrowed her eyes at him. “Of course, it *changes* things. It changes everything.”

Eric pulled the envelope from her hands.

“Then I don’t want to know.”

His mother folded her hands in her lap and stared at him disapprovingly. “You’re acting childish, Eric.”

“No, Mom. I’m not.” He looked over at Miranda for support. She put a hand on his shoulder to tell him that she was on his side.

“I have adopted him. In all eyes of the law, he is my son. I don’t want him to be treated differently because of a blood test – because that shouldn’t matter.”

He looked at his mother with his shoulders set back and his spine straight. “He is my son, and he is your grandson, and the results of that test should not change anything. The fact that you say it will means that we shouldn’t open this envelope.”

His mother huffed at him. “What if he belongs to some degenerate street person?”

“That’s my point, Mom. He belongs to me now. His past will have no consequence on his future, and you, of all people, should agree with that.”

Her mouth was in a flat line as she listened to him.

“I can simply call and ask for the results.”

“That’s fine then mother, but if that’s your plan, then you can leave now and not be a part of his life.”

Her jaw dropped as she listened to Eric take a stand against her for the first time in his life.

Without saying a word, she took care to stand up and left the house.

Eric’s shoulders sagged as he heard the ringing of the front door slamming, and Miranda enveloped him in her arms.

“You did a good thing. She will come around.”

He felt tears stinging his eyes. “And if she doesn’t?”

“Then she doesn’t deserve him.” Miranda let him go and gave him a big smile. “Now, how about we set fire to that envelope on the barbecue.”

She stood up and offered him her outstretched hand.

He took it, and together they made their way to the backyard while sweet Oliver continued sleeping – having no idea the significance of the event that just happened around his bassinet.

Eric chuckled as they stood together in front of the barbecue and he placed the half-ripped envelope on the grill.

“What’s so funny?”

“I’m just happy you weren’t wearing pants when she came in.”

He took the lighter and lit the envelope.

As they both watched it go up in flames, Miranda nudged him playfully and said, “You’re very welcome, Captain.”

They watched as the paper burned until it was unrecognizable.

He was pretty sure that at one point, he saw the words “confirmed paternity” but didn’t want to put too much thought into it.



Just as he told his mother, Oliver was his now, and nothing could change that.

# Chapter 25

## ADRIANNA

Adrianna and Henry sat down underneath the tree she had brought him to during the last game when she had injured her shoulder.

She did the same as the last game and put down a bowl of water and a toy bone.

This time she placed a blanket on the ground and made sure to drink from the large bottle of water she had remembered to bring.

Her team was already on the field playing. She had come a few minutes before the game to say hello to everyone and let them know she was sorry she couldn't play.

They had a teammate in the net to act as her replacement until she was better, and although he was a decent goalie, her teammates were anxious to know when she would be returning.

She told them it would be a few weeks yet, but she would keep them posted.

Realistically she was out for a while – likely the rest of the season. It saddened her, but the good news was that she could potentially return as a forward if the team needed someone- as long as nobody was pulling on her arms, it should be okay.

Adrianna took another sip of water as she watched Marc run to the sidelines, hurrying as he was quite obviously very late to the game. He was flagging that he was ready to go on but still hadn't tied his cleats up yet.

Luckily nobody needed to sub off yet, so it wasn't a big deal.

She laughed as Henry rolled over on his back and begged for belly rubs.

“I think he prefers it when I do it.”

Adrianna looked up to see Eric standing over her.

Her heart fluttered as she looked up at him. He looked as good as every time she had seen him, and she could smell his cologne as he gingerly sat next to her.

It was only when he sat down that she noticed he was wearing the wrap carrier, and little Oliver was snuggled close to his chest.

“Oh, baby Oliver! Don’t you just look so comfy in there.”

She couldn’t help but reach for his tiny hand. It reflexively grasped around her finger, and her heart soared.

“I know it’s just a primitive reflex, but I like to think they know what they’re doing,” she cooed at Oliver, but really directed her comment to Eric, who was chuckling beside her.

“How’s the arm?”

She shrugged. “How’s the sleep?”

He also shrugged in response.

“Looks like we are quite the broken pair.” She winked at him, and he moved his body to sit a bit closer to her.

She could feel the intense energy between them. It was like she was being drawn to him, and her sole purpose in life was to avoid the pull – despite it feeling so good.

She couldn’t help but lean onto his shoulder, relaxing her weight slightly onto him. His body welcomed her touch and braced to allow her to shift her weight closer to him.

“Do you miss soccer?”

She turned her head to look up at him as she spoke, “It’s only been one week, but yes, I do already.”

“Maybe you could play out of the net once you’re feeling better.”

She became animated when she heard him and jumped in excitement. “That’s what I was just thinking about.”

Eric pulled her back to rest against him. It felt good to be so close.

Together they watched the rest of the game as Oliver slept soundly. They were both so invested in the game that they were in sync with perfectly timed ‘oohs’ and ‘aahs’ at the right moments.

The game ended with her team winning and a proud Marc scoring the winning goal.

He bounded towards them after the game like a child, “Did you see it? Did you see my goal?”

Both Adrianna and Eric nodded yes and then laughed.

Oliver started stirring in Eric’s arms as Adrianna was packing up. She was enjoying her time with Eric so much, but knew she should be getting back home soon.

Her phone buzzed as she picked it up. Her face scrunched as she looked at the screen, seeing that Carley had triggered her doorbell camera and was knocking on her front door again.

Eric was asking her something, but she wasn’t concentrating on what he was saying. Instead, her mind drifted to possible scenarios of why Carley was coming to her door.

She wasn’t even sure how Carley knew where she lived but figured someone in the NICU must have told her.

Her shoulders sagged. She just wanted a few uncomplicated days to enjoy herself, and now today was already changing for the worst.

“Adrianna, is everything okay?”

Eric’s voice cut through her thoughts and pulled her back to the soft breeze and distant sound of children playing in the background.

She shook her head and put her phone away. “I’m sorry, just something on my phone. What were you saying?”

Eric smiled warmly as he picked a bag off the ground for her.

“Marc was asking if we wanted to go for drinks with the team.”

Eric looked behind him as Marc was talking to a small group of jerseys.

“But I was wondering if you wanted to come back to my place for a short while.”

Adrianna was about to decline when her phone buzzed again. This time it showed a picture of Carley actually sitting on her step, waiting for her to come home.

“Actually, yes. Let’s do that.”

Eric laughed. “Which one?”

She blushed apologetically. “Your place.”

Together they walked out of the park, waving goodbye to a disappointed Marc. He put his hands up in the air in exasperation to say, ‘as if you’re not coming,’ but neither of them changed their mind.

When they got to Eric’s place, Henry bounded in the front door and ran to the living room, as was his usual, while they slowly followed behind.

Oliver was stirring louder now, and Eric had to pull him out of the wrap to bounce him in his arms while he got his bottle ready.

Adrianna sat in the living room, listening to the rustling sounds in the kitchen of a formula can being opened and water being boiled. Intermittently she could hear Eric saying, “It’s coming, buddy. Don’t worry,” and “Just hold on, it’s almost done now.”

Oliver was in full-blown screams by the time he came back to the living room.

Adrianna couldn’t help but find it attractive that Eric looked so big and strong as he held the tiny baby. He had thrown a burp cloth over his shoulder and laid it on a pillow across his lap as he propped Oliver on his side to feed.

“Side-lying position, just like you taught us.” Eric winked at Adrianna as he popped the bottle into Oliver’s mouth, and the crying stopped.

Oliver greedily took the bottle and then started closing his eyes, eventually falling asleep with the nipple in his mouth.

“He had a big day today, I guess?” Adrianna asked while leaning close to Eric and stroking Oliver’s cheek.

Eric took the nipple out of Oliver’s mouth and set it aside. A little bit of formula dribbled out the side of his cheek and onto the burp cloth.

“Very big day. Now it’s time for a burp and a nap.”

Oliver was heavy with sleep as Eric hoisted him upright and tapped his back gently.

He opened his eyes briefly when a big burp came out. Eric and Adrianna both exclaimed how proud they were of him, but he took no notice and promptly fell back asleep.

Eric gently carried him to the bassinet and laid him down with ease. He was so tired that he didn’t stir at all.

“You’re getting pretty good at all of this.” Adrianna was beaming from the couch as Eric walked back over.

“He’s a pretty awesome kid. I think I just got really lucky.”

He sat back down beside her, putting his arm around her shoulders and pulling her close to him. “Thank you for all of your help.”

She laughed and looked up at him, “I didn’t help at all. That was all you.”

Eric’s face lit up as he looked into her eyes. “You know what I mean.”

He leaned down and kissed her gently. She couldn’t restrain herself and kissed him back deeply, wanting more of him than he was giving her.

Eric picked up on her energy and moved so she could lay on top of him on the couch.

Adrianna was excited to feel like the one in control this time, and was thinking of everything she wanted to do to him, but realized it was almost impossible with one arm in a sling.

Eric must have sensed where her thoughts went and instinctively flipped her underneath him, taking care not to hurt her shoulder.

She was breathing heavily as he slowly kissed her neck and collarbone, making his way down her shirt with his lips.

“Should we take this upstairs?” Her question came out breathy, but she was so filled with desire for him that she didn’t care.

He gently pushed himself off the couch and put his hand out to her, leading her to the stairs.

“What about Oliver?” She quickly asked, looking back at the bassinet.

“I have the monitor, and he is going to be out for a long time.”

Eric pulled her up the stairs and brought her to his bedroom door, stopping at the threshold while looking down at her.

“Are you sure you want to go in?”

In response, she lifted herself on her toes and wrapped her good arm around him, kissing him softly.

Quickly he whisked her into the bedroom and onto his bed, laying down beside her as he did so.

“This time, I’m prepared.” He had a serious look on his face, and she couldn’t help but giggle.

He raised an eyebrow at her, “What are you laughing about?”

Her cheeks blushed as she looked up at him, putting a hand on his cheek as she tried to read his eyes.

“Sorry, I think I’m just a little bit nervous.”

He started kissing her neck again, and her nervousness slowly dissipated.

He helped her take off her sling and carefully removed her top and bra. Slowly he trailed kisses down her chest as she lifted herself to help him remove her pants.

He was about to remove her panties when she stopped him.

“Your turn now.”

He smiled and pulled off his shirt, throwing it on the pile of clothes on the ground next to the bed.

She couldn't help but stare at him as he pulled down his pants, revealing a tight pair of boxers.

She could easily see his excitement through his boxers and then could feel it as he laid next to her on the bed.

With her hand, she traced the outline of his chest and abs. He was in ridiculously good shape. She wasn't sure she had ever seen such a beautiful human up close before.

“You're like – movie star attractive.” She hadn't meant to say it aloud, but now the words were out there, and she couldn't take them back.

He looked at her sheepishly and shook his head.

“Thank you for the compliment.”

She felt like she was drooling as she stared at him. She wanted to lick, kiss and bite him at the same time but didn't know where to start.

Luckily, he took the lead and started kissing her again, cupping her breasts gently as he moaned into her skin.

His hands roamed down her stomach, stopping briefly to gently caress her faded stretch marks.

She moaned in excitement as he gently caressed the skin of her inner thighs before moving his hand between them.

He could feel the slickness of her excitement between her legs.

She felt nervous and incredibly excited at the same time.

“I just need you to know that it's been a long while for me.”

Thankfully the excitement was winning, and she could feel herself becoming more relaxed and at ease with him.

He brought out a different side of herself that she hadn't seen for a while – if ever. She felt sexy and confident but also



comfortable and stable.

She knew she could trust him. After her recent heartbreak, she had thought she would never be able to trust again.

“I’ll be careful.”

He was caressing her face while looking thoughtfully into her eyes.

“I think you’re one of the most amazing women I have ever met, and we can take this as fast, or as slow, as you want to.”

She held back tears and wrapped her hand around his.

“What I want right now is you.” She took a deep breath and let it out as she said, “All of you.”

Next thing she knew, she was swept into his arms, and into an unbelievable evening of lovemaking where he sent her soaring to heights she never knew existed.

By the end of the evening, they were both happily exhausted and cuddling each other as Oliver fell asleep in the bed between them. They would safely move him to the crib when he was deep enough in his slumber to not wake up during the transition.

Adrianna agreed to spend the night when Eric asked her, and once Oliver was safely in his crib, they both drifted off to sleep in each other’s arms until Oliver needed them a couple of hours later.

Together they managed Oliver overnight, and when the morning came, they were both feeling a delicious mix of exhaustion and rejuvenation.

## Chapter 26

### ADRIANNA

Adrianna was still smiling as she drove back to her place the following morning with Henry.

She had turned the radio off to allow herself to embrace the quiet hum of her body as she was still buzzing with excitement from the night before.

She felt better than she had in years.

A part of her was worried about what it would feel like to come down from this high, but she was too happy to care about the consequences.

Her phone was vibrating softly in her bag, but she didn't bother to check the notification.

She wasn't going to let anything ruin her day.

Until she saw Derek on her front step.

She pulled into the driveway and gave him a friendly wave; meanwhile, inside the car she was muttering unhappy thoughts to herself.

He was holding two coffee cups stacked on top of one another in one hand, his phone awkwardly held in the other.

“Good morning?” He gave her a questioning look which she chose to ignore.

“Good morning!” She responded cheerfully, not allowing him to pierce the protective bubble of happiness she was surrounding herself with.

“Late night?”

“No.” She didn't elaborate. If there was anything the past few weeks had taught her, it was that she didn't owe anybody any answers.

“Ah, I see.”

She walked past him to unlock her front door, looking back as he watched her place her key into the keyhole.

“Did you need something, Derek?”

He was shifting his weight between his feet, seeming unsettled.

“Oh, I was just in the area again. I was wondering if you wanted to go for a walk, or maybe grab some breakfast.”

He was looking around him again as he spoke. She found his behaviour bizarre as of late, but couldn't quite put her finger on why.

“I've already eaten.” Her answers were blunt and to the point.

The exact opposite of what his visit was.

“I have a latte for you. Can I come in?”

She sighed, “I guess so, but I have some errands I need to run soon, so I'm not free for too long.”

“Right.”

He brushed past her as she held the door open for him. Henry was dancing around his legs, waiting for scratches and pets.

She needed to remind herself later to research if you could train a dog not to like another person.

“Okay, okay, one second, let me put the drinks down, and then I'll pet you.”

Derek put the two coffee cups on the bench in the front hallway as Henry read the situation and eagerly jumped up his legs.

Derek was laughing as he tried to calm him down, but it was too late, and Henry's tail knocked over one of the cups.

Thankfully the lid was on pretty tight, and mostly stayed on, but liquid still leaked all over the bench and onto the floor.

“Oh shit, Henry, you big oaf!” Derek reached over as quickly as he could and righted the toppled coffee cup.

“I'll go grab a towel.” Adrianna sighed as she bent down to pick up the two cups and bring them somewhere safe.

Derek gently pushed Henry to the side and moved the bench out of the way to give Adrianna access to clean the latte that had

leaked between the bench and the wall.

“Oh shoot, Adrianna, you have some papers that have fallen down here.”

He started picking the papers up and inspecting the level of importance of each document and how damaged they were.

“What was that?” Adrianna called back, but he was too busy inspecting the papers to answer her.

A couple of the papers just looked like flyers, which he tossed back onto the bench, but one of the other documents caught his eye.

It was a thank you card that was now dripping wet with the spilled latte.

He opened the card to ensure the inside was safe.

Thankfully none of the writing had been damaged, and it was all legible.

Unfortunately, Derek continued reading the card, which was not meant for him.

“What the fuck is this?” he angrily asked Adrianna as she walked back with a towel.

“What is what?” She looked over at his hands, and her heart stopped as she realized it was the thank you card from Eric. She had lost track of it when she had come home the one night and never had a chance to read it.

“Wait, is this from the same Eric from work? The *grandpa*?”

Adrianna quickly pulled the card from his grasp, shaking her head at his use of the word ‘grandpa.’

“This is none of your business.”

“It sure as fuck is.”

Her jaw dropped.

“It isn’t, and also, you cannot speak to me that way.”

He was glaring at her now, his arms crossed indignantly across his chest.

“It is my business, and I will speak to you however I want when you’re making stupid decisions.”

She rolled her eyes at him.

“The guy is a *creep*, Adrianna. Not to mention you could lose your license for seeing him.”

Realization washed over his face as he glared at her narrowly.

“Did you just come back from his place? Is that where you were last night?”

Goosebumps started rippling up her spine in warning.

“How do you know I wasn’t here last night? Are you *spying* on me?”

He made himself look insulted as he said, “I’m not *spying*. I’m checking up on you to make sure you’re okay, and I guess I haven’t been doing a good job since you’re acting like you’re out of your fucking mind.”

Her happiness bubble pierced suddenly and filled her with rage.

“Since when do you give a shit about what I do?”

She was taking angry steps toward him, forcing him to step back.

“I’ve always cared about you, don’t turn this into something else.”

The rage was building inside of her. All of the feelings she had packed down, all of the words she never said to him, all of the tears she held back at work so that she could remain ‘professional in the workplace.’

She could feel it bubbling from deep inside her, and the only way to manage it was to let it all out.

“Care?! CARE?!”

She took another step towards him.

“Adrianna, take it down a notch. You’re acting irrationally.”

She pointed her finger and jabbed him in the chest with it.

“Did you *care* when I told you I was having contractions and had started bleeding? No. Did you *care* when you dropped me off in the emergency department and left me alone while I birthed our sick child? No. Did you *care* when I was sick in the hospital and had nobody to tell me how my baby was doing in the NICU? No!”

She raised her voice to full volume by the end and didn't care if anyone heard her screaming.

There was a sick urgency in her voice that Henry picked up on. He dutifully marched over to her and stood protectively by her side.

“You're so dramatic! You make it seem like I wasn't there at all, and the whole thing only happened to you. Oh, poor Adrianna - it's always about *you*. You are so selfish, and all I am trying to do is help you become a better person.”

That was the last straw.

At the top of her lungs, she let out the remainder of what she was holding inside and screamed, “Get the fuck out of here, Derek!”

Derek looked surprised at her emotion and put his hands up in resignation, except he swung them a little too closely to Adrianna, and Henry took the opportunity to lunge and bite his hand in defence.

“What the fu-” Derek yelled as he took a step back to assess the damage.

Thankfully Henry hadn't broken the skin, and it had only been a warning bite.

Henry was growling and holding the space between him and Adrianna.

“Stupid dog. I'm out of here.”

Adrianna was shaking with rage as she put a hand down and held Henry's collar so he wouldn't do any further damage.

“Oh, and Adrianna. I would be really careful about your relationship with the grandpa. It would be a shame if someone reported it.”

With that he left, scowling as he rubbed his injured hand.

Adrianna watched him leave, noticing again that he didn't have his car with him, but was walking away in the same direction as the previous night.



## ADRIANNA

Adrianna was still feeling unsettled after her earlier interaction with Derek. It was the evening now, but her nerves were still shot.

She poured herself a small glass of wine and decided to run a calming bath.

With a wine glass in hand, she made her way to the top of the stairs when she heard the doorbell ring.

Her mind instantly went to worrying that it was Derek with a grin on his face, letting her know he had reported her to the licensing board.

She had to keep telling herself that he didn't have proof of her relationship with Eric, and she never actually admitted anything to him.

She knew she should check the camera to see who was at the door, but she was too nervous to check her phone. She had left it in the living room earlier, so she wouldn't be tempted to check it. The last thing she needed was to read mean text messages from Derek.

She didn't even want to hear from Eric right now. She was worried her emotions were too raw, and she would possibly do or say something she didn't mean.

When she opened the door, she saw Carley standing nervously on the front step.

Not wanting to have a repeat of earlier with Henry, she closed the door behind her and stood in front of Carley on the step.

“Hey, Adrianna. I’m so sorry to disturb you. I’ve been trying to get in touch with you and was worried I was going to the wrong house.”

Adrianna was not in the mood for niceties and took a sip of her wine.

“What do you want, Carley?”

She was nervously shifting her weight from foot to foot. “Can we sit?”

Adrianna sighed. “Alright then, I guess you can come inside. Did you want a glass of wine?”

“No, I can’t, but thank you.”

Adrianna heard the word ‘can’t’ and looked around to see if she had driven to her place, but didn’t see any cars parked on the street.

Carley picked up on Adrianna’s question and offered additional information.

“I walked here. I just live around the corner.”

Adrianna narrowed her eyes briefly, considering, and then opened the front door.

She didn’t know she lived so close.

“I have some chairs in the backyard. Why don’t we sit outside?”

Carley nodded and followed Adrianna inside.

“Your place is super cozy.”

Adrianna nodded at her and continued to the backyard, opening a screen door to let Carley through it.

She was wearing a cute little summer dress and was putting her hands awkwardly on her stomach as she sat down on the patio furniture.

At one time, they had been friendly colleagues, but that changed when she found out that she and Derek were secretly seeing each other.



Adrianna sat in the chair across from her and took another sip of wine, looking at Carley.

“I didn’t know that you knew where I lived.”

Carley looked uncomfortable and looked down at her hands when she spoke, “Derek told me, sort of.”

“That’s kind of an odd thing to tell you, don’t you think?”

“Well, when you two were still together, we sometimes would, uhm, meet outside your place when you were sleeping off your night shifts.”

Adrianna looked at her in astonishment. “Why are you telling me this?”

Carley looked uneasy and leaned forward to speak softly to Adrianna.

“So, Adrianna. I came here today because I want to come clean about some things.” She took a deep breath and looked like she was about to cry.

“Is this all because you and Derek broke up? Because honestly, it’s in the past now, so I don’t really need to know any of this.”

Carley looked up at her, eyebrows furrowed. “Broken up? Where did you hear that?”

Adrianna was worried she was getting too deep into the drama between them and waved her hand. “My mistake. I thought I had heard that somewhere.”

She wasn’t sure why she was trying to save Derek in this conversation, but she told herself it was because she didn’t want to get involved in their relationship.

“No, we aren’t broken up.” She looked around again nervously. “Quite the opposite of that, actually.”

She put her hand up and showed Adrianna an elegant engagement ring on her finger.

Adrianna shook her head, confused. “I’m sorry, Carley. Why are you showing up unannounced at my house to tell me that you’re engaged to my ex-fiancé?”

She hated labelling him as such, but it was the truth.

“I’m sorry. I’ll try and get to the point.” She took another deep breath and started fanning herself with her hands, her blond curls blowing slightly as she did so.

“I just wanted to say that I respect you, and I am sorry for how things started with Derek. It wasn’t my intention to hurt you. It all sort of happened so quickly between us, and it was cowardly to do it all behind your back. For that, I truly am sorry.”

“As I said - it’s fine. That’s all in the past now.”

She nodded, swallowing hard. “Which is why I wanted to come to you first to let you know about the engagement and the other announcement we are making next Friday.”

Adrianna raised her eyebrows at her.

“I just don’t want you to be blindsided again. It wouldn’t be fair to you.”

“What’s the other announcement?” Adrianna was hoping she was going to say that Derek had taken a new position in another country and was leaving next week forever.

“Next Friday, we are going to announce that I am officially twelve weeks pregnant.”

Adrianna stared at Carley, taking a moment to process what she was saying.

“I’m sorry - you’re announcing you’re pregnant, or you’re exactly twelve weeks pregnant next Friday?”

“Both, actually.” Carley was looking at her sympathetically, and it was making her angry.

Adrianna furrowed her brow thoughtfully. “What’s the date next Friday?”

Carley bit her lip, looking like she didn’t want to answer. “June ninth.”

Adrianna just about dropped her wine glass and had to set it down with trembling fingers.

“Are you saying that you’re exactly twelve weeks pregnant on June ninth?”

“Yes.” Carley looked scared as the realization washed over Adrianna’s face.

“That was my due date. It was exactly twelve weeks before that I gave birth to Violet. That means that –” she took a deep breath, “your pregnancy was consummated on the night I was in the hospital delivering my premature baby?”

“I’m so sorry, Adrianna. I just – well, I wanted to tell you, and Derek was telling me to leave you alone. I didn’t want it to come out and you to find out and be alone and-” her voice cracked as she whispered, “I’m sorry.”

Adrianna stood up and took the rest of her wine in a big gulp.

“You know what, Carley? That’s fine.”

She stood up, and watched as Carley also stood. If she looked hard enough, she could see the small pregnant bump underneath her dress.

“I’ll show you out.”

Carley nodded and followed Adrianna to the front door.

“Adrianna, I just want you to know that I truly am sorry, and I’m trying to do the right thing this time.”

Adrianna nodded and opened the front door for Carley to leave.

She was seething as she stared down Carley, who was now wide eyed and looked terrified.

“I think the two of you are absolutely perfect for each other.”

She slammed the door and went upstairs to draw her bath.

She had enough of today and just wanted to be alone.

# Chapter 27

## ERIC

It was Monday, and Eric was irritated that he was getting nowhere with finding a nanny.

Miranda was back to work, and he had to take more time off.

He was exhausted from the lack of sleep and was disheartened that Elliott had never tried to reach out to him. Unfortunately, due to his incarceration, Eric had no way to communicate with him, and it was up to Elliott to make contact.

He also hadn't had the energy to go for a morning run in what felt like weeks, and now that it was just him and Oliver, he wouldn't be able to until Oliver was old enough to go in a running stroller.

He hadn't heard much from Adrianna since she spent the night and was worried she was rethinking things between them.

Today would also be the first time he took Oliver to a medical appointment alone.

Miranda had offered to come but ended up having a meeting she couldn't reschedule and promised to meet him at the hospital afterwards.

Eric put Oliver in the car seat as he screamed. He had been trying to calm him down for the past hour, but nothing was working.

Eric's nerves were fried, and he felt like he was in fight or flight mode constantly.

He was in survival mode.

A part of him felt angry with Adrianna. The push and pull between them was getting exhausting, and after the last push, he was feeling abandoned.

The last straw of the morning was that he was now out of time to get to their appointment, and would have to take Oliver in the car as he screamed.

Hopefully, the drive would calm him down, and he could sleep on the way.

He tried one last attempt to give Oliver the soother as he put the car seat in the back of the car, but Oliver spit it out as he let out a big cry.

Thankfully, after five minutes of white-knuckle driving, Oliver eventually settled, and they made it to the appointment alive, although exhausted.

When they finally saw the physician, who thankfully wasn't Dr. Cook, he let them know how fussy Oliver was being as of late.

He was expecting the morphine orders to be increased and was surprised when the physician told him that Oliver was now acting like a normal baby and no longer needed any morphine.

"This is normal?" he asked again, needing to be told a second time to confirm he was hearing her correctly.

The doctor gave him a sympathetic smile and let him know that her babies did the same also.

"Is it colic?"

She gave a friendly laugh. "Nope, just normal baby stuff."

He sighed, and she gave him a gentle pat on the shoulder. "You're doing great, Dad. Don't worry. It will get better, I promise."

He gave a weak smile and put Oliver back in his car seat.

Miranda showed up as the doctor left the room.

"Oh great, I found you. What did they say?"

Eric relayed the information to her as they clipped Oliver into the car seat and got ready to bring him back to the car.

As they left the clinic and waited for the elevator, Dr. Cook came into the hallway and called out Eric's name, asking for a private word.

The elevator doors opened, and Eric motioned for Miranda to go ahead without him and handed her the car keys.

"I'll meet you and Oliver at the car."

Miranda looked back to Dr. Cook and then at Eric before finally nodding and taking the elevator to the first floor.

Dr. Cook brought Eric into a small room and shut the door behind them.

"Sorry for the abruptness, but I just wanted to talk to you on a personal level - if that's okay with you."

Eric raised his eyebrows and crossed his arms without saying anything.

"I just wanted to give you a heads up – or rather – a bit of a back story on Adrianna."

"Okay..." Eric was confused as to why this was coming up.

"I know that the two of you have become quite close from being in the NICU together, and I don't know what your relationship is outside of work, but-"

Eric cut him off, "There is no relationship outside of work."

Dr. Cook let out a sigh of relief. "Oh, that's good then."

"Why?"

Dr. Cook leaned against the small table in the room, pausing as he tried to find the best words.

"Adrianna is a lovely person, but she has some issues that she is working through. I have known her for many years through the NICU, and as much as I trust her judgment as a colleague, she has been known to develop inappropriate relationships outside of work."

Dr. Cook stopped looking at his hands and made direct eye contact with Eric.

“I heard some stories about her and chose not to believe them. We ended up going on several dates last year, and then the truth came out.”

Eric was getting impatient now and cleared his throat.

Dr. Cook sensed the urgency to finish his story and continued.

“As I said, we went on a couple of dates, and then suddenly she was telling me that she was pregnant and we were having a baby – and none of it was true.”

Eric’s posture changed, but he was still hesitant to believe him.

“She believed it to be true, which made it very hard on both of us. I tried to end things amicably, but it was quite difficult, and she needed to take some time off work to recover.”

Eric acknowledged his story with a nod but still said nothing.

“I agreed to continue working with her, but it became increasingly difficult because she was in such a fragile state. She continued to believe that she lost a child, and that’s when she began seeking out parents in the NICU – I assume as a way to connect with their babies and fill this void she felt.”

The exhaustion Eric felt was hitting him harder now, and he was feeling frustrated. He didn’t know what to believe, but it wasn’t this story from Dr. Cook.

“She is even lactating - I’m not sure if you know this.”

Eric’s tired brain was having trouble comprehending. “If that’s the case that she is, how do you possibly do that without having been pregnant?”

Dr. Cook became animated. “This is what I am talking about. She’s created this fantasy tragedy and even started medications and pumping to induce lactation. It’s quite bizarre.”

Eric shook his head. “I didn’t think that was possible.”

Dr. Cook sighed empathetically. “It’s very sad. We feel for her in the NICU. She needs help.”

Eric’s mouth felt dry as he listened.

“After a few dates, she had invited me to her house and being naïve; I had gone. She showed me this nursery she had set up for this fictitious baby she thought we had.”

Eric’s palms were sweating. Could this all be true?

“I think she tries to find families to get close to them so she can live out this fantasy of hers to be a mother.”

Eric had been leaning against a wall and then stood up straight. “And why should I believe you?”

Dr. Cook put his hands up in resignation. “Listen, you don’t have to. But it’s in your best interest to do so.”

“Uh-huh, and what about the other day when I saw you leaving the hospital with her? You didn’t look too scared of her then.”

Dr. Cook raised his eyebrows, “That’s the perfect example of what I am talking about. I found her in her office, basically on the floor, saying she needed my help to get home. I had a moment of weakness and decided to take her home. She asked me to help her to her bedroom and then tried to take advantage of me.”

Eric wasn’t sure he believed this part and rolled his eyes.

“If you don’t believe me, then go see for yourself. If you’re at her house, and she has white bedsheets with little roses on them and a men’s size white T-shirt that she’s sleeping in – that will confirm what I’m telling you.”

“Men’s T-shirt?”

“Yes. I had to leave without my shirt just to get out of there. She said she needed it to sleep and wouldn’t give it back.”

Eric turned to leave. He had just about enough of this conversation

“Eric, just be careful with her. She’s not well. I wouldn’t want her to try and manipulate herself into your home – it



would be the perfect opportunity to play mommy.”

“Thank you for your time, Dr. Cook. I’ll keep it in mind.”

“Just do yourself a favour and don’t let her know where your security equipment is. The last thing you need is her showing up unexpectedly, or worse yet, taking Oliver all together.”

Eric left the small room to go and meet Miranda and Oliver at the car.

He didn’t want to believe Dr. Cook but some of what he was saying was making too much sense for him to shrug it off.

He knew there had been something between her and Dr. Cook, and she had been ill a couple of times since he met her.

And most recently, she had asked him where his security cameras were at the house – after showing up unexpectedly.

Eric’s head was spinning, and the more he thought about everything, the angrier he felt.

Was she using him?

All she ever did was talk about Oliver – but that was her job. She did seem to hold a special place for him – but he had thought that was endearing.

The thought that kept coming back to him was that even if Dr. Cook was making up everything – he still saw them leaving the hospital together.

That would mean she tried to be with Dr. Cook right before he had been intimate with her at her house.

He knew they weren’t exclusive – and in reality, they weren’t anything right now - but he felt betrayed.

He felt used, like she was only with him because of Oliver. Like she lied to him about Dr. Cook.

Like she lied about everything else.

By the time he got back to the car and saw Miranda – he was fuming.

“What’s wrong?” Miranda asked, concern written in the lines across her forehead.

“He told me some things about Adrianna. I just don’t know what to think. I need to speak with her.”

Miranda looked stunned. “That’s so unprofessional. What did he say? Why would he tell you anything?”

Eric shook his head. “I don’t know. I don’t want to repeat anything in case he’s making it up – but I can’t let it go. I need to talk to her.”

Miranda put her hand cautiously on his arm. “You’re angry, Eric. I get it. Let’s get home, and then you can figure something out from there.”

Eric took a deep breath.

He knew she was right. He was running off no sleep, and his world had just been flipped upside down by both Oliver and Dr Cook.

Within a few minutes, they were back at his place and parked in his driveway.

Eric looked in the backseat at Oliver, who was sleeping again. He was so innocent and so sweet. He couldn’t let anyone get close to him and potentially hurt him or try and take him away.

“I have to speak with her,” Eric said to Miranda as she pulled the car seat out.

“What? Eric, I really think you should take a pause here. Who knows what the story is. Take a deep breath and then ask her when you’re not so emotional.”

“I can’t. If it involves Oliver’s safety, then I can’t wait.”

Miranda shrugged her shoulders and opened the car door on the passenger side. “Just promise me you will *ask* her and not *accuse* her of whatever Dr. Cook is saying she did.”

“Okay.”

Miranda closed the door, and Eric left.

As he was driving, he was picturing her pulling Dr. Cook's shirt over his head in her bedroom, and it was making his chest hurt.

Within minutes he was at her place and parked on her street.

Angrily he got out of the car, slamming the car door.

He needed answers, and he needed them now.

He knew Adrianna was home because he could see her car in the driveway.

Angrily he stomped up the front steps and knocked on the door. When he didn't hear a response from inside, he impatiently knocked again.

He thought he heard a voice telling him to come in, so he opened the door and looked inside.

Adrianna was sitting on the couch, attached to what looked like a breast pump.

She looked startled, and almost dropped her phone out of her hands. The phone she was receiving his text messages on and choosing to ignore.

"Is everything okay?" She leaned forward and began removing the flanges from the pump off her breasts, putting them on the coffee table in front of her.

"I need to speak with you. Now."

She seemed taken aback. "You're scaring me. Is everything okay? Is Oliver okay?"

Anger sparked in his chest at the mention of Oliver.

"Don't worry about Oliver right now." He was glaring at her, his temper taking over any rational thought.

"Okay, did you want to sit down? You look quite upset right now."

"I need to see your bedroom."

She stood up from the couch. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me."

She walked over to him. “I don’t understand why you’re here or what you need, but you can’t simply come into my house and demand to invade my privacy.”

Eric wasn’t listening and walked up her stairs to find her bedroom.

He walked into the open door at the end of the hall, and the first thing he saw was her white bed sheets with red roses on them.

Folded neatly on one side of the bed was a men’s white T-shirt.

He angrily grabbed the shirt and turned around to show her. She had followed him up the stairs and was standing behind him.

“Does this shirt belong to Dr. Cook?”

She grabbed the shirt from him and furrowed her brow. “How do you know that?”

He huffed and walked down the hallway toward the closed door.

She quickly stepped in front of him and stood between him and the closed door.

“I think you should leave.”

“Why? What are you hiding?”

Adrianna jutted her chin towards him, not backing down. “I am not hiding anything. *You* are being inappropriate, and I am asking *you to leave*.”

Eric saw the handle between her arms and took the opportunity to thrust his hand at her side and open the door.

The sudden jerking of the door opening behind her made her lose her balance momentarily, and she awkwardly stumbled into the room.

Eric looked around the room at the nursery. The perfect crib, the perfectly organized diapers next to a change table, the matching rocking chair in the corner.

“Oh my god, it is true.”

Adrianna looked distressed and stood in the open doorway as Eric fully walked in.

“What the fuck is this, Adrianna?”

Tears started streaming down her face as her lips trembled.

“You’re sick, you know that?” Eric was spewing words at her now and didn’t care that she was crying.

“I wasn’t ready to tell you yet.”

Eric huffed. “You need help, seriously. This is crazy.”

He started walking away from her and then turned around, glaring at her.

“Don’t even *think* about coming around me and Oliver again. I don’t need you trying to play out your mommy fantasies with him. He’s an innocent child.”

The last words he said as he left were, “Shame on you.”

Eric then got into his car and sped off to his house as Adrianna collapsed in tears on the floor of the nursery.

When he pulled into his driveway, his hands were shaking with adrenaline and anger.

He took a minute to breathe and then went in to see Miranda and Oliver.

He wasn’t ready to talk about what happened yet, but eventually he would need to break the news to Miranda that Adrianna was no longer welcome at his home.

## Chapter 28

### ERIC

Later that evening, Marc stopped by with some beers and food.

The first thing he asked was about Adrianna.

Eric didn't want to talk about her, so he just simply told him that Adrianna wasn't welcome back.

"Oh? That's a shame. She's a really nice girl. I've been invited to continue playing on her soccer team for now. Poor girl, it's been a rough year for her."

Eric mumbled in understanding and took a gulp of the beer Marc had brought over.

"Seriously, she's tough. Not many women come back to sports so quickly after having a baby, but apparently, she was there right after her six-week follow-up. My wife wouldn't have been able to do that."

Eric looked at him sharply from the corner of his eye. "What did you just say? Adrianna doesn't have a child."

Marc swallowed his sip of beer. "I know. She lost the baby in the third trimester."

Eric grabbed Marc by the shoulder. "What else do you know?"

Marc shrugged off Eric's grip. "Relax, man. I don't really know much, just that it was with some doctor she was engaged to at the hospital. Apparently he was cheating on her and was with the other woman when Adrianna was in the hospital with the baby."

"Who told you this?" Eric's heart was in his throat.

"Her teammates. She keeps that stuff pretty private, so nobody knows the full story, but the baby was in the NICU for a bit before it died, so all of her colleagues knew what was happening with her. Awful stuff, man."

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.” Eric leaned over with his elbows on his thighs and covered his face with his hands.

“What’s going on? I thought you would have known all of this about her.”

Eric shook his head. “No, and you’ll never guess what I did today.”

He went on to explain what he had done as Marc’s mouth dropped in horror.

“Dude - that’s bad. Really bad.”

“I know. How do I fix it?”

Marc stood up and grabbed Eric another beer, handing it to him. “I don’t think you can.”



## **ERIC**

In a panic, Eric and Marc called Miranda, and she came over straight away.

“Where’s my beer?” she asked as she joined them in the living room.

Marc was about to say it was in the fridge but thought better of it and walked to grab her one.

“I told you to ask her what happened,” she chided.

“I know, I know you did.”

“Why didn’t you tell me what you were thinking? I could have told you that nothing was going on between them. I overheard their phone call the one day, and she didn’t seem too happy about him calling and checking in on her.”

“I was overheated and not thinking.”

Marc was back with a beer and handed it to Miranda.

They huffed in agreement that Eric had not been thinking properly – if at all.

“Did you really tell her to stay away from you and Oliver?”

Eric looked guiltily down at his hands.

“I don’t think you can do anything but apologize and fully expect her to never speak to you again.” Miranda was pointing her beer at him as she spoke.

“I’m an idiot.”

“Why did you think she had breast milk? Didn’t you question that?” Miranda wasn’t going easy on Eric, but he deserved it.

“I wasn’t really thinking about it, to be honest. I just thought maybe she had a medical condition, or it was a side effect of working with babies full time.”

Miranda looked at both of them with her hands planted firmly on her hips. “Well, that’s just dumb.”

Eric didn’t have to say anything for her to see that he agreed with her.

“Has anyone even checked on her since this happened?”

Marc and Eric both shook their heads.

“Boys don’t think. I’ll be back.”

Miranda put her unfinished beer down and got into her car.

All she could think of was poor Adrianna, alone at home and accused of something so awful.



## ADRIANNA

Adrianna’s eyes were swollen from crying. She had picked herself up off the floor, and was now downstairs on her couch, snuggled up to Henry.

She had no idea why Eric was so angry at her for not telling him about Violet, but assumed he was likely more angry about Derek’s shirt.



He must have found out about Derek spending the night, and Miranda likely told him.

Her phone vibrated to notify her that someone was at the door.

Henry jumped off the couch at the sound of the doorbell ringing, and Adrianna answered to find Miranda at the door, shivering from the cold rain.

“Can I come in?”

Adrianna didn’t say anything but just opened the door widely so that Miranda could step inside.

“I didn’t know it was supposed to rain today until I got in my car to get here, and it just started pouring.”

Adrianna gave her a nod and sat down on the couch.

She wasn’t sure how to feel about Miranda right now.

She couldn’t really be mad at her for relaying information to Eric. They were best friends, after all.

“Can we talk about what happened today? Eric told me.”

Adrianna stood up as Miranda sat down.

“I’ll make tea for us. You just wait here.” She looked at Miranda, who was sitting on the couch in soaked clothes. “I’ll get you a towel and a warm sweater.”

Moments later, Adrianna walked in with a towel and an oversized sweater. As Miranda dried off, Adrianna retrieved the warm teas from the kitchen.

“Careful, it’s hot.” She said as she placed them on the coffee table.

“Are you okay?” Miranda was leaning forward, looking concerned.

“No.”

“I just want you to know that Eric is usually very level-headed. I think he’s just out of sorts with lack of sleep.”

“Uh-huh.”

“He told me what happened, and I just think you should know that he got some terrible information and just saw red.”

Adrianna looked over at Miranda without emotion on her face. “I know your reasons for telling him that Derek spent the night, but I wish the information could have come from me.”

Miranda looked grief stricken. “Oh honey, is that what you think this is about?”

Adrianna looked confused. “That and I kept from him that I had lost a child. I don’t like talking about it.”

Miranda couldn’t help herself and rushed over and enveloped Adrianna in her arms.

“You don’t have to tell anyone anything you don’t want to, okay? And we don’t have to talk about it. I just need you to know that I am here if you need me.”

Adrianna was confused.

“Okay? That’s very sweet of you.”

“Listen, this morning, Dr. Cook pulled Eric aside and told him all of these horrible and untrue things about you. I won’t repeat them, but just know that for whatever reason, Eric believed them and thought that you were a danger to Oliver.”

Adrianna opened her eyes wide.

“Dangerous to Oliver? Me?” Her voice squeaked at the end.

Miranda nodded. “Eric is mortified by how he acted and would be here himself, but was worried he would cause you more stress if he just showed up.”

She nodded in response and closed her eyes. This was just all too much.

“I called my brother, and I’m going to Australia for a month.”

“Oh.”

“I leave in a couple of weeks. I just need to take some time to myself, and things keep happening to me here,” her voice cracked, “and it’s getting to be too much.”

In perfect timing, Henry came over and gently put his head on Miranda’s lap.

“What about this guy? Is he going with you?” Miranda looked at Henry lovingly and started petting his soft ears.

Adrianna shook her head. “I just got off the phone with my brother, so I haven’t had a chance to figure that out yet.”

“I can watch him for you, if you would like.”

Adrianna smiled, blinking away tears. “That would be lovely.”

She put her hand on Adrianna’s knee. “Would it be okay if Eric contacted you?”

Adrianna shook her head again. “Not right now. Maybe not ever.”

Miranda gave her a weak smile in understanding.

“Why don’t we sip our teas and order some food, and you can or cannot tell me anything else that is bothering you.”

Adrianna gave a slight nod and leaned back on the couch.

Food would be good right now.

“I’m just going to message Eric and let him know that he should refrain from contacting you because if I don’t, I think he’s going to break the door down to speak with you.”

Adrianna wanted to say out loud that she seriously doubted that but chose to remain quiet. She carefully sipped her hot tea as Miranda typed on her phone quickly and then put the phone away to give Adrianna her full attention.

“Even if I could forgive Eric, it could never work. Dr. Cook knows about us and threatened to report me to the licensing board.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s for the best anyways. It clearly wasn’t meant to be.”

Miranda just shrugged in response.

“Let’s order food. What are you in the mood for?”

## Chapter 29

### ADRIANNA

Adrianna stepped into the humid air and let the sunshine warm her face.

It was a beautiful day, and although she was gloomy inside, the outdoors was easing her feelings.

Today was her due date and also the date she had to renew her neonatal resuscitation certificate at the hospital.

She would have rescheduled, but it was a good day for the distraction. It was also a day of celebration because even though she didn't have Violet in her belly or her arms, she had pumped until her due date, as she had hoped.

In total, she had donated sixty litres of breast milk to neonates across the province.

She was planning to slowly wean down her supply to eventually stop and give herself a break from pumping.

This way, she could travel to Australia in a week without worrying about pumping as she travelled.

She made her way to the hospital and to the elevators to take her up to the fourth floor, where the NICU was located. Her exam would be in one of the training rooms across the hall. It would be nice to see her colleagues again.

As she pressed the button for the elevator, she thought she heard her name being called, and turned around to see Eric and Oliver behind her.

He had messaged her several times throughout the week, but she hadn't replied.

She chose to ignore him and walked into the elevator, making sure to push the 'close door' button quickly so he wouldn't be able to jump in.

Eric made it to the elevator just as it was closing and jugged his foot in between the doors so that they opened back up.

“Hey.” He smiled at her as he stepped inside.

She looked away from him and leaned on the metal wall as she waited for the doors to close again.

“I didn’t know you would be here today.” He tried again to speak to her, but she wasn’t in the mood.

“What floor do you want?” she asked dryly while staring at the numbers on the panel.

“Fifth, please.”

She hit the button for the fifth floor and sighed in relief when the elevator doors finally closed.

“Can we talk?”

The elevator whirred as it powered up, and she imagined it lifting them closer to the fourth floor, where she could finally make her escape.

When she didn’t answer, he stepped in front of her and hit the ‘stop’ button, which lit up when he pressed it.

She looked at him in anger. “You’re not supposed to press that, and I’m going to be late if I don’t get off this elevator in the next five minutes.”

She pressed to release the button, but it stayed lit, and the elevator remained stalled.

“Great,” she muttered in frustration. She was angry and didn’t have time for this nonsense. He had hurt her enough by the way he spoke to her. The last thing she wanted to do was to be trapped in a small space with him.

“Did you break it?” She was losing her patience as she repeatedly hit the button.

“Wouldn’t that be great if I did?” He had a childish smile on his face that did not impress her.

“Do you think this is funny or something?” She had her arms across her chest as she glared at him.

“No, I’m sorry.” The smile dropped from his face. “Here, I’ll turn it off, and you won’t be late.”

He pressed the glowing button again, but nothing happened.

“I tried that already. Did you think you would press it differently than I did?”

He laughed and nervously ran his fingers through his hair. “Maybe.”

“Well, that’s just dumb.”

He turned towards her, keeping his distance out of respect.

“You’re right, and I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for breaking the elevator or acting like an asshole?”

“Both.”

She rolled her eyes and moved to the back of the elevator, leaning against the back wall.

“If you broke the elevator, I hope you know that this hospital is absolutely ancient, and we will be lucky to get out of here alive.”

This time he was the one to roll his eyes at her. “It’s all going to be fine.”

“I hope you brought food for Oliver.”

Eric’s face suddenly dropped as Oliver started stirring in the carrier. He dropped the black diaper backpack he had on and quickly rummaged through it.

“Shit.”

Adrianna smiled indignantly. “Shit is right.”

Eric quickly turned around and pressed the emergency button, which, to his surprise - only opened up a phone line to a tired-sounding operator.

*“Hello, my name is Emily. Do you need assistance?”*

Eric proceeded to tell the operator that they were stuck and what he had tried to do so far to get the elevator to work.

*“Thank you. Please remain calm. We will contact the on-call service to see when they can come out and check the elevator.”*

Eric was starting to get angry as he listened to her read off a script.

“There isn’t someone on site? That’s not acceptable. We need someone right now.” He looked at Adrianna in terror. “We have a small baby in here who needs food.”

The operator seemed unphased by this as Oliver started crying.

*“Please remain calm, sir. I am doing everything that I can to contact the on-call service. Please hold.”*

Oliver started fussing more, and Eric looked nervous. For a brief moment, Adrianna felt bad for him, but that quickly faltered when she remembered how he had told her to stay away from both of them.

“He’s not settling.” Eric’s concern was growing, and tiny beads of sweat started dripping off his forehead.

Adrianna raised her eyebrows but said nothing.

Eric removed Oliver from the carrier and was frantically bouncing him as his screams grew louder. The small space was making the screams sound even worse.

Eric pressed for the operator again, but nobody answered.

“Shit.”

Adrianna still said nothing.

“Could you hold him for a second while I double-check the bag?”

Adrianna could barely hear Eric because the screams were so loud. He frantically put a soother in Oliver’s mouth, and he quieted for a moment so she could talk to him.

“The last time I saw you, I believe the final words you said to me were, ‘Stay away from us, he’s just an innocent child.’”

Eric looked defeated. He turned around and pressed the operator again. Emily came on and gave an update that the on-call service would try to be there within three hours.

“Three hours?” Both Adrianna and Eric repeated her words at the same time.

This time it sounded like the operator went off script and let them know there was another elevator stuck in the building that was holding an injured individual, and they were taking priority.

Eric tried to soothe Oliver with the pacifier, but it wasn't working anymore. He turned around, and Adrianna could see tears streaking poor Oliver's face.

“Here, I'll take him while you check your bag.”

Adrianna sat down on the other side of the elevator as Eric passed Oliver to her. As soon as Oliver was safely in her arms, he turned around to recheck his bag.

She was having difficulty holding Oliver because he was pushing his head down into her chest.

“Anything?” she called out as she pushed Oliver's head back up again.

Eric turned around to face her and shook his head.

Oliver's screams were muffled as again he was pushing his head into her chest.

When she moved him out of the way again, she had two large wet spots on her shirt.

Eric looked at her and asked, “Is that your breasts leaking?”

Adrianna looked down as Oliver was frantically pushing his head back down to her chest.

She shrugged. “It is, yes.”

Eric came and sat down next to her. She was struggling to control him as he wiggled in her arms.

“You're going to have to take him again. I'm having trouble holding him.”

“Is he looking for breast milk?”

Adrianna's eyes went wide as she looked at him and then at Oliver. “Oh, right, I guess he is.”



She blushed. This was all so embarrassing.

Oliver moved down to her chest again and pinched her hard with his mouth, letting out a frantic wail that bounced off the walls and sent chills down her spine.

“I’m sorry if this is weird, but can he have some?” Eric was looking at her with a pale face.

She coughed as she looked at him and asked, “My breast milk?”

“Yes.”

She was about to say no when he let out another sorrowful cry.

“I’ve never done it before. I teach women all the time, but I don’t know how to do it myself.”

Oliver grabbed her shirt in his fury; his legs went rigid as he screamed.

It was hurting her heart to hear him cry, and she was willing to do anything to help him stop crying.

Eric grabbed Oliver momentarily as she lifted her shirt and adjusted her bra so that her one breast was free.

Eric brought Oliver back to her breast, where he instinctively opened his mouth wide until he met her nipple and latched on. Adrianna’s eyes widened as she felt a painful pull for a brief moment and then a tingle as her breast released milk.

Oliver was sucking so hard that she had to have Eric help hold him steady for her.

It only took him a few minutes of sucking before he began to slacken in their arms and slowly fell asleep. Anytime they thought he was done and they could remove him from her nipple, he would give a few gentle sucks as if he were trying to tell them to leave him be.

“Does it feel weird?” Eric asked as Adrianna looked down at Oliver, who was gently tugging at her nipple but wasn’t pulling milk as he slept.

“Sort of. Weird yet natural at the same time.” She laughed as she looked down at Oliver again and then met Eric’s gaze. “It’s hard to explain.”

He smiled and leaned against the wall, briefly closing his eyes before looking back at her. “You saved him again.”

She huffed, “I hardly think this counts as saving him.”

He looked at her with his brows furrowed in confusion. “Why wouldn’t it?”

She was about to protest but then didn’t actually have a rebuttal planned.

He sat up straight and then turned his whole body to face her.

“For what it’s worth, Adrianna, I am incredibly sorry for how I behaved and the things that I said.”

She wasn’t sure what to say to him, so she chose to say nothing.

“I shouldn’t have listened to Dr. Cook, and I should have spoken to you first before accusing you.”

She nodded, her voice a soft whisper, “I thought you trusted me.”

“I did.” He put his hand on her knee. “I mean, I do.”

“I would never do anything to hurt you or Oliver.” Her throat felt tight as tears welled in the corner of her eyes.

He kept his hand on her knee while he hung his head for a brief moment. “I know. I should have known that.”

“I also never lied to you. I just wasn’t ready to tell you everything.”

He lifted his head and looked deep into her hazel eyes. “I also want you to know that I am so sorry for what happened to you.” He looked away for a second to gather himself. “Miranda told me what happened, and explained how you were donating breast milk to the NICU. I can’t imagine the pain of losing a child, and I’m just so sorry that it ever happened to you, and also that you had to face it alone.”

She blinked away tears. "I'm used to being alone."

Eric moved his hand from her knee and gently placed it on her cheek. "I don't want you to face things alone anymore."

Adrianna kept quiet as she considered his words. "Her name was Violet, and today was my due date."

Eric let his hand drop into hers, giving it a gentle squeeze as he told her that was a beautiful name.

"It was my grandmother's name."

He gave her hand another gentle squeeze.

"She would have loved to meet her. Sometimes I imagine that the two of them are waiting for me on the other side."

Oliver gave a sigh and popped off her nipple. Eric quickly scooped his limp body into his arms and gently pulled him onto his shoulder to burp him.

"I bet he is wondering why he doesn't get that all the time."

They both laughed nervously.

"Well, depending on how long it takes for us to get out of here, he might get it again."

Eric took a deep breath before asking her if it was true that she was going to Australia for a month.

Adrianna nodded. "I'm leaving in a week."

"Can I talk to you while you're there?"

She shrugged. "I'm not sure yet."

"That's better than a 'no.'" He had a big smile on his face, and she couldn't help but smile back.

"I didn't know you liked your glass half full."

He laughed. "I've decided to try it."

"Well, it looks good on you." She gently nudged him with her shoulder.

It ended up taking another three hours before help arrived.

Oliver had fed a total of three times from her and looked super pleased as they stepped off the elevator to a growing crowd of people clapping.

Word had spread that there was a baby in need, and a nurse from the hospital saved its life by breastfeeding.

Adrianna took a mental note that once you pressed the operator button, they could hear everything until they turned it off themselves.

She blushed thinking of all the things that the operator had overheard.

# Chapter 30

## ADRIANNA

One month later, Adrianna was stepping back onto Canadian soil. It was a long flight, and all she wanted to do was sleep.

Eric had offered to pick her up from the airport, but she had declined. It was three o'clock in the morning, and she was severely jet-lagged.

She turned her phone on as her taxi pulled up to take her home. Almost instantly, a message came from Miranda with a photo of her and Henry snuggled in bed for the night.

Unfortunately, she would have to wait another few hours to see him as she had planned to pick him up late in the morning from Miranda's place.

She missed him more than anything and couldn't wait to see him. Miranda had taken great care to send her daily photos of the fun adventures they went on during the last month.

There were quite a few photos with Oliver and Eric in them.

Eric had agreed to give her space while she was gone, but they had kept in touch almost daily despite the time change, and had made tentative plans to see each other when she came back.

The taxi dropped her off at her front step, where she found a letter and a newspaper article wrapped together.

She opened the letter when she stepped inside to find that it was just a printout of the contact information for her licensing bureau.

The newspaper article, however, was a picture of her and Eric getting off the elevator with the headline, 'Off Duty NICU Nurse Saves Baby A Second Time.'

Both her and Eric's names were circled in red pen.

They had both declined the interview, but unfortunately, enough bystanders were available to provide the correct information. The article printed their names and even the age of Oliver.

That had solidified her decision to leave the country and take some time alone for a few weeks.

Goosebumps prickled her skin as she looked back down at the newspaper article. There was only one person she knew who would send this warning to her.

Adrianna threw the papers onto the coffee table and carried her exhausted body upstairs to bed.

There was nothing she could do about it now.

The next morning, she was still tired, but the excitement of seeing Henry was enough to pull her out of bed early.

She messaged Miranda to let her know she was heading over and quickly stopped for lattes on the way.

Miranda's place wasn't far from Eric's, which wasn't surprising since they spent so much time together. She lived in a single home near the water.

It was a beautiful new build, and Adrianna was in awe as she walked up the front steps and knocked on the door.

The house was made up of large windows with dark wood and black steel accents. There was a wrap-around patio on the upper level that boasted various colourful flowers and lavish green plants.

It was an oasis.

Miranda opened the door quickly as Henry stuck his nose through her legs to investigate who was at the door.

When his nose picked up the scent of Adrianna, his excitement couldn't be contained, and he almost knocked over Miranda as he barged through her legs to escape the house.

Adrianna had to ask him to calm down repeatedly, but it didn't work. Eventually, the jumping was so powerful that she resorted to sitting on the front step so Henry could kiss her face as much as he wanted.

He was barking and whimpering intermittently as his tail wagged ferociously.

This was the most excited she had ever seen him. It was also the longest they had ever been apart.

When Henry finally calmed down enough to stop jumping, she was able to stand up and say hello to Miranda.

Miranda invited her in as Henry ran inside to grab a new toy he wanted to show off.

Adrianna handed a latte and a gift bag to Miranda, who exclaimed in surprise how thankful she was, and also how unnecessary it was to give her anything.

She opened the gift in front of her. It was a few trinkets from Australia with a bottle of their finest Moscato that she had picked up while there.

“Thank you again, Adrianna! This is just lovely.” She was reading the label of the Moscato. “I would open this now for us, but it’s a tad too early.”

Adrianna laughed, looking at her watch and seeing it was only nine in the morning.

“I guess we will just have to make plans again, then. Thank you, it’s very sweet of you to do this.” She gave Adrianna a big hug and then suddenly pulled back in alarm.

“Your arm! It’s out of the sling!”

Adrianna nodded and slowly moved it. “I’m not out of the woods yet, but it feels so good to finally not have to wear that thing.”

Miranda motioned for Adrianna to follow her upstairs to the upper patio.

It was now the height of summer, and the weather was perfect.

“Your place is absolutely gorgeous.”

Miranda nodded. “My father is an architect and built this place for me as a gift for graduating from law school.”

Adrianna raised her eyebrows at the word ‘gift.’ When she graduated from nursing school, she had not received anything from her parents.

They hadn’t even bothered to come to the ceremony.

Miranda laughed at Adrianna's facial expression. "Eric makes fun of me all the time for being spoiled."

Adrianna blushed. "Sorry, I didn't realize my facial expressions were so transparent."

"Speaking of Eric, have you two spoken since you came back?"

"No, I just landed early this morning and haven't really had a chance to message anyone." She looked down at her hands, knowing she was lying because it only took a couple of minutes to send a message.

"He misses you."

Adrianna looked back at Miranda, who had a severe look on her face.

She missed him also, but wasn't sure she could move past the words he had spoken to her when he was scared and angry.

She knew in her heart that she had already forgiven him, but she needed to see him in person to see how her feelings had evolved since they last saw each other.

"I miss him too, I'm just not sure if it feels right anymore."

Miranda put her hand out and placed it on Adrianna's.

"I get that. Just know that no matter what happens with the two of you, it won't affect our friendship, okay?"

Adrianna smiled and nodded in agreement.

It felt good to have a solid friend in her life.

She wanted to confide in her what she found on her doorstep, but didn't want to tell the entire backstory.

She knew she was pushing down her feelings again, but it was the only way she knew how to cope.

"Are you okay, though?"

"Yeah, just jet lagged."

Miranda gave her a look like she knew there was more than exhaustion behind her tired eyes, but thankfully left it alone.



“I’m going to miss this big guy. He’s been like a boyfriend the past few weeks.”

Miranda was leaning down and scratching behind Henry’s ears as he lay by her feet. He was panting slightly due to the heat, but also looked like he had a massive smile on his face. Adrianna was almost sorry to take him away from her.

“Would you ever get your own dog?”

Miranda shook her head. “I would love to, but with the long hours we work, I worry he would be alone too long.”

“Well, we will just have to share him then.”

Miranda had a big smile on her face.

“I would love that.”



## **ADRIANNA**

When Adrianna got home, she was still feeling unsettled about the paper that had been left on her front step.

She also had anxiety about seeing Eric again.

It was easy to be away from him when she was on another continent, but now that she was back, she felt the familiar pull to be close to him.

She was also missing Oliver. From the pictures she had seen of him lately, he had changed so much in just four weeks.

Oliver was now smiling and engaging with his environment. He remembered faces and had started grabbing for toys if they were within reach.

He was also sporting some of the cutest summer outfits she had ever seen. All she wanted to do was pick him up and kiss his little cheeks as many times as he would let her.

Eric had told her that he was only waking a couple of times at night now – just because he was hungry – and would promptly fall back asleep once he was full.

They were their own perfect family unit, and she couldn't help but feel left out of it.

When her doorbell unexpectedly rang, she felt the same sense of dread and anxiety as before she left for Australia.

This time she looked at her phone first to ensure it was a welcomed visitor.

Much to her surprise, it looked like Eric on her step.

Her heart skipped a beat as she rushed to the door. She was excited to see him but nervous at the same time.

She worried that Derek was around the corner, waiting for the perfect opportunity to take photos and report her. Or maybe he had already reported her, and she was about to receive a notice in the mail that she could no longer practice nursing.

Her head was spinning, and she hadn't opened the door yet.

She took a deep breath and reached for the handle.

She would simply let him in and tell him that he wasn't welcome – only that wasn't true either.

Another knock on the door startled her, and she decided to finally reach for the handle and open it.

When she opened the door, she saw Eric and Oliver on the front step. He had a big smile and a bag in his hands.

She must have had a startled look on her face as he started to explain why he was there. "Did you forget about tonight?"

Quickly she realized that they had lightly talked about having dinner tonight but had not made concrete plans.

"Oh, sorry. I did. Please, come in."

Eric walked in with the bag of food and placed it on the front bench.

"Am I disturbing you? I messaged you earlier to confirm plans, but I don't think you read them."

"Sorry, I'm just having an off day, I think. I put my phone away this morning and haven't really looked at it since."

He placed Oliver in his car seat on the floor, careful not to wake him. He looked over at her with concern in his eyes. “Is everything okay? Did you want to do a rain check?”

He walked over and cupped her face in his hands. “You look sad. Is it something that I did? Is there anything that I can do?”

“I think I might just need to be alone tonight, if that’s okay with you.”

Her bottom lip was trembling as she spoke. She tried to bite it down as a single tear escaped and trickled down her cheek.

“Did someone hurt you?”

She looked away from him, not wanting to talk about it.

He stood back and flexed his shoulders.

“Who?”

She looked away from him.

He stood firm and waited until she made eye contact before he asked again. “Who?”

She shook her head again.

“Was it that weasley doctor?”

She nodded, more tears trickling down her cheeks.

He sighed heavily and took her by the arm, leading her into the living room.

“Tell me what happened.”

She was about to shake her head again and regroup as she usually did.

Eric stood in the living room with her when something on the table caught his eye.

He grabbed the newspaper article and the letter with it, inspecting both carefully.

“When did you get this?”

“It was on my doorstep when I came home.”

“You think this is from Dr. Cook?”

She nodded, wiping the tears from her cheeks.

“Adrianna, I need to know what happened between you two. Let me help. I know you’re a strong woman, but that doesn’t mean you need to take the world on all by yourself.”

Suddenly the tears started falling, and she couldn’t stop them.

She ended up telling him everything. She told him how long they dated, their engagement, more details about the loss of their baby, and even about his pregnant fiancée down the street and her unexpected visit before she left.

Once she started talking, she finally tipped her heart over and let all her sadness spill out. The last thing she told him was about Derek visiting her often and how he had threatened her during their last interaction.

“And this all happened right before you left?”

She nodded.

“Shit, Adrianna, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay. You didn’t know.”

Eric sighed heavily and ran his fingers through his hair.

“It’s not okay. I should have been there for you – and instead, I ended up adding to everything.”

She couldn’t argue with him on that.

Eric grabbed her hands and pulled them into his lap.

“Adrianna, I know you might not believe me, but I need you to know that you are one of the most important people in my life. Even though I’ll never be able to make up for what I did, just know that I will never stop loving you.”

She looked up at him - his amber eyes set on hers.

“I love you, Adrianna, and I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you happy. I will do whatever it takes to prove that I will never break your heart again – if you trust me with it.”

Adrianna wasn’t sure how to respond and stayed silent.

“I’m also not going to let someone like Dr. Cook choose whether I can be with you or not.”

Letting go of her hands, he leaned forward and kissed her softly on her cheek.

He then stood up, and when he noticed the confused look on her face, he smiled at her.

“Whether you choose to be with me or not, I will be here. And as long as I am here, that means that Dr. Cook won’t be able to come anywhere near you. I promise you.”

He turned to walk away when she grabbed his hand quickly. “Are you leaving?”

He nodded. “Yes, and so are you.”

# Chapter 31

## ERIC

Eric held Adrianna tightly as she lay asleep in his arms. It had taken a lot to finally convince her that it was safest at his place for the night.

Her long brown hair was lying loose over his pillow and outstretched arm. Looking closely, he could see sun-kissed strands from her month away.

Without waking her, he gave her a gentle squeeze in his arms, just enough to convince himself that she was real and truly in his bed.

Not wanting to leave her but needing to check on Oliver, he gently rolled his arm off her to grab his phone on the bedside table.

On the monitor, he could see that Oliver was sleeping soundly in his crib.

It was Saturday morning, so he wouldn't have the assistance of his nanny until Monday.

Eric carefully pulled his arm out from underneath Adrianna and made his way to his office. He kept his phone with him so he could get to Oliver before his cries woke up Adrianna.

Sitting down at his laptop, he felt foggy and quickly realized that he needed coffee before anything else.

Walking downstairs, he was surprised by the smell of coffee already brewing, but once in sight of the kitchen, he knew why.

Miranda was standing in front of the cupboards, reaching up on the tips of her toes to grab something, but wasn't quite able to get it.

“What are you doing?”

Miranda startled and almost fell backwards as Eric walked behind and steadied her with his hand.

“Where's your pancake mix?”

“Why?”

She looked at him, annoyed. “So I can make pancakes? What else would I want with it?”

He rolled his eyes. “Are you making them in your own place?”

This time she nudged him playfully with her foot. “Why would I do that?”

He hung his head as he rubbed his eyes. “It’s too early for this.”

She had a big grin on her face. “Which is why I made coffee!”

Eric mumbled something that sounded like ‘great’ as he strode over to the coffee machine to pour himself a fresh cup.

“Seriously though, it’s like seven in the morning. What are you doing here?”

She looked down at her hands as she held them together tightly. “I heard creaking at my house.”

Eric waited for her to look up at him before he responded. “You know he can’t go near you, right? We filed the restraining order, and if he breached that – it would be career suicide.”

She nodded, looking down at her hands again. “It’s just,” she swallowed heavily but restrained herself from breaking into tears, “I always have this feeling like I’m being watched, and I don’t like being alone.”

Henry took the opportunity to trot in to see Miranda who exclaimed in excitement, “Oh, my favourite puppy is here!”

She started to pet him when she stopped suddenly and looked up at Eric. “Does this mean that Adrianna is here?”

Eric nodded as he took a sip.

“Have you guys talked? Is everything okay?”

He finished the last sip of his coffee and placed the mug down in front of him, studying the writing on it as he was thinking. “I think we are okay, but there’s more stuff going on right now that I need to take care of.”

Miranda nodded and grabbed a seat close to Eric.

“I saw her yesterday morning when she grabbed Henry, and something just seemed off.”

Eric proceeded to tell her about the letter they assumed came from Dr. Cook.

Miranda’s face was set in a scowl. “Oh, that little weasel!”

Eric laughed. “That’s exactly what I called him.”

“Well, he is a weasel. What are you going to do about it though?”

Eric stood up to grab another coffee. “I have an idea.”

“Is there any way I can help?”

Eric took a moment to consider her question as he poured his second cup.

“Actually – yes.”

Miranda clapped her hands together like she was squishing a pesky fly.

“Perfect.”

Eric walked over and enveloped Miranda in a big hug. “And as for the other issue, I won’t let him hurt you, and you can come over and stay here whenever you want, okay?”

“He tried to once before.”

Eric held her out at arm’s length, waiting for her to look up at him. “It won’t happen again, okay? Things are different now.”

She nodded. “Okay, thank you. Now, how do we take care of the weasel?”



## ADRIANNA

When Adrianna woke up, she was surprised to find herself alone. Even Henry was gone.



She checked the time and realized she had slept in quite late.

Hurriedly, she dressed and went downstairs to find Eric, except he wasn't anywhere to be found.

She looked for Oliver in the bassinet in the living room, but it was empty. Feeling confused, she went back upstairs and slowly opened Oliver's room to find neither of them were there either.

When she stepped into the hallway, she thought she heard voices coming from down the hall.

As she stepped closer, Henry burst out of the office and ran over to her excitedly.

"Good morning, my love! Do you want to go outside for a quick pee?"

"I took him out already," a woman's voice called out to her from the office.

Stepping inside, she saw Miranda and Eric sitting at his desk, both engrossed in a document he was writing up on his laptop.

Oliver was in Miranda's arms, sleeping soundly against her chest.

"What are you guys doing?" Adrianna asked in a whisper while peering over their shoulders.

"Taking care of business," Eric responded in a firm tone.

"Is that my name?" Adrianna pointed to the laptop screen, where she saw her name listed on a long document.

"Yes." Eric and Miranda both answered at the same time.

Adrianna felt like she was disturbing them and motioned to Miranda that she would take Oliver from her.

Miranda handed Oliver over, barely looking at Adrianna as she was occupied by what Eric was typing into the document.

"I'll see you guys downstairs in a bit."

Neither Eric nor Miranda answered her as she tiptoed out of the room.

She was sure they would tell her later, but until then, she would get some much-needed snuggles with Oliver.



## ADRIANNA

It was a couple of hours later when Eric and Miranda finally emerged from upstairs.

Adrianna had cooked lunch for everyone, and the smells of her cooking had wafted upstairs into the office.

They looked tired but cheerful when they came into the kitchen.

“Are you guys all done up there?”

They both nodded in unison.

Eric walked over and gave Adrianna a hug and a kiss on the cheek. “It smells delicious in here, thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I figured you guys would be hungry after you finished whatever you were doing up there.”

“We were doing what we should have done from the beginning,” Eric said as he sat down.

“What’s that?”

“Rodent control,” Miranda said with a smirk.

Eric laughed while Adrianna looked confused.

“I don’t get the joke.”

They proceeded to explain their plan, and then broke the news to her that there was one task she needed to do.

Adrianna immediately protested, “I can’t do that. No, I can’t.”

“It won’t work any other way.”

Adrianna bit her bottom lip in deep thought.

“Are we sure this is a good idea? What if it just makes him more upset?”

Eric and Miranda both huffed in response, with Miranda speaking next.

“Then we get angry.”

Adrianna sighed. There was no talking them out of it, so instead, she did what they asked of her and texted Derek, asking if he was free to see her tonight at her place.

It only took a couple of minutes for him to respond that he could be, and she continued the conversation asking him over for dinner.

“He said yes and is coming over at seven.” She put her phone on the table as her stomach twisted into a knot. “This better work.”



## ADRIANNA

Adrianna was back at her place and feeling nervous.

Derek was due to stop by any minute, expecting a dinner date with her.

It made her feel sick to her stomach that he was likely walking over from his pregnant fiancée’s place again – and she would have no idea where he was going.

“He’s such an ass,” she said aloud.

Miranda was beside her and burst out laughing. Her laugh was infectious, and Adrianna started laughing with her.

“I hate him.”

Miranda gave her a sympathetic nod. “I know you do.”

Adrianna was getting worried that they should call the whole thing off.

“What if this just angers him, and it doesn’t work?”

“The ball won’t be in his court anymore, so you have to accept that he’s going to be angry at you regardless of what happens tonight.”

She knew Miranda was right.

There was a knock on the door, and Miranda quickly went to hide in the kitchen.

Adrianna wiped her sweaty palms on her pants and slowly opened the door.

Derek had a big grin on his face as he stepped inside.

His grin faltered slightly when he looked around for Henry.

“He’s outside in the backyard.”

Derek’s grin returned, and he continued into her place. It bothered her that he walked in like everything was happening exactly as he wanted.

“Did you want to sit in the living room? I thought we could have a quick chat.”

“Sure.”

He made his way into the living room and sat down while Adrianna offered to grab drinks for them.

Instead of Adrianna bringing drinks out, it was Miranda who held the drinks in her hand and sat quietly next to Derek on the couch.

She looked both elegant and sexy in her black skirt and loose white dress shirt. She had the top two buttons undone in a casual fashion, and was wearing a long gold necklace that disappeared into the depth of her shirt.

He looked confused as she calmly handed him a cool glass and then clinked it with hers and said, “Cheers.”

She took a sip while maintaining eye contact with him the entire time.

His eyes roamed her body uncomfortably as he took a sip of his drink and then looked around for Adrianna. “Is this some sort of a special night you ladies wanted or something?”

Miranda smiled and relaxed into the couch, crossing her long legs as she coolly smiled back.

“You could say that.”

Derek took another sip of his drink and placed it on the coffee table. He reclined like he was expecting the night of his life

when Miranda put her own drink down in front of her and said, “Oh, silly me. I forgot the most important part.”

She turned and grabbed a document from the side table.

Derek looked confused as she handed it to him.

“What’s this? Some sort of an agreement or something?”

His brows furrowed as he slowly read the document.

“Oh, fuck this shit. I’m out of here.”

He rose to stand, but when he looked to the door to leave, he saw Eric blocking the door frame.

“I suggest you sit,” Eric said in a commanding tone.

“Or what?” he snidely responded. “Are you going to hurt me or something?”

Eric just remained in front of the door and said nothing.

“If you even *think* of touching me, I will press charges so fast your head will spin.”

He went to open the door, but Eric stood still, casually responding by saying, “Sure, you could do that. But that won’t erase the pain of a broken face while you’re waiting for the cops to arrive.”

“You wouldn’t fucking dare.” Derek’s face was flushed with anger as he stared up at Eric, who had at least a couple of inches of height on him.

“Try me.” Eric crossed his arms on his chest and leaned against the door, unmoving.

Adrianna felt the need to interrupt and stepped in.

“Derek, can you please just sit, and we can talk this out?”

Derek let out a wicked laugh as he looked around the room at all of them.

“You guys are idiots. Do you really think you can try and ambush me? I’m not going to stand here and be held against my will like this. I’m calling the police.”

He went to grab his phone when Adrianna stepped in front of him.

“And then I can walk over to your pregnant fiancée’s house and show her all the text messages you were sending me while the two of you were still together.”

Derek tightly gripped his phone in his hand and held it close to his body. His words displayed confidence, but his body language betrayed him.

“Or when the cops arrive, I can show them the footage of you placing a threatening letter on my doorstep while I was away.”

Derek looked around angrily and stuffed the phone back in his pocket. He stalked back over to the couch and sat down in a huff.

“Alright, let’s get this shit over with. What do you want?”

Eric walked into the living room after Adrianna. She sat down on a chair across from Derek so she could address him at eye level.

“Simple. You leave me alone, and don’t ever bring my license into question again.”

“And if I do?” The grin had returned on his face, and now Adrianna was sorry she was even giving him the time of day.

Miranda grabbed the papers Derek had thrown beside him on the couch, and handed them back to him.

Derek dismissed the documents with a roll of his eyes. “These are all bogus charges that will never stick. Why would I care about them?”

Miranda laughed as she and Eric made eye contact with one another.

“Doctors don’t get paid when they don’t work, is that correct?”

Derek licked his lips as he looked at Miranda as she spoke, “That’s correct.”

Miranda smiled coyly at him and clucked her tongue. “Well, wouldn’t that be a shame if you were tied up in court constantly because you pissed off two lawyers who have all the time in the world to drown you in litigation and paperwork?”

Derek laughed. “I could easily pay a lawyer to fight the charges, and maybe I could sue you in return for wasting my time.”

Eric stepped in, “Sure, and good luck finding a lawyer to represent you. Miranda and I are partners at one of the most respected firms in Ottawa. So try that. I think that’s an excellent idea.”

Derek had a look on his face like he knew he was outmatched and wouldn’t get out without a compromise.

He shook his head. “So what, I just say I’m not going to report Adrianna for hooking up with her grandpa-boyfriend, and you’ll just take my word for it?”

Eric nodded.

Derek stood up, “Alright, fine then, whatever you want. I’m out of here.”

Derek moved to walk past Eric, who paused for a moment before stepping aside and letting him past.

As Derek opened the door, Eric walked beside him and firmly grabbed his arm.

Eric spoke deep and low into Derek’s ear, “Just also remember that I know where you work, and where you live, and I’m not above coming to your place and reminding you what will happen if you forget about our conversation today.”

For the first time, Derek looked terrified and nodded as he pulled his arm away and took off out the front door.

Eric shut the door behind him and came back into the living room to sit with Adrianna and Miranda.

“You really think that will work?” Adrianna looked at both of them.

They both nodded.

Miranda spoke first, “We looked into the licensing issue, and we think you’re safe regardless of what he could say. You have documentation of a meeting outside of your work as a nurse. That newspaper article is probably the best thing to ever happen to you guys because it puts on record when you two could have

possibly started a relationship: when Oliver was no longer a patient, and Adrianna was medically removed from work.”

Eric nodded, adding, “The point of today was really to ensure he stays away from you. With Henry, Miranda and myself protecting you – I don’t see why he would ever think to come around again.”

Adrianna looked at both of them. “He also has a baby coming into the world soon, so let’s hope his focus will change to being a good father instead.”

“Hopefully,” Miranda said as she smiled and squeezed Adrianna’s hand. “Now, can we go out for actual drinks and food? I’m starving.”

Adrianna went to the backyard and let Henry into the house.

He jumped onto the couch and put his head on Miranda’s lap.

“Okay, I take that back. Let’s relieve the nanny and order in so Henry can have some dinner with us.”

Adrianna smiled and walked over to Eric. She wrapped her arms around him as she whispered, “Thank you.”

He kissed the top of her head and held her close against his chest.

“We still aren’t even for what you have done for me, but I hope it’s a start. You’re welcome.”



# Epilogue

## ADRIANNA

It was the end of the summer, and everyone was sitting in Eric's backyard for a final barbecue.

The vines were finally fully grown and cascading across all the fences, which added the illusion of a private oasis that they had all to themselves.

Marc and Lucy were present, but had left their daughter with a babysitter this time. Lucy was sporting the start of a beautiful baby bump in her flower summer dress.

Eric couldn't keep his hands off Adrianna as they worked together to host.

Miranda was minding Oliver, who was smiling and laughing on her lap. She had been spending a lot of time with him and was quickly becoming his favourite person.

Eric had told Adrianna very briefly that there was a good reason why Miranda didn't feel safe at her place, and there was discussion of her possibly staying at Adrianna's for a little bit.

Adrianna was happily back at work, and between the long hours of the NICU and staying at Eric's – she was barely at her own house anymore. She was more than happy to share her home – although it wasn't nearly as nice as Miranda's.

Miranda told her that she felt at home in Adrianna's cozy house, and there was nothing left to do but believe her.

The doorbell rang, and everyone looked at each other confused. They hadn't invited anyone else and weren't sure who it could be.

Adrianna smiled and offered to answer the door as Henry followed her to the front of the house.

After a couple of seconds, Henry could be heard barking frantically, and Eric rushed out of his chair in alarm, but just as

he was about to race to the front, Adrianna was in the back with a tall man walking beside her.

“Hey everyone, I guess there’s no better time to introduce you to my older brother, who just surprised me with a visit from Australia. Everyone – this is Grayson.”

Everyone stood up to say hello except Miranda, who seemed stunned.

Grayson was introduced to everyone and then turned to Adrianna who was quiet.

“Sorry to spring this on you so suddenly.”

Adrianna wrapped her arms around him and dismissed his apology. “When I told you I was staying here and you asked for the address, I thought you were planning my birthday present! Although, this is much better.”

Grayson and Adrianna had some facial similarities. If you looked really hard, then you could tell they were related; but otherwise, they looked nothing alike.

Grayson was tall with shaggy blond hair, perfectly tanned skin and slight freckles that dotted his cheeks and nose. His green eyes sparkled from a distance and made Miranda’s breath catch in her throat.

He was sporting a short scruffy beard which was likely a result of the long flight he just endured.

Grayson waved to everyone and then sat down in an empty chair between Adrianna and Miranda.

Eric came over to hand him a drink and introduce himself properly.

Adrianna wanted to ask why he was suddenly home, but it wasn’t the proper time.

The last time she had seen him, he had been happily living with his long-term girlfriend in a cute house near the beach. They had looked happy and were starting early conversations about planning a wedding.

They had talked about visiting together so that she could meet their family, but they hadn't made any immediate plans.

She leaned over to him, asking if he needed a place to lie down since he was probably exhausted from the long flight.

He shook his head to say no; he was fine for now.

"You can spend the night at my place, if you don't mind sharing the house with Miranda. She can drive you over there after supper."

Grayson winked and said, "If that's okay with you, Miranda."

Miranda looked flustered, and Adrianna laughed. She had never seen her flustered around anyone before.

"Sure," she breathed out heavily, and noticed the way Adrianna was looking at her.

She blushed suddenly and then made an excuse to leave, saying Oliver was getting fussy and needed a diaper change.

"That's not her baby, is it?" Grayson asked after she left.

Adrianna giggled. "I mean no, but almost. That's Oliver."

Grayson looked at her, eyebrows raised in surprise. "*That's* Oliver? He's so big!"

Eric came over to both of them and asked where Miranda went off to.

"She said she had to change Oliver."

Eric looked confused. "I just changed him about ten minutes ago."

Adrianna focused her attention back on Grayson. "Are you sure you're okay with staying at my place? I was planning on staying here tonight."

Grayson nodded and yawned. "Of course. Sorry, again for not giving you a heads-up. I left rather quickly."

"Oh, and how long are you staying for?"

Grayson shrugged. "I only bought a one-way ticket, so I'm not really sure yet."

Adrianna gave a look of concern to Eric but couldn't ask more questions as Miranda was back.

"Miranda works at the firm with Eric."

Miranda nodded. "And what do you do, Grayson?"

"I was – I mean – I am a firefighter in Australia."

"Oh right, your sister did tell me that. She said you had just bought a place with your girlfriend when she was visiting."

"Ex-girlfriend."

Adrianna looked at Grayson and then back to Miranda and thought she could see sparks flying between them, but shook her head. Grayson was always very charismatic, and if he really did just break up with his girlfriend, meeting someone else was probably the last thing on his mind.

Either way, Adrianna was questioning if maybe it wasn't a good idea that the two of them spend too much time with each other in the same small house.

Eric stood up and clinked his glass, getting everyone's attention.

"There is an announcement I would like to make, and it's the reason you are all here tonight."

He had everyone's attention as he turned and grabbed a piece of paper from behind him.

"Miranda – I wanted to thank you for being such an amazing friend and an even better Aunt to Oliver."

Miranda smiled and bounced Oliver in her lap.

"Which is why Oliver has had a recent change to his birth certificate."

He walked over and handed her the small laminated birth document that would follow him for the rest of his life.

Miranda read aloud, "Oliver Mirando Forrever."

She had tears in her eyes and kissed Oliver as she held him tightly and laughed.

"Oh, the poor thing. What a name! But I love it, I really do."

Eric laughed and came over to give them both a hug.

“Miranda is actually believed to be derived from the male name, ‘Mirando’ which means to be marvellous and admired. I thought it was perfectly suitable as a middle name.”

Miranda smiled and wiped a tear off her cheek.

“I thought you were going to announce something else. This is quite the surprise.”

Eric asked, “What did you think we were going to announce?”

Miranda waved her hand in dismissal. “I thought maybe Adrianna was pregnant or something.”

Adrianna’s eyes went wide as Eric laughed nervously, “Why would you think that?”

“I noticed she was not drinking any alcohol tonight, and she seemed a bit tired lately and ...” her voice trailed off as she noticed the look of fear on Adrianna’s face.

Adrianna smiled nervously and looked at everyone as Eric walked over to her and got down on one knee.

“I did have plans for an announcement, and sorry to disappoint everyone, but I think we have more than enough baby for now.”

Adrianna was blushing and looked uncomfortable being the centre of attention, so Eric quickly pulled a small ring box out of his back pocket.

“Adrianna, from the moment I met you – I knew you were going to change my life for the better. Every day since I have met you has been better than the last. You have taught my heart what love really feels like, and now I can never go back. I don’t ever want to risk losing you again, and need you to know how much you mean to me. I would be honoured if you would allow me to continue to show you every day how devoted I am to you. Please say that you will be my wife.”

Eric opened the ring box and showed it to Adrianna.

Tears started flowing down Adrianna's cheeks as she said yes, and everyone applauded. Eric gently placed the solitaire diamond on her ring finger and picked her up off the ground in an excited embrace.

Miranda ran over and hugged both of them, being careful to include Oliver.

Adrianna was laughing and crying tears of joy. It was the perfect end to her disastrous summer, and she couldn't have been happier.

It made it even better that her brother was there to enjoy the moment with her.

## About the Author

Teddy Jovial is a wife, a new mother and a nurse. Deciding to finally pursue her dream of writing during maternity leave for her son, she is now a published author.

When she isn't running after her son or working, she's quietly enjoying a chai latte, going for walks with her dogs and husband or playing soccer.

Follow along social media to find out about upcoming books in the Sweet Series, including Miranda's story next ...



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