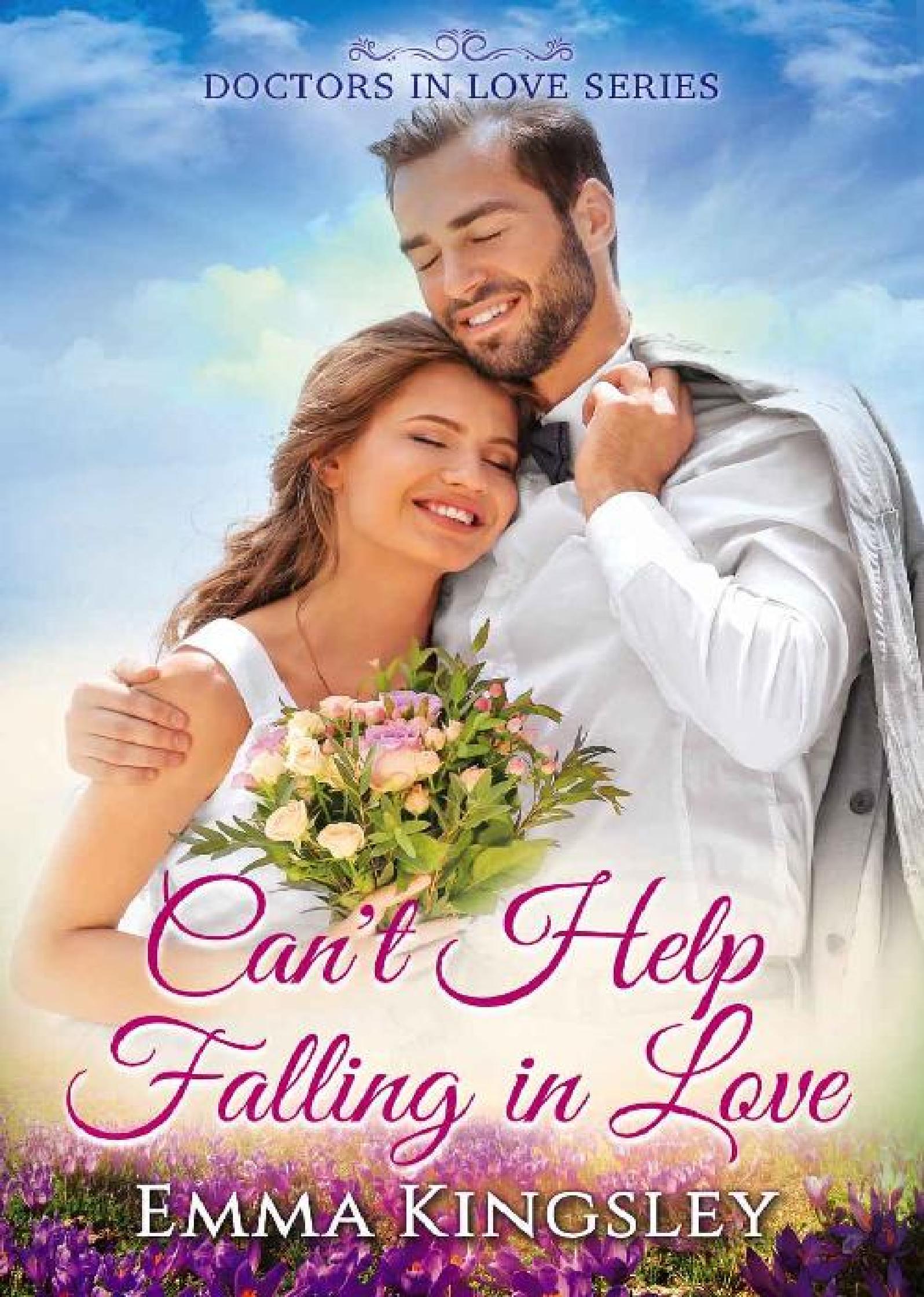


DOCTORS IN LOVE SERIES

A romantic couple embracing in a field of purple flowers under a blue sky. The man is wearing a white shirt and a grey jacket, and the woman is wearing a white dress and holding a bouquet of flowers. The background is a bright blue sky with soft clouds.

*Can't Help  
Falling in Love*

EMMA KINGSLEY

CAN'T HELP FALLING IN  
LOVE

*DOCTORS IN LOVE BOOK 2*

EMMA KINGSLEY

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## *CAN'T HELP FALLING IN LOVE*

*(Book 2 Doctors in Love Series)*

*You bump into someone, look up, and... the world stops. There's nothing else but the two of you. You know that feeling? Well, Kate Watson didn't... until she met Dr. Blake Kelley.*

*And while meeting a gorgeous young cardiologist who invites you for a coffee the moment he lays his eyes on you may sound like a rather pleasant scenario, Kate will soon face the irony of protecting her heart from getting broken by the man whose job is healing hearts.*

*Blake Kelley's handsome face, athletic figure, and undeniable charisma draw sighs of admiration from women wherever he goes, but he is not interested in romance. He is one of the most prominent pediatric cardiologists in the country, but he doesn't care too much about titles and accolades either. Marked by a painful childhood memory, he has dedicated his life to curing children and spreading the word about the prevention of heart diseases. And the only thing that truly matters to him is helping his little patients get better.*

*But when the right woman walks into his life, will the heart specialist be able to keep his heart guarded or will Kate steal it forever?*

# I

## KATE

**K**ate Watson took a deep breath before entering the hospital lobby. The sight of the building had provoked mixed feelings in her ever since her mother's struggle with cancer. It reminded her of the painful moments her family had spent there but also of the happiness they felt when Diane was cured. Her brother-in-law and her best friend worked at this place, and she could never forget their contribution to saving her mom's life and giving her and her sister emotional support.

For weeks, she obsessed over how to help other patients and their families find hope rather than frustration in their treatment. She was not a scientist or physician, but she strongly believed there was something she could do for them as an artist.

Lost in her thoughts, Kate walked down the hallway, approaching the elevator. Before she pressed the call button, she plunged her hand into her bag and started fishing for her phone. She loved large bags and had the habit of filling them with her books, chocolates, sketchpads, crayons, and other art essentials, which turned every occasion she had to pull something out of her purse into a treasure hunt. After a thorough search, it was clear she had left her phone in the car. She spun on her heels with a sigh, her hand still buried in her bag. Suddenly, before she even had a chance to start barging back toward the exit, she felt her face pressed against the broad chest of a tall figure in a lab coat. Two strong hands

grabbed her shoulders as a fresh masculine scent filled her nostrils.

“I’m so—” she started to apologize, stepping back. The sight she was treated to when she looked up sucked all the air from her lungs. The most handsome face she had ever seen stared back as the stranger towered over her. Strong masculine features. Sharp cheekbones, long straight nose, and chiseled jawline. Big dreamy eyes, the color of melting chocolate. “Sorry,” she managed to finish her sentence.

The man released his grip on her shoulders, and her gaze darted to his takeout coffee, spilled on the floor at his feet.

Indeed, she was sorry. There must have been at least a million less embarrassing ways to meet such a gorgeous man.

“Are you okay?” he said in a husky voice that sent shivers down her spine.

“Yeah, I’m fine. I’m really sorry about your coffee,” she muttered, gesturing to the floor.

“It was an accident. We’re good. More than good, really.” His intense dark eyes shone as his lips split into a smile.

“It was my fault. I should have been more careful,” she said.

“How about you buy me a cup of coffee and ease your guilt?” he suddenly suggested with a smirk, running his fingers through his raven-black hair.

Her jaw almost dropped at his words. An insanely handsome doctor just showed up out of nowhere and practically invited her for a coffee the moment he saw her. She had come to the hospital to talk about her interest in volunteering with Nathan and William, and for a few seconds, she toyed with the idea that they had hired an actor to play some kind of prank on her. The three of them liked to joke and tease each other, but this would have been too much even for them.

“A cup of coffee for a cup of coffee. Sounds fair to me,” she answered, regaining her composure.

“Great.” He grinned. “I’m on my way to meet a patient’s parent right now. Can you find a free moment this week?”

*I’m sure that won’t be a problem. I would cancel everything for you, pretty boy.* She chided herself to stop it as the mischievous thought crossed her mind. “Let me see.” She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “I’ll be busy all day tomorrow. How about Friday morning?”

“Friday it is! Do you know Coffee Tree?” he offered readily.

It was a coffee shop next to the hospital building, which Kate knew all too well from the period when her mom was hospitalized. “Sure. What time?”

“8:00 a.m.?”

“Sounds good to me.”

He reached in his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. “Any chance you’ll tell me your phone number so I can remind you of your promise in case you forget about it?”

“I’m sure I won’t forget about it.”

“I guess that means you don’t want to give me your phone number,” he said, raising a brow.

Just when she was about to tell him that was not what she meant and recite the digits of her cell phone, she refrained. All this sounded too good to be true. She needed to slow down.

“We agreed on a cup of coffee for a cup of coffee, not for a cup of coffee and a phone number.” She snorted out a nervous laugh.

“Fair enough,” he replied with a chuckle. “But since we’re already negotiating, can I at least get a cup of coffee and your name?”

She crinkled her eyebrows, feigning deep thought. “That sounds like a reasonable proposal. I’ll add my last name to that as a little bonus.” She stretched out her hand and smiled. “Kate. Kate Watson.”

He shook her hand, his skin soft and his grip strong. “I’m very pleased to meet you, Kate Watson,” he said, as if enjoying the sound of her name in his mouth.

“Your turn.”

He narrowed his eyes. “My turn?”

“Do you have a name?”

“My name was never part of this deal.”

She giggled. “I suppose I’m not such a good negotiator after all.”

“But since you were so generous with your bonus, I’ll make a concession here. I’m Blake Kelley.”

Even his name sounded attractive to her. Kate had no idea what she could expect from her coffee date with the handsome doctor, and she was concerned that his intense gaze might lead her to hope for much more than he was ready to offer. Still, she felt she had no choice but to take the leap and see what happened.

“Well, Blake Kelley, I don’t want you to be late for your appointment with your patient’s parent because of me. Causing you another inconvenience may cost me another coffee.”

“I’m afraid that would be a more serious inconvenience, so it might end up costing you a whole lunch.”

“Oh, we definitely don’t want that to happen, right?”

“Speak for yourself,” he replied calmly, his eyes unblinking.

While the quips kept flowing out of their mouths, Kate couldn’t wrap her head around how much his presence affected her, and still how effortless and relaxed their exchange was. “I’ll see you on Friday,” she finally said.

“You can count on it.” He nodded, an irresistible smile dancing on his lips.

Kate waved her hand and started walking toward the exit. When she reached the door, she gave in to the temptation of turning her head and casting one final glance at Dr. Blake

Kelley. His eyes glued to his phone, he paced back and forth, waiting for the elevator. Suddenly, his head snapped up and looked in her direction across the lobby. As their eyes locked, she felt her pulse quicken and embarrassment wash over her at being caught looking. But she caught him looking too, right?

Before she managed to look away, they exchanged a sheepish grin of complicity. Kate glanced at her wristwatch, making a mental note on how many hours were left until their next encounter.

The unexpected exchange with Dr. Kelley and going back to her car to get her phone made Kate late for her appointment with two of the most respected doctors in the country. She wasn't particularly worried though, because, after her mother and her sister, Nathan Parker and William Evans were the closest people she had in her life.

More than a brother-in-law, Nathan had been like a big brother to Kate since he was a young man and first in love with her sister Elizabeth. When he called off his wedding to Liz to focus on his career years ago, the whole family felt betrayed and Kate couldn't help but despise the man she had once been so fond of.

Nathan had always regretted losing the woman of his life and, after years of being separated, her mom's illness brought them together again. When he confessed that he had never stopped loving Liz, she struggled to open her heart to him, but eventually decided to give their love a second chance.

Winning back Kate's trust had been even harder for Nathan than reuniting with her sister, but his good heart finally earned him everyone's forgiveness.

"You're one of the few people in the world who's allowed to keep us waiting," Nathan teased Kate as she walked into his office.

"I'm sorry, guys. I had a little incident in the lobby."

"What happened?" William asked, looking concerned.

For a moment, she considered telling them about bumping into a doctor she hadn't seen before, but she decided against it. It was obvious that the man was a sight to behold. Who knew how many women went around trying to find out about him and his private life. No matter how hard she tried to sound nonchalant, Nathan and William would immediately figure out that the handsome doctor caught her attention. They would want to talk about it, and she would blush, and... she didn't want to look like a giddy teenager swooning over her first crush—not even in front of her best friends.

Blake Kelley didn't invite her for a date. It was just a coffee. It meant nothing. If eventually there was something to talk about, Nathan and William would be among the first to know. But for now, there was really nothing to say.

“Nothing important. It's all set now.” She waved her hand dismissively. “I'm here because I'd like to know your opinion about an idea I had.”

“What can we do for you?” Nathan gestured for her to take a seat next to William.

“I want to help,” she started.

“Help whom?” Nathan rubbed his chin as he waited for her to clarify her proposal.

“I want to help patients like Mom.”

She knew that Nathan and William would understand instantly what was driving her desire to help. Her mother had been diagnosed with a rare form of cancer years before, and she and her sister had dropped everything to take care of her. They had watched Diane struggle for years against her illness, and the day she was declared in remission was the happiest day of their lives. With God's help, her family's love and support, and Nathan's world-class medical knowledge, Diane had finally triumphed over her disease.

During the whole process, Kate knew her mom was exceptionally lucky, no matter how hard her path was. She had the fortune of having two daughters who loved her and supported her through it all. Plus, she had Nathan and William.

Kate had often thought of others who didn't have the support system her mother did, and wondered how they managed the emotional turmoil of facing such a horrible disease.

"What would you like to do?" Nathan asked gently, his fingers clasped in front of him.

"You know that my thing is art, not medicine, but I truly believe that your patients could benefit from what I have to offer."

Art had always been Kate's haven. Her father passed away when she was only one, and art helped her cope with his absence while she was growing up. Then, when her sister left home to serve as a nurse with Doctors Without Borders, she used it to deal with how much she missed her. It was not until her mother was diagnosed with cancer, however, that she fully understood the depths of its power. While taking care of her mother, she was so frightened and so sad all the time. It was a struggle just to get through each day. She found comfort and refuge in prayer and in her artwork. They made it possible for her to access her inner strength and support her mother when she needed her the most.

"Well, what kind of impact are you looking to make?" William intervened.

"I want to help people deal with all the complex emotions tied to their diagnosis and treatment. I know that not everyone has as many people there to help them as Mom did. I want to make sure nobody ever has to feel alone while they face something like this."

"So, what's your plan?" Nathan asked.

"Art has always helped me cope with whatever life threw at me. And I realized that, if I want to help others, I just need to do what I do best."

"Paint their rooms?" William raised his eyebrows in confusion.

"That's one option too, but what I have in mind would get the patients more actively involved. I know I can't force people to become art lovers just because it's the only way I

know to connect with people and myself. But maybe it's not about making them art lovers. Maybe it's more about giving them the tools to express the emotions they're feeling in a constructive way. I can teach them how to do that. I can teach an art class for your patients."

Kate had been teaching at the local college for a few years, and she enjoyed every minute of sharing her passion with her students. She struggled to imagine herself teaching in the hospital setting since she couldn't think of any place more lacking in color and creativity. But, after all, transforming people's hospital experience was supposed to be part of her mission there.

"That's a great idea, Kate," Nathan said with a nod. "We're men of science, but we must recognize that cold, hard logic is not enough here. Our patients don't need only our scientific expertise. They also need emotional support and spiritual guidance. Prayer, a heartfelt conversation, art... all that matters," Nathan continued, clearly passionate about his patients' well-being.

"When did you get so evolved?" William teased his friend.

"My wife inspires me to be more open-minded than I originally intended."

Nathan chuckled, staring at the photograph of Elizabeth and their baby boy on his desk with such love and warmth that it made Kate's heart ache for someone to love her like that. She had always been a romantic at heart, and seeing the love between her sister and her brother-in-law inspired her. A lot of her friends had married over the past few years, and their husbands were good guys who cared about them. Still, when she saw them together, she so rarely saw the spark that Liz and Nathan had.

Looking at the two of them gave her hope that she could also find a love that would shake her world and leave her breathless. The thought instantly brought to her mind Blake's face. Even though she reminded herself once again not to get her hopes up, she couldn't help but smile with anticipation.

**H**ow about you buy me a cup of coffee and ease your guilt? His own words echoed through Blake's mind. He had been trying to explain to himself where that question came from since the minute Kate Watson disappeared through the hospital door the day before. And then, he even asked for her phone number and teased her about the possibility of sharing a meal together. What was wrong with him? She was beautiful and charming, and he liked her attitude and wit. The truth was that he couldn't think of any other woman who had ever made such a powerful impression on him the moment he laid his eyes on her. But all that was no excuse. He should have controlled himself and kept his mouth shut.

What was the point of inviting her for a coffee? He knew he didn't have much to offer a woman, and he hated the idea of playing with anyone's feelings. That was exactly why he hadn't dated in more than three years. He still recalled his last girlfriend's words, "For someone who makes a living healing hearts, you're terribly good at breaking them." That shook him to his core, but Marcia was right. He broke her heart without meaning to. Before they started dating, he warned her that his patients were his priority and that he couldn't even imagine putting anything or anyone else before them. He made it clear that he wasn't looking for commitment, but Marcia insisted, just like every other woman he had ever dated, that she would change him and reorder his priorities.

After dating for almost a year, Marcia wasn't ready to give up on him, but he simply couldn't waste her time any longer. In her late twenties, she was pretty, smart, and successful, and Blake knew she deserved much more than he could give her. She needed someone who was crazy about her and ready to dedicate his life to her and their future family.

Seeing how much love and energy she had invested in their relationship led Blake to try to convince himself that he loved her and that he could become the person she needed, but he finally had to accept that he couldn't fool himself anymore. What he felt for Marcia was not love. He was already married to his job, and he was certain that nothing would ever change that.

Marcia struggled to make him reconsider his decision and assured him that she preferred waiting for him to fall in love with her to losing him, but he felt that parting ways was best for both of them. It turned out he was right. A year later, she got married to her best friend and recently had twins, while Blake happily continued to devote himself to his patients. No dates, no flirting, no romantic entanglements of any kind.

So, what came over him to suddenly invite a woman he had literally just met for a coffee? *Don't overestimate yourself, man! The girl was just being nice and took you up on your offer. That's all. You're not so irresistible,* he scolded himself. The thought that Kate Watson felt embarrassed for spilling his coffee and was only kind enough to accept his proposition but wasn't really interested in getting to know him had a strange effect on him. The prospect of her immediate disappearance from his life felt reassuring because it allowed his carefully structured daily routine to remain intact. But, at the same time, something inside him found the possibility of not seeing her ever again disappointing.

Before entering the room where a staff meeting was about to start, he took a deep breath. He had no time for this kind of dilemma in his life, which was why he needed to keep his mind clear and focused.

As he walked in, Dr. Wendy Parton rushed to him.

“Hey, Blake. I’ve saved you a seat next to me,” she purred, gesturing to two free chairs in the back of the room.

Since he arrived in Cleveland two months ago, quite a few female colleagues had lavished him with attention. Some of them were subtle about showing their interest in him, but Wendy was definitely not one of them. With her supermodel body and beautiful heart-shaped face, she was considered by many to be the most attractive woman at the hospital, and she made no secret of her conviction that she and Blake would make a perfect couple. The fact that he was cold and distant with her didn’t seem to discourage her. If anything, the more he ignored her, the more insistent she grew.

Blake quickly scanned the room for familiar faces. Relieved to spot a free seat next to Ken Brixton, he shrugged. “Sorry, Wendy, but I have something really important to share with Ken,” he lied.

For a moment, he hoped that the icy look she flashed him meant she would finally give up on her efforts to seduce him. But he realized there was no such luck as she quickly added, “I’ll text you later to see if—”

“Text me? You have my number?” He furrowed his brows.

“Since you were in a hurry the last time I asked you for it, John from HR gave it to me. We’re colleagues, we should have each other’s phone number. You never know when you may need it, right?” She gave him a wink. “So, as I was saying, I’ll text you to see if we can grab a coffee together one of these days.”

Blake was polite enough not to roll his eyes, but Wendy’s persistence was starting to annoy him. She was clearly so self-confident that she couldn’t even imagine the possibility of any man not being interested in her.

He scrubbed his jaw. “My schedule has been really crazy lately, without any prospect of getting better in the foreseeable future,” he said, shaking his head and dashing to the seat next to Ken.

As Blake chatted with his colleague, the door flung open and the director of the hospital, Alana Hatman, entered the room and took her seat at the head of the table. The hum of chatter quieted.

Blake had had little contact with the director since he arrived at the hospital, but he was familiar with her reputation. Even though she was respected for her professional results, she wasn't very popular among the staff due to her short attention span and arrogant attitude.

"Nathan, William, you both wanted to speak to the group before we move on to the usual topics," she said, not one to mince words.

"Yes, thank you, Alana." Nathan Parker rose and walked to the front of the room with William Evans close behind.

"We appreciate the opportunity to talk about this project with all of you," William announced. "We realize that this has been a bit last minute, but we're—"

Alana released an impatient puff. "Get on with it. Time is money."

"As you all know," Nathan began, "all of our patients face a daily struggle to stay optimistic as they face treatment. That's not limited to our cancer patients. Each and every one of you have patients who are dealing with fears and depression on a daily basis. A local artist has conceptualized a program that would allow our patients to learn to express their feelings through art."

"Yes, the artist in question is extremely talented and passionate about art. She teaches art classes at the university and a few other community organizations," William added.

After they wrapped up their presentation, Alana demanded, "So, you want me to pay some artist to draw doodles with our patients?"

"No, there will be no doodling," Nathan said, apparently irritated by her remark.

"Plus, she's willing to do it for free," William assured her.

“Free?” Alana’s eyebrows shot up in interest.

“Yes,” Nathan replied. “Her mother was treated here, and she wants to volunteer her time to help our patients.”

“What is it going to cost us?” The woman looked skeptical.

“Just the use of one of the rooms in the old office wing. Half of them are empty anyway,” William explained.

“I just talked to her an hour ago, and she told me she convinced Martin’s Art Supply, that shop downtown, to donate all the art supplies she’ll need.”

“If it isn’t going to cost us anything, then I have no objections. You know the process, though. We don’t add a new patient program without the majority of the medical team approving it.”

Nathan nodded. “I understand.”

“Shall we put it to a vote?” William asked, visibly eager not to lose momentum.

Blake was new to the hospital, but he had already had a chance to meet both Nathan and William. They were excellent physicians, and he had a great deal of respect for both of them. Still, he wasn’t convinced that his patients would benefit from the project the two men had proposed, and he felt compelled to make his concerns clear.

“One second, please,” he said from the back of the room. “Can I have a few moments to express my objections to the group?”

“The floor is yours, Blake,” Alana told him.

“Thank you. I respect your volunteer’s good will. I really do.” Blake’s gaze moved between Nathan and William. “But I had a negative experience with a project of this kind in the past, and I believe it may cause a lot of distraction and inconvenience to both the patients and the staff. How am I supposed to keep the children still and committed to what I need them to do for their health if they have the option to run

off and paint? Art projects can be great, but I just don't think a hospital is the right place for them.”

“Fair enough,” Alana remarked.

“Can I have a few moments to expand further on the project's benefits?” Nathan asked.

“That's not necessary. You both made your points. We've spent enough time on this. We have more important things to discuss today. Let's vote. All in favor, raise your hands.”

Blake sighed as he saw that the majority of those in the room voted in favor. He clearly recalled all the trouble that was caused when a similar initiative was implemented at the hospital where he had previously worked. The artist who collaborated with them was constantly late for the classes she had set up as she considered strict schedules overrated. She invited patients not to comply with their doctors' prescriptions because “their artistic flow was stifled by accepting any kind of imposition.” Her program was finally canceled after she interrupted a little boy's therapy session with her artistic performance that she entitled “Art is all you need.”

Blake wanted only what was best for his patients. He worked with kids, and he needed them to take their healing process seriously. Shaking his head, he tried to figure out how to protect them from the distractions that this new art program threatened to cause for them. And then, thinking of protecting oneself from distractions, Kate Watson's smile suddenly popped into his mind. Again.

**T**he idea of taking it easy and not expecting too much from her coffee meeting with Blake Kelley sounded good. In theory. The problem was that it was absolutely impossible to put into practice. Kate's mind kept wandering to his piercing brown eyes and his large hands gripping her shoulders, and the excitement about seeing him again grew stronger and stronger with every minute.

When she walked into the coffee shop, Blake was already waiting for her, sitting at a table in the corner and scrolling through his phone. She took a few calming breaths, unable to believe that the man looked even more stunning than she remembered.

"You see? I'm good at not forgetting my promises. Isn't that important in a coffee companion?" Kate asked as she approached him.

"I can't think of anything more important than that, actually." He chuckled, rising to his feet and gesturing for her to take a seat. "Can I get you a coffee or tea?"

"I think I'm supposed to be the one treating today," she said with a smirk.

"Please, let me take care of it." He placed his phone in his pocket.

"You suggested I buy you a cup of coffee to ease my guilt. Remember?" She smiled up to him.

“I guess I’m old school in that sense,” he replied with a shrug. “Would you mind if I paid?”

“If it makes you feel better, okay. I’ll take a double espresso and a blueberry muffin, then.”

“You’ve got it,” he said. “Go grab us another table if you don’t like this one.”

“No, this one is perfect.”

Kate watched him from across the coffee shop as he got to the front of the line and placed their order. The woman behind the counter was clearly as taken with him as Kate was, based on the way she was twirling her hair around her finger and grinning at him. For some reason, Kate was pleased to see that Blake limited himself to giving the woman a courteous smile without prolonging their eye contact.

As he carried their drinks across the coffee shop, she noticed that almost all the women in the place had their eyes on him. She couldn’t blame them. Blake was truly gorgeous. With a sigh, she had to admit to herself that the odds of finding true love with someone like him were disarmingly low.

“Are you okay?” he asked as he sat down.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Sorry, I spaced for a second. Thanks for the coffee and the muffin.”

“No problem.”

“I’ve visited the hospital quite a few times, but I’ve never seen you around. Are you new here?”

“Yes, both at the hospital and in Cleveland.”

“Oh, really? Where are you from?”

“I’m originally from Stowe, a little town in Vermont. But I studied at UCLA and lived on the West Coast for a few years before moving here. Are you from Cleveland?”

“Yup, born and raised. Have you had a chance to get to know the city?”

“To be honest, not really. I spend most of my time at the hospital. I’ve been to many schools and other institutions but

mostly in some capacity related to my job here, promoting our heart health initiatives.”

“Sounds like you’re a very busy man.”

“That’s true, but I’m not complaining. My job is my life. I’m not asking for more,” he said, his voice determined.

Kate nodded with a smile, unsure how to interpret his statement. She admired his obvious dedication to his work, but she was confused by the tone and the words he had chosen to make his point. She couldn’t help but notice that his attitude had changed since the day they ran into each other in the lobby. His relaxed expression and playful smirk were gone, and he looked more guarded and reserved. Was he trying to make it clear that she shouldn’t expect anything more than a cup of coffee from him?

“You mentioned that you’ve visited the hospital quite a few times. Is anyone you know hospitalized here?”

“My brother-in-law, Nathan Parker, works here.” She turned her eyes to the window, looking at the hospital building. She wanted to see what direction their conversation would take before opening up about such an emotional issue as her mother’s struggle with cancer and the time she had spent in the hospital.

“Your brother-in-law? Nathan Parker is married?” he asked, clearly shocked.

“Why do you find that so strange? You think he’s so unattractive that no woman would be crazy enough to marry him?” she teased.

He chuckled. “It’s just that he’s so wildly successful and busy that I simply assumed he dedicated all his life to his career.”

“Well, he’s married to my sister, Liz. He doesn’t wear his ring at work. Since he spends so much time wearing gloves and all that kind of stuff, he always worries it’ll fall off or he’ll lose it. They have the sweetest little boy ever. And, by the way, he’s a great husband and a wonderful dad,” she said, clearly proud of her family.

“He even has a kid? I had no idea.”

“You don’t think having a great career is compatible with having a family?”

“To be honest, having a great career in the medical field is quite challenging. I admire people who manage to balance work and family, but I guess we all have our priorities in life.” As his eyes met hers, he added, “Our past experiences often mark how we set these priorities and what we’re ready to sacrifice for them.”

Goose bumps littered her skin at the intensity of his gaze. Perhaps she was reading too much into his words, but she picked up from his tone that there was something personal behind his reference to *past experiences* and his readiness to make sacrifices for meeting his priorities. She was curious about his remark, but she felt it would be inappropriate to try to find out more than he was ready to reveal.

“Personally, I could definitely never prioritize something that requires that I sacrifice my private life.” She shook her head with resolve. “Love, family, these are the things that I care about the most. If I never find all that, I’ll accept it as God’s will. But if He sends it my way, I could never push it away, no matter what experiences I might have had in the past.”

“I respect that, but I guess we’re all different.” There was something unreadable in the depths of his beautiful dark eyes.

Blake was definitely not only the most handsome but also the most intriguing man she had ever met. The eagerness to discover everything there was to know about him mixed inside her with a growing sense of certainty that she would never get a chance to get close to him. With every word that came out of his mouth, it was more obvious that she had been too hasty to interpret his invitation for a coffee as a sign of romantic interest. She figured it was probably something more like his daily act of kindness to a stranger. Still, she couldn’t help wondering what had happened to the Blake Kelley that she had met two days before. His effortless charm and spontaneity were replaced by a respectful but distant demeanor.

They remained quiet for a few moments, just looking into each other's eyes. Suddenly, the sound of her favorite classical music tune interrupted the silence between them.

Blake shoved his hand into his pocket to pull his phone out.

"Mozart, Symphony 40." She nodded, an approving smile spreading across her lips. "My favorite."

"Really?" He stared at her, amazed. "It's my favorite too. My mom used to play it all the time when I was a kid." Finally, his eyes flashed with the warmth that she saw in them when they first met. "Excuse me for a second." He slid his thumb across the screen. "Yes. Yes. Five-four-three? I see. I'll be right there," he said into his phone. "I'm really sorry, but I'll have to leave. I'm needed."

"Sure. I hope it's nothing serious." Kate remembered he'd mentioned his patient's parent the first time they met, so she assumed he was a pediatrician. The idea of his unconditional devotion to helping sick children made him look even more irresistible.

"I'm sure we'll be able to take care of it." He smiled gently, standing up from his seat. "Thanks for sharing a coffee with me. It's been a pleasure."

"Thank you." She waved, still hopeful that he might ask for her phone number again.

Blake seemed to hesitate for a second, but then he was gone. As Kate watched his tall, imposing figure stride away, she was certain that this was not the last time she'd see him. Nathan had called her the night before to tell her that her project had been approved, and she had no doubt that some of her future students would be Blake's patients. But he couldn't know that. And he still left, just like that. She gritted her teeth as disappointment washed over her. Taking a deep breath, she lifted her chin in a defiant tilt. If he was fine with them not seeing each other ever again, she was fine with that too.

**K**ate turned around in the empty classroom, taking in the space she'd prepared for her art program. In the end, the hospital had given her a large unused office, and they set it all up surprisingly quickly. Thanks to Martin's Art Supply and her friend Jerry who ran it, she had been able to turn it into a classroom where she could teach all her students the basics of art.

She ran her hand across the smooth wood of the easel in front of her before picking up an unopened tube of paint and twirling it around in her hand. At any moment, the students for her first class would be arriving, and she couldn't contain her excitement. She had talked with Nathan and William, and they all decided it would be best to start with the teenage group, though she was also going to teach a class for younger children and a third for adults.

Soon, the nurse from the pediatric unit would be walking down with a group of kids who had expressed interest in learning more about art. She didn't know anything about the children or their diseases ahead of time. What she wanted was to get to know them as children, to give them an hour within the hospital where they were not defined by their illness.

There was a knock at the door, and she jumped. Her sister's head peered through the door.

"May I come in?" Elizabeth flashed her a smile.

"Liz! What a nice surprise!" Kate motioned for her to enter. "What are you doing here, sweetie?"

“I was here to see Nate, and I just wanted to stop by and wish you luck before your first lesson.” Elizabeth looked around, nodding. “The space looks pretty good.”

“It did come together really well. I think I like it even more than my classroom at the college.”

“They don’t mind you taking time off to head up this program?”

“No, I’m still taking on my full course load. I couldn’t take the time off and leave my students. Plus, a girl has to make a living.”

“This was such a wonderful idea. You’re amazing.”

“It runs in the family.” Kate gave her a wink.

“Well, I won’t keep you any longer, but I need you to make me a promise.”

“Anything.”

“Go see Nathan as soon as the class ends. He and William are like nervous, overbearing mother hens, worrying whether you’ll be fine.”

“They are the sweetest.”

“I agree,” Elizabeth said with a chuckle. “I’m heading home now. If I leave Mikey with Mom for too long, she’ll have him spoiled rotten.”

“Thanks for stopping by. I’ll call you later. There’s a guy —” Kate stopped herself. She usually shared everything with her sister, but in this case, there wasn’t really much to share. Her story with Blake Kelley finished before it even started.

“A guy?” Elizabeth squinted, intrigued.

“No, it’s nothing. Just forget I said anything.” Kate shook her head, waving her hand dismissively.

“What do you mean? You haven’t mentioned a guy to me in years, and now that you finally do, you want me to forget about it? You forget about it, sis. I need to know what’s going on.”

“It’s really nothing.”

“Well, I want to hear everything about that nothing.” Elizabeth pointed a shaking finger toward her.

“Okay, fine.” Kate raised her hands in mock surrender, rolling her eyes.

As soon as Elizabeth left, the nurse appeared with a dozen teenagers behind her. Kate’s chest tightened at the thought of what those boys and girls had to go through at such an early age. She forced herself to be strong, though. She wasn’t there to let her emotions get the best of her but to give the children hope and inspiration.

“Hello! Welcome to your art classroom!” She gently smiled at them, spreading out her palms.

“Hi!” they replied in unison.

“My name is Kate. Let’s chat a little bit first and get to know each other, and then we’ll jump into making art,” she suggested before inviting them to take a seat in the chairs she had set up in a circle in the back of the room.

The children sat down as she asked each one of them their name and why they decided to join her class. After they had all introduced themselves, it was her turn to tell them a bit more about herself.

“I’ve loved art since I was a kid, and as time went by, I came to realize how powerful it is. It helped me through a lot of tough times. That’s why I love to teach it so much. Every time I teach someone how to create art, I feel like I’m putting a tool in their hands to help them through hard moments.”

“Were you sick?” a young boy named Jared asked her bluntly.

“I wasn’t. My mom was. She fought cancer for years while my sister and I took care of her.”

“I’m sorry you lost your mom.”

“We didn’t lose her. She got better.” She was saddened by the fact that these young people had to deal with thoughts of

death so often that they just assumed someone who was ill had passed away.

“Really?” The boy looked surprised.

“Yeah, she’s doing great. She just returned from her trip to Toronto with her friends.” Kate grinned at the thought of how strong and full of life her mother felt again.

A girl raised her hand. “Did you make art while she was sick?”

“I did. Prayer and art were the things that got me through it.”

“Can we see what you painted when she was sick?” another boy asked.

“I’ll bring in some pictures of my work from those years for our next class if you’d like to see them,” she promised, surprised that they all seemed so interested in her own connection to disease and caretaking.

“Please do,” Jared said, his expression curious.

“I will. I promise. But let’s get to making some art now. I just want you all to get the feeling of having a paintbrush in your hands. Everyone get behind an easel and pick up a brush and a tube of paint. We’re about to have some fun.”

As they all took their places, she went to the desk and turned on her iPod, filling the room with the classical music she always liked to listen to when she painted.

“Now, this is the music I like to create to. Each week, one of you can pick out the music we paint to. Does that sound good to you?”

“Sounds brilliant!” one of the boys at an easel in the back said, clearly pleased.

“He’s going to make us listen to country music,” a girl named Sarah said.

“Then the next time you can make him listen to anything you want.”

“Get ready for opera, Charlie!” Sarah announced.

Kate looked around the room and couldn't help but smile at the expressions of delight on the young people's faces as they got down to work. Suddenly, Mozart's Symphony 40 started playing from her iPod, and she couldn't push from her mind the thought that Blake Kelley was probably in the same building at that very moment. She loved that musical piece, but perhaps she needed to temporarily remove it from her playlist—just until she stopped associating it with Blake Kelley's ringtone or... until she stopped considering him the most gorgeous man alive. Whichever came first.

**I**t had been a long and busy day. Blake leaned back into his desk chair, lacing his fingers behind his head. His shift had ended hours ago, but he was still at the hospital. After doing his round of the pediatric unit, he got immersed in his patients' files. He knew every single detail about each child's medical history, their life conditions, and habits, but he was always alert to any changes. He had spent the previous five days at a medical conference in Japan, where he had been invited to talk about his work with infants suffering from hypoplastic left heart syndrome, and he was catching up with the latest updates.

He started to massage his temples rhythmically as his eyes drifted to his desk calendar. It was Wednesday. The same day that he met Kate Watson three weeks before. Where was she now? He caught himself clenching his teeth as he pictured her having a coffee with another man. Before he left the coffee shop that day, he was tempted to ask for her phone number but forced himself to walk away without it.

He did the right thing, though. He had his priorities in life, and he couldn't give to a woman like Kate what she truly deserved. But would she have wanted anything from him at all? He imagined his fingers running through her hair and wondered if he would ever again meet a woman who could recognize Mozart's Symphony 40. She was so sweet, so beautiful, so witty, so—*stop it!* Squeezing his eyelids shut, he shook his head as if the movement might help him get Kate out of his thoughts.

She was gone from his life forever, and he had more important things to think about. The condition of one of his patients had gotten worse the day before, and another kid's CRP test results had come in that afternoon and didn't look good. These children were his life. Period.

An abrupt knock at the door pulled him from his musings.

"Come on in," he said.

"Dr. Kelley." A nurse walked into the office, her expression hesitant. "I'm sorry to interrupt. Do you have a moment?"

"Sure, Linda. What's going on?"

"We've had a few requests from the kids."

"What kind of requests?"

"Well, they've been trying to reschedule their tests and appointments."

"What do you mean 'reschedule'?"

"If whatever they're scheduled for clashes with their art class, they ask us to change it. We realize that they're all big fans of this art program that started last week. It's all they're talking about. So, we're not sure whether we should accommodate these requests or not."

Blake frowned. "Absolutely not!" He struggled to keep his anger in check. He had warned the rest of the staff that the patients would be distracted by this initiative, but nobody listened to him. "This is a hospital. They need to understand that their health is what matters the most. There will be no rescheduling."

"I understand, Dr. Kelley. I'll try to explain to the children," Linda stammered. "The art teacher is downstairs right now, perhaps I should talk to her."

"No, I'll take care of it personally. Where can I find this person?"

"They converted an old office into a classroom. Ground floor, old wing, room 67, next to the vending machine."

“Thanks for letting me know about this issue.”

After the nurse left, Blake put his files back in order and rushed out of his office. He couldn't allow anyone to play with his patients' health.

Briskly walking down the dimly lit corridor in the old wing, he saw a female figure locking the door to a room next to the vending machine. That had to be the art teacher. Room 67. Right!

“Excuse me, are you the art teacher?” he asked, his tone determined.

“Yes, I—” the woman started to respond as she turned around.

This was not happening. What were the chances? Blake swallowed hard, unable to say a word. Seeing him clearly had the same effect on Kate, as her sentence remained unfinished. They stood there in silence for a few long moments, their eyes locked and breathing uneven.

“You're the art teacher?” he finally blurted out, his voice hesitant. She was Nathan Parker's sister-in-law. Nathan and William presented the project in front of the staff. It had never occurred to Blake that she might be the local artist they talked about.

“For the second time, yes.”

Blake's mind was racing, a mixture of excitement and frustration unfurling inside him. He felt his heart hammer in his chest at the sight of her beautiful face, but at the same time he was terrified by the prospect of Kate distracting not only the kids but also their doctor. “I didn't expect to see you here.”

“Well, I was aware you worked in the same building, but I can't say I expected to see you here tonight either.”

Blake drew a sharp breath. “Why didn't you tell me you were going to volunteer here when we met?”

“You left before I had a chance to.”

He nodded. “We need to talk.”

“We do?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

“About your project,” he clarified, wondering whether she also felt there was something more personal they needed to address.

“My project? Sure. What’s going on?”

“I understand your intentions are good, but this is not working.”

“What do you mean it’s not working? The kids love it. A few parents told me it’s all they’re talking about.” She frowned in confusion, planting her hands on her hips.

“My point exactly.”

“You’re not making any sense.”

“No, all this doesn’t make any sense. A nurse just informed me that the kids started requesting to reschedule their tests and appointments so they could attend your art class.”

“Really?”

“You didn’t know about that? You didn’t encourage them to reschedule?”

“Of course not.” She shook her head fiercely. “I would never do that. My work is not supposed to interfere with your work.”

“Well, it obviously does. It starts with rescheduling, and then the situation quickly degenerates. When Parker and Evans presented the project, I warned all of them about this risk, but nobody listened. The only thing that seemed to matter was that the hospital didn’t have to pay for it. But this... this is exactly what I talked about when I said the patients would get distracted. We’re in a hospital! These kids shouldn’t be thinking about your little drawing school all the time. They should be focusing on their health, on letting us save their lives.”

Kate inhaled deeply, narrowing her eyes. “I’ll ignore your arrogant reference to ‘my little drawing school,’ and try to explain to you calmly why I think this program helps your patients and how it actually makes your job easier.”

His eyes drifted to her full lips, then to the smooth skin of her neck, and the effect she was having on him pushed his guard up even more. He hated the atmosphere that his accusation had created between them, but he couldn't stop the words coming out of his mouth, unable to distinguish anymore if he was trying to protect only his patients or also himself from Kate's presence.

"Look, I don't mean to be disrespectful," he cut her off, "but you don't know anything about my job, and I don't really think you can teach me how to make it any easier."

"If you're this disrespectful when you don't mean to be, I don't even want to imagine what it looks like when you do it on purpose. For someone who aspires to be a top physician, you show a terrible lack of sensitivity and humility."

"You can't question my aptitude as a physician," he growled.

"Then don't question my aptitude as a volunteer who's doing her best to help these kids get through the day. By giving them all day to think only about their healing, what you're doing is actually giving them all day to think only about their illness. Making sure they take their treatment seriously is not incompatible with making their time at the hospital enjoyable. Perhaps you're just too rigid in how you understand what kind of place a hospital should be." She turned around and started walking away.

"Wait, we're not done here," he called after her.

"It looks like you've had a long day. You should come back when you get some rest and calm down," she shouted over her shoulder, leaving Blake standing in the hall with his mouth open.

His stomach was in knots as a sense of impotence washed over him. She didn't know him. He wasn't too rigid in his idea of what a hospital was about. He joked with the kids all the time, and they loved him.

At least, she was right about one thing, though. He did need some rest. Still jet-lagged after his return from Japan, he

wasn't having a particularly good day.

Gaze still on Kate walking down the hallway, he scrubbed his jaw. He shouldn't have referred to her classes as a "little drawing school," or told her that she didn't know anything about his job. Being nervous, tired, and skeptical about the project was no excuse. Talking like that was just not his style. Kate's efforts clearly came from a place of generosity and kindness, and she looked like someone who truly cared about the children's well-being. She definitely deserved an apology.

**T**raffic was thick and sluggish, and the drive to her sister's house was taking longer than Kate had expected. As she tightened her grip on the steering wheel, Blake Kelley's smoldering dark eyes peered through the jumble of emotions provoked by the conversation they'd had the day before.

*"Your little drawing school." "You don't know anything about my job."* His words echoed through her head. She was hurt and angry with his remarks about her project. Her only intention was to help, and it was frustrating to know that there was someone who could even think that her work might have the opposite effect on children's healing process.

But it wasn't Blake's criticism that disappointed her the most about the whole situation. It was her own reaction to it. Instead of taking advantage of this incident to finally shut down any thought of him, she couldn't stop daydreaming about his perfect face, his athletic figure, his manly voice. Seeing him again after three weeks and standing so close to him shook her to her core. There was a chemistry that was nearly impossible to clamp down. What was wrong with her? How could she still feel so attracted to someone who didn't even let her explain what her project was truly about?

She couldn't wait to tell Elizabeth and Nathan about her confrontation with Blake and to hear their thoughts about how she should handle her professional relationship with him. It was clear that that was the only kind of relationship the two of

them would ever be in, and she kept telling herself that she had no problem with that.

When Kate finally arrived at the upscale neighborhood on the outskirts of the city, both Elizabeth and Nathan rushed to the door to greet her.

“Sweetie, what took you so long?” her sister asked, hugging her.

“Traffic. It was crazy.”

“I half hoped you’d stand us up so I could eat the whole carrot cake by myself,” Nathan teased.

“You wish, Dr. Parker.” Kate chuckled, giving him a playful punch on the shoulder.

“Come on in.” Elizabeth ushered her toward the kitchen.

“Where is auntie’s big boy?”

“Poor thing, he was waiting for you, but he fell asleep. He was exhausted,” Elizabeth explained.

“Oh, my sweet little Mikey! I’m going to check on him and give him a kiss.” Kate dashed toward her nephew’s room.

“Okay,” Elizabeth said. “The meatballs are ready. All I have to do is boil the pasta.”

“I’ll join you in a sec.”

Kate loved spending time with her family. When her sister shared with her the news of her pregnancy, she was nearly as excited as Elizabeth and Nathan themselves. Now that Michael was eighteen months old, he was a tireless and curious little boy, and she used all her creative skills to come up with crafts and games he might enjoy.

“He’s sleeping like an angel.” She smiled as she walked into the beautifully decorated, spacious kitchen.

“Yeah, no wonder,” Nathan said, setting the forks next to the plates. “A couple of days ago I read about a study that found that the average toddler walks two and a half miles a day. For those little legs, that makes about fourteen thousand steps.”

“Fourteen thousand steps a day! Wow! I should look up to my nephew, then. I haven’t had much time for physical activity lately. I’m working on my own stuff and getting ready for the exhibition, teaching at the college, volunteering at the hospital... I’ve barely had time to sleep, and much less to work out. I really need to get back to jogging.” Kate sat and leaned her elbows against the table.

“Oh, speaking of the exhibition, Aunt Emma called to say that she’ll be attending with her new fiancé?”

“What? Aunt Emma has a new boyfriend?” Kate asked, her eyebrows jumping in surprise.

“Not just a new boyfriend, a new fiancé,” Elizabeth corrected her.

“That was quick. I didn’t even know she broke up with the old one, and she’s already engaged again.”

“You’re just jealous that, at the age of seventy-four, her love life is much more exciting than yours,” Liz teased as she set a large bowl of pasta on the table.

“That’s not very hard. Even this bowl has a more exciting love life than me.”

Nathan chuckled. “Oh, there’s no doubt about that. It’s mingling with so many other bowls all day long, and let’s not forget about plates and pots.”

“But, to be fair, your love life has been a bit less boring lately.” Liz wiggled her eyebrows. “Have you seen him again?”

“Seen whom? Why am I not informed about these new developments?” Nathan protested.

“Look, guys, there’s something more serious I need to talk to you about,” Kate cut them off.

“What’s wrong, sweetie?” Liz’s playful expression disappeared, and her face turned thoughtful.

“I’m getting mixed reactions to my project at the hospital.”

“What? Mixed reactions? Nathan told me everybody’s raving about your classes.” Elizabeth shot a puzzled glance in her husband’s direction.

“That’s what I’ve heard.” Nathan raised his hands defensively.

“Almost everybody. There is one person who hates it.” Kate took a long sip of her cranberry juice.

“Who’s that?” Nathan asked.

Kate turned her head to Elizabeth. “The guy I talked to you about, Blake Kelley.”

“The hottie?” Elizabeth’s mouth dropped open. “The hottie hates your project?”

“Wait, when did you two talk about Blake Kelley? And why is my wife referring to him as a hottie?” Nathan spread out his hands, his gaze perplexed.

Elizabeth pinched his cheek and giggled. “I swear, I never saw him, honey. I’m only echoing what Baby Bird told me.” Elizabeth used the pet name the whole family called Kate by since she was a child.

“I didn’t really use the word hottie.”

“Oh, right, let me recall your exact words, then. How about ‘the most incredibly gorgeous man I’ve ever seen in my whole life’?”

“Did I really say that?” Kate rolled her eyes.

“You like Blake Kelley?” Nathan asked. Then he looked at Elizabeth. “You never mentioned that.”

“Sisters have their little secrets.” Elizabeth gave him a wink.

“Well, it wasn’t really a secret. I just didn’t tell anyone else about it because it all ended before it even started,” Kate explained.

“What do you mean?” Nathan pushed. “How did you meet him?”

“How we met doesn’t really matter anymore, but I’ll tell you about it because it’s relevant to our confrontation over the art program, which is something I want to discuss with you.”

“I’m all ears.” Nathan leaned forward, resting his forearms on the table.

Kate shared with him the details of her first encounter with Blake in the lobby and described their conversation at the coffee shop. Nathan listened to her carefully, his expression interested. He had always been a good listener since the times when she ran to him for advice as a teenager.

“The weird thing was that at the coffee shop his whole attitude was totally different from the first day we met. I have no idea what the reason was, but he was, like, more guarded, more reserved, kind of trying to keep the distance between us.” Resting her chin on her hand, she concluded, “He was probably just being nice when he invited me for a coffee, and he later realized I might get my hopes up, so he backtracked.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “Come on, Kate. You don’t really believe that, do you? People don’t just go around inviting everyone they bump into for a coffee.”

“Well, not all people are the same. Perhaps he does.”

“Yeah, sure.” Elizabeth huffed.

“And when did you talk to him about your project?” Nathan asked, keeping his focus on Kate’s professional concerns.

“Last night,” she said. “Apparently, some kids asked to reschedule the appointments that clashed with my lessons, which I had absolutely no idea about. So, after I finished my class, he just showed up out of nowhere and started ranting about ‘my little drawing school’ and how I was distracting his patients.”

“Oh, sweetie, he doesn’t know what he’s talking about.” Elizabeth grabbed her sister’s hand and squeezed it.

Nathan dabbed his lips with his napkin and cleared his throat. “Look, we all know that jobs in the medical field are extremely stressful. But I’m sure the pressure gets multiplied

when you work with kids. This man works on some of the most complicated cases in pediatric medicine. We're talking about heart failure, the risk of a sudden death." He paused for a moment, as if to emphasize his point. "I've already noticed that he's too obsessed with his work, but I'm sure he's a good guy."

"I think we knew another doctor who was also a bit too obsessed with his job a few years ago, didn't we?" Elizabeth teased, squinting her eyes at Nathan. She alluded to the fact that he had canceled their wedding because he wanted to focus on his career.

Nathan blew his wife a kiss before he continued. "I've heard quite a bit about him lately. He's very active in organizing heart health awareness programs for kids and young people. He gives talks for free and collaborates with foundations to organize Echo and EKG screenings at schools. He's particularly passionate about improving techniques for early detection of congenital heart defects and helping little babies. To be honest, my impression is that he's an extraordinary human being."

The thought that behind Blake's handsome face and perfect body there was such a noble man, committed to children's well-being, melted Kate's heart and further complicated her efforts to stop thinking about him.

"I'm sure he's a nice human being and a dedicated doctor, but how do I resolve this tension between us?"

"Well, perhaps both of you need to figure out the source of this tension," Elizabeth suggested. "And I'm not trying to be funny here. There's obviously something going on between the two of you."

"No, there isn't. Now it's just about our discrepancies over the project." Kate snorted.

"Okay. You keep telling yourself that. Time will tell that I was right."

"Time will prove you wrong, Liz. But how do you guys think I should deal with his opposition to my project in the

meantime?”

“You don’t need to worry about trying to convince him with arguments,” Nathan commented calmly. “He’s had some negative experience with an art project at the hospital where he previously worked, and he doubts these initiatives can work out in a hospital setting. The only way to change his mind is with the results of your work. He’s smart, and most importantly, he truly cares about these kids. It won’t take him long to notice you’re really making a difference in their lives, and I’m sure he’ll eventually appreciate it.”

Kate hoped her brother-in-law was right. She couldn’t deny that it sounded like Blake was the kind of person whom she could respect and even admire. But she had to be careful. If she wanted to protect herself from heartbreak, Blake was not a man she should ever let herself fall in love with.

**K**ylie Goodwin was one of the children who asked the nurse to reschedule her test because it clashed with her art lesson. Blake had to explain to her how important it was to keep the focus on her treatment. He was used to simplifying complex medical issues and explaining to children of different ages how the heart worked, what heart conditions consisted of, and what doctors like him could do to help their patients.

He approached the door to the girl's room and froze, startled by the excitement in her voice.

“—and I laughed so hard when she told us how this baby elephant splashed her with his trunk,” she said, giggling. “She tells us all these stories about the things that happened to her when she visited her sister, Liz. Liz was a nurse, and she worked in many places that are very far away. And later we had to paint something that made us smile, and the first thing that came to my mind was this baby elephant splashing Kate, so that was what I painted.”

When Blake took over Kylie's case, her parents had informed him that her personality had completely changed since she was diagnosed with hypertrophic cardiomyopathy. This heart defect was one of the most common causes of sudden cardiac death, and it shattered the girl's dreams of becoming a professional basketball player. Once a bubbly, cheerful nine-year-old, Kylie became moody and silent. Although Blake had managed to gain her trust, he had rarely

seen her smile and, even less so, laugh. He was a big basketball fan, and he tried to encourage her to talk about their favorite teams, but she refused. Basketball had become a painful topic for her.

He finally knocked on the door. When he walked in, Kylie's beaming face warmed his heart.

"Good morning." He nodded to her parents. "Hey, Kylie! How are we doing today?"

"Hi, Blake." She grinned. "I'm great."

"I'm happy to hear that. You have a beautiful smile, young lady. You should smile more often."

"That's what we keep telling her too," the girl's mother said.

"Miss Welsh told me she wasn't sure if she could reschedule my test. Please, Blake, you tell her. Kate's coming on Monday. If I miss her class, I won't see her until Thursday." Kylie put her palms together, her eyes pleading.

"Do these classes really mean so much to you?" he asked gently.

"Yes!" Kylie nodded with such enthusiasm that her curly red hair kept bouncing, even after her head stopped moving.

"Well, in that case, I guess we'll have no other choice but to run these tests two hours later," he said with a shrug.

"Yay!" the girl shrieked. "Thank you, Blake!"

"But you need to promise me something, okay?"

"Sure."

"You remember what we said about all those little things we have to do together every day to help your heart work well, right?"

"How could I forget? You even made a drawing for me to make it all clear. Perhaps Kate could teach you how to draw better," the girl teased.

Blake felt his heart jump at every mention of Kate's name. He was frustrated by the fact that the harder he tried to keep a distance from her, the more it seemed that people around him were eager to speak about her. Suddenly, everybody was talking about how the patients loved her and her lessons. Getting her out of his mind under those circumstances was proving even more difficult than he had anticipated. Still, he had no other choice but to suppress the emotions that had been swirling inside him since the day he met her. He owed it to Kylie and all the other kids under his care.

"Are you saying that I'm not the natural artist I believed I was?" he asked with feigned indignation, folding his arms across his chest.

The girl laughed. "I'm afraid you're not."

"Okay, now seriously. So, here's the deal. You promise you'll follow my advice on everything we talked about, and I promise I'll make sure you never miss an art class. Deal?" He extended his hand.

"Deal!" She shook his hand with a grin and turned her head to her mother.

"Mom, can I keep taking Kate's classes, even when I get out of the hospital?"

"I don't think that's possible, sweetie. But we'll get you another art teacher if you want."

Kylie's face tightened. "No. Kate's the best!"

"Don't worry about that now. I'll talk to Kate, and we'll figure something out," Blake assured her.

"Yes!" She did a swift fist pump.

The girl's father rose to his feet to face Blake.

"Dr. Kelley, can we go out for a moment, please?"

"Sure." Blake glanced at the girl and her mother. "See you later, Kylie. Goodbye, Mrs. Goodwin."

When the two men walked out of the room, Kylie's father couldn't hold back his tears.

“Dr. Kelley, we haven’t seen her like this in over a year. This is a miracle!” he said, his voice trembling with emotion. “She’s smiling! She’s laughing! She’s as chatty as she used to be before the diagnosis.”

Blake looked into Mr. Goodwin’s wet eyes and put his hand on the man’s shoulder.

“It’s really good to hear that, Mr. Goodwin.”

“At times, she looked so disheartened that we were scared she might even lose interest in her treatment, but now she looks so motivated and empowered.”

“She definitely does.” Blake nodded, still amazed that such an important breakthrough in the process of his patient’s treatment was brought on by a nonphysician. No matter how competent he was in his field, this reminded him that his mind always had to remain open to new experiences and knowledge. “I’m confident that the results of the tests we’re currently running will give her even more reason to stay positive.”

“I really hope so.” The man ran his hands through his hair. “It’s been a tough year. We’re in desperate need of some good news. But, in the meantime, the important thing is that our little girl is finally back. My wife and I have been praying to see her like this again.”

“Now I understand what you meant when you said you couldn’t recognize her.”

“Isn’t that right? And it’s all thanks to you, Dr. Kelley. You’re a genius! Introducing this art program was such a brilliant idea.”

Blake felt his throat tighten. He was an honest man, and he couldn’t take credit for an idea he had opposed.

“To be fair, all credit for that goes to Kate Watson. It’s her project.”

“Well, please, tell her that she’s amazing.”

“I most certainly will,” Blake replied with a smile.

What Kate had achieved in such a short amount of time was impressive. She was helping Kylie in ways that no

currently available treatment ever could. Blake regretted the fact that he had allowed his preconceptions to skew his judgment, and now he felt even more embarrassed for confronting Kate the way he did days before. It gutted him to think that, after his cold behavior at the coffee shop and his rant in the hallway, this fascinating woman probably hated him.

**L**unch break was an expression that in Blake's daily schedule rarely had anything to do with food or any kind of rest. He usually barely had time to drink his protein shake in his office. But this was a surprisingly calm Monday, and he decided to drop by Kate's classroom. After his conversation with Kylie, he made inquiries about the art program schedule and quickly memorized it. Taking the last sip of his shake, he glanced at his watch. Kate's lesson with adults was starting in half an hour. *Perhaps she's already there*, he thought.

He had spent all weekend thinking about her art program and its impact on Kylie and other children. But, to his dismay, his mind did not center only on the way Kate's work affected his patients. He struggled to push her smile from his mind and couldn't stop picturing her in his arms. The excitement of seeing her beautiful hazel eyes again was mixed with the nervousness of having to find the right words to apologize for his arrogant tone during their last conversation. He had been wrong about her project, and he was man enough to admit when he made a mistake.

When he reached the old office wing, he stopped in front of the glass wall, mesmerized by the sight of Kate dancing around the easels. His lips split into a wide grin as she started to sing, holding a paint brush and pretending it was a microphone. He was lost in the tenderness of the scene when their eyes suddenly met. Her expression quickly changed as

she put the paint brush down and lowered her gaze. The magic was broken. It was time to face reality.

“May I come in?” he asked, gesturing to himself and pointing to the classroom.

She nodded, her face serious.

“Nice moves!” He tried to break the ice as he walked in, hoping she would accept his teasing as a sign that he was eager to move past the tension of their last encounter.

But his tactics didn't seem to be working. “What can I do for you, Dr. Kelley?” she asked bluntly.

“Why not simply ‘Blake’?” he asked, tucking his hands into his pockets.

“As a person who ‘*knows nothing*’ about your job and can only aspire to run ‘*a little drawing school*,’ I’m afraid it would be entirely inappropriate to call you anything but Dr. Kelley. Or perhaps you prefer Your Highness?”

With a nod, Blake raised a brow. “Your Highness sounds much better.”

“Don't push your luck,” she replied, rolling her eyes.

“Look, I'm kidding, but what I came to tell you is actually quite serious. I owe you an apology.”

“Well, I won't dispute that.” She leaned back against her desk, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Not only because I acted like an idiot the other day but also because I was wrong and you were right,” he said, his tone thoughtful.

Kate squinted. “About what exactly?”

“About everything.”

“Everything is a broad term.”

“Your art program really does help both the patients and the doctors.”

She stared at him in silence, her interest apparently piqued.

“I talked to one of my patients a few days ago. Her name’s Kylie. You remember her from your classes, right?”

“Kylie. A lovely kid. Of course I know her.”

“She’s only nine, and she’d been struggling with depressive thoughts since she was diagnosed with hypertrophic cardiomyopathy. Her mom and dad couldn’t recognize her anymore. She’d become a totally different person. After a few lessons with you, she’s finally back. She’s smiling again, even laughing out loud. Listening to her and her parents talk about you and your class had a powerful impact on me. After that conversation, I went on and talked to a few other patients. They all agree. They’re finding inspiration and comfort in your classes.”

“Thank you for sharing this with me,” she whispered, her eyes flooded with emotion. “I really appreciate it.”

Suddenly, Blake felt a sense of deep connection between them, grounded in their common desire to help sick children feel better.

“I apologize for questioning your work. Now I realize that the fact that I care about these kids doesn’t give me the right to think that I’m the only one who can help them.” He expected to find this exercise in humility more embarrassing, but the words came out of his mouth so effortlessly and naturally that it was clear that Kate’s presence put him at ease. “I guess you were right when you said I was too rigid in thinking of the hospital as a place where we should only focus on medical care of our patients.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to judge your—”

“No, it’s fine. You just commented what you saw. I was the one who judged your project based on previous experiences with someone who had nothing to do with you. I let myself get carried away by preconceptions, and I’m sorry about that. I should have known better.”

“It’s not an easy thing to look at ourselves in the mirror and admit when we’ve been wrong. It takes a lot of strength to face our weaknesses.”

“I like the way you put that.” He smiled, running a hand over his jaw. “I guess I still have a lot to learn.”

“Even from the *little drawing school girl*?” she teased.

“Especially from the *little drawing school girl*,” he said with a chuckle. “I’m really sorry about the tone I used that evening. I was tired and worried, and I didn’t formulate my concerns correctly. I never meant to diminish you in any way.”

“It’s all right.”

“Kylie’s dad asked me to tell you that you’re amazing.”

“Thank you.”

“And I have to admit that I agree with him,” he blurted out before he could stop himself.

“You do?” She tilted her head, a blush spreading across her face.

*I’ve believed you’re amazing since the moment I ran into you in the lobby*, he thought, but he remained silent, nodding and staring into her dark eyes.

“Hello, my dear!” an old lady’s voice broke the silence as she walked into the classroom.

“Hi, Evelyn!” Kate smiled at the woman, stepping toward her. “How are we doing today?”

“Oh, I’m so glad it finally stopped raining. Sunny weather always puts me in a good mood.” Evelyn pushed her glasses up her nose as she looked up at Blake. “Dr. Kelley? What a lovely surprise!”

“It’s nice to meet you,” he replied, puzzled to hear an unfamiliar woman knew his name.

“Is Dr. Kelley going to be our model today?” Evelyn asked, a mischievous glint in her eyes.

Overhearing her words, three older women shouted in unison as they stepped through the door, “Dr. Kelley is going to be our model?”

“When I found that penny on the floor this morning, I knew this was going to be my lucky day,” one of them commented with a grin, fussing with her short gray hair.

Blake glanced at Kate as she covered her mouth with her hand, giggling.

“I’m flattered, ladies.” He bowed his head. “I’m sorry to disappoint you, but duty’s calling,” he said, gesturing to his white coat. “I’m leaving you in good hands, though. I’m sure Kate has better ideas for today’s painting subject.”

Evelyn sighed. “It sounded too good to be true anyway.”

“I’ll see you around, Kate.” He nodded at her as he began to stride away.

“Have a nice day,” she replied. “And thanks once again.”

“Thank you for your understanding.” He turned his eyes to the patients. “Enjoy your lesson, ladies!”

“I wish I was his patient,” he heard one of the women comment in a low voice as he approached the door.

“Well, he’s a pediatrician so you would have to go back to 1925 to be his patient.” Another patient laughed.

“Perhaps you should go back to 1925. I’m not that old,” the other woman protested.

Blake stifled a chuckle as he walked out of the classroom. Passing by the glass wall, he fought the urge to cast one final glance at Kate. Even though his purposeful stride exuded tranquility, his mind was in chaos. Half of it obsessed over how to defend himself from Kate’s charms, while the other half was already scheming to find an excuse to see her again.

**B**efore starting his shift on a Friday morning, Blake sat at the coffee shop, drinking his espresso. For days, he did his best not to fall into the temptation of looking for Kate. Knowing her schedule well allowed him to avoid crossing paths with her. Still, her beautiful face was the first thing he saw when he woke up and the last image that lingered in his head before falling asleep. The enthusiasm that Kate's work provoked among his patients and their continuous praise of her personality didn't help either. The day before, one of the girls even gave him a painting that she had made for him in Kate's class.

He tried to convince himself that his mind drifted to her so often because of the tension that was created between them over the art program. He knew that apologizing for his arrogance was the right thing to do and hoped that it would liberate him and allow him to regain his focus. But he couldn't be more wrong. She was so lovely while dancing in the classroom and so graceful in accepting his apology that keeping her out of his thoughts was even more difficult now.

The sight of Nathan Parker entering the coffee shop only confirmed that wherever he turned, everything reminded him of Kate. The two men had rarely had a chance to talk in private. Parker was a brilliant physician, and until recently, the only thing that Blake was interested in discussing with him was medicine. This wasn't the case anymore, though. He hated to admit that now he was more intrigued by the information

that Nathan could share with him as Kate's brother-in-law than as one of the best doctors in the country.

After Nathan made his order, he started scanning the place, looking for a free spot. Blake caught his gaze and gestured toward his own table.

"Hey! Thanks. It's crowded today." Nathan settled into the chair across from Blake.

"No problem."

"How is it going? Getting used to Cleveland?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"You don't sound convinced," Nathan remarked, raising an eyebrow.

"Cleveland certainly has a lot to offer. I've lived in a few big cities since I finished high school, and they all have their good sides, but I think I'll always be a small town guy at heart."

"I've never lived in a small town, so I can't compare, but I can imagine that living in a place like that has its charms."

"It's a totally different lifestyle. Slower pace, fewer crowds, more peace and quiet." His face beamed as he showed Nathan a white church tower in the midst of fall foliage on the background image of his phone.

"Is this your town?"

"Yes. Stowe, in Vermont."

"Your family still lives there?"

"My parents do."

"Do you visit them often?"

"Not as often as I'd like, but loneliness is the price we have to pay for having the privilege of saving lives every day." Loneliness? Why did he use the word loneliness? Blake didn't feel lonely. He lived alone, that was true. But he was fine with that. And even if he was lonely, he shouldn't go around

revealing his vulnerabilities to others. And especially not to Kate's brother-in-law.

"It's funny you mention that, because I used to have that same idea for a long time, that being a doctor was incompatible with many things. But trust me, my life totally changed when I realized a good doctor doesn't have to be lonely."

"You're probably right. But I guess we all have our backstory, our emotional baggage, and... each one of us needs to follow our own path and figure out what works best for us."

"That's true." Nathan nodded.

Blake hoped Nathan would drop the subject. He wasn't ready to discuss his internal struggles with anyone. Still, deep inside, he held so many questions that he would have liked to ask Nathan. The first of all was whether Kate had ever mentioned him to her family.

As if reading his mind, Nathan said, "So, I heard you already had a chance to meet my sister-in-law."

*She talked to Nathan about me! Or he heard it from someone else. Kate's sister?* Blake's breath hitched in his throat. Perhaps Kate had limited herself to informing her family that an arrogant doctor ranted against her project. The urgency of his need to know what she felt about their interactions over the past few weeks surprised him.

He was usually good at reading the cues of women's interest, but the one time it actually mattered to him to figure it out, his senses seemed to be failing him. At one moment, he saw fire in Kate's eyes, at another, he was sure she couldn't care less about him.

"Yes." Blake decided to stop torturing himself and cut to the chase. "Did she tell you about it?"

"Yes, she did." Nathan smiled, his expression hard to interpret. "She's very passionate about her work, and this project comes very close to home for her. She spent many sleepless nights at the hospital while her mom struggled with cancer."

“Really? I’m sorry to hear they had to go through that. I remember she mentioned having been to the hospital quite a few times. But I wasn’t aware that was the reason. Did her mom get better?”

“Yes. Thank God, she’s cured.”

Blake appreciated the fact that, just like him, Nathan wasn’t a man of science blinded by the feeling of omnipotence, but someone who acknowledged the importance of God’s will.

“Were you in charge of her treatment?”

Nathan nodded.

“Were you already married to her sister back then?”

“No, and paradoxically, if poor Diane hadn’t brought us together in such a dramatic way, perhaps I never would be. Kate didn’t tell you about it?”

Blake shook his head, a sudden relief washing over him at Nathan’s question. If the man believed Kate could have shared part of her family history with Blake, that meant she didn’t represent him as a grumpy doctor she only wanted to run away from. “No, but it sounds like an interesting story.”

“Yeah, interesting but long. Perhaps we’ll tell you about it someday.”

*We?* As Blake imagined himself sitting at a dinner table with Kate’s family, exchanging anecdotes and laughing, an unexpected warmth filled his chest. He wasn’t sure anymore if he should fight what thinking about this woman was doing to him or just give in to the feeling.

“Dr. Kelley!” a woman called as she approached their table with a grin. “I’m sorry to interrupt you. I just needed to thank you for the art program. It’s been a true blessing for our Robbie and for the whole family. Please, say hi to Kate for me. She’s such a sweetheart.”

“I’m happy to hear that. I’ll pass on your greetings to her. The merit for that project is all hers.” He was confused that kids’ family members assumed that he collaborated closely

with the hospital volunteer who was in charge of art lessons. It wasn't the first time that a patient's parent had sent greetings or a message for Kate through him. And, at that moment, it struck him.

Perhaps, that was actually what he needed to do: collaborate with her. He would be contributing to a project that was clearly bringing benefits to his patients. But he would also get a chance to normalize his relationship with Kate and strip their encounters of all that excitement and trepidation that he felt whenever he saw her. Sharing with her the mission of helping his patients would shift his focus from her as a woman to a collaborator. With time, he would probably realize that all these emotions swirling inside him now were just a moment of confusion caused by many years of living alone.

"I really appreciate your feedback, Mrs. Cruz," he added before the woman left him and Nathan to their conversation.

"I already apologized to Kate, and I'd like to do the same with you. I'm sorry I initially opposed the program. My patients are really enthusiastic about it."

"I understand where you were coming from, but I'm glad we're on the same page now. I truly believe this project has a lot of potential."

Blake could have waited until Monday to see Kate at the hospital and tell her all about his plans for collaboration. But he suddenly felt impatient to set it all in motion, and three days seemed like a terribly long time.

"Speaking of the potential of the project, I actually have a few ideas how to expand it. Would you mind giving me Kate's phone number so we can discuss a few things?" Blake asked, doing his best to keep his tone neutral.

Nathan stroked his chin for a moment, studying Blake's face. "Just to be clear, I've never given Kate's phone number to anyone. But if you have some ideas related to her project, I guess she may be interested."

"Thanks a lot," Blake said. Something in Nathan's eyes told him he didn't quite buy his excuse. He typed in Kate's

name as Nathan scrolled through his contact list, looking for her number. Knowing that he would soon be only a phone call or a text message away from her sent shivers all the way to his toes.

## I I

### KATE

**K**ate sat in the rocking chair on her mother's porch, swaying back and forth. During Diane's illness a few years ago, she moved back home so she could take better care of her. After the older woman was cured, Kate rented her own apartment again, but she visited whenever she could.

She stared in the distance as the picture of Blake's cocked eyebrow and smug half grin flickered before her eyes. "*Your Highness sounds much better.*" She recalled his playful words with a giggle. She had caught herself grinning as she watched his broad shoulders disappear through the door of her classroom. When her gaze finally shifted back to her students, the old ladies were already winking and exchanging knowing looks among themselves. Kate's heart was hammering in her chest and she was thankful that the women refrained from teasing her about the dashing doctor. She wouldn't have known how to respond to their quips, and the blush on her face would have revealed much more about her feelings than she was ready to share.

Her mother's voice pulled her from replaying the scene in her head.

"I made your favorite cheesecake," Diane announced cheerfully as she stepped on the porch with a tray in her hands.

Kate straightened and reached for her plate with a smile. "Homemade pasta, strawberry cheesecake... I can't even

remember why I ever moved out of here. You're the best housemate a girl could wish for, Mama."

Diane chuckled. "I'm sure a girl of your age would wish for quite a different kind of housemate," she said with a wink.

"Are you thinking what I think you're thinking?" Kate narrowed her eyes.

"You know what I mean, sweetie." Diane settled into the chair next to her daughter, bringing her cup of tea to her lips. After a long sip, she continued, "You've been so dedicated to caring about me and to your work over the last few years, and I can't even remember the last time I heard you talk about a boy."

"A boy?" Kate laughed. "Yeah, it was probably such a long time ago that we still referred to them as *boys* back then." She paused for a moment as her expression turned thoughtful. "I won't lie to you, Mom. I wish I had in my life what you and dad had, what Liz and Nathan have. But perhaps I just wasn't born to be loved—I mean, in that way. It doesn't seem to be happening for me."

Diane took a deep breath before reminding her daughter of a verse from the Bible. "The Lord is good to those whose hope is in Him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord." Sinking back into her chair, she reached her hand out to Kate.

The young woman left the plate with her dessert on the table in front of her and interlaced her fingers with her mother's.

"When the right man walks into your life, you'll realize that it was worth the wait," Diane assured her, lifting her eyes to the sky.

"But what can you do if you wish someone was right even though you know he's wrong for you?" Kate sighed.

Diane glanced at her suspiciously. "I'm not sure why, but that doesn't really sound like a hypothetical question. Is there someone specific who you want to be right for you at this very moment?"

Kate smiled at her own inability to hide anything from her mother. She knew how much Diane wanted to see both her daughters happily married, and she didn't want to get her hopes up by telling her about Blake, because it was clear from the start that nothing would ever happen between them. But now that her mother was asking her a question, she couldn't deny the truth.

"Well, it's kind of complicated. But, to be honest, yes. There is someone I'd like to be meant for me."

"And?"

"And nothing. He's not." Kate shrugged, her tone more sad than resigned.

"How can you be so sure?"

"Trust me, Mom. I know what I'm talking about."

"You're really not going to tell your good old mom who this mysterious man is?" Diane let go of Kate's hand, facing her with a playful frown.

"Just a guy who works with Nathan."

"You fell in love with a doctor too?" The woman raised an eyebrow, looking intrigued.

"Who said I fell in love?" Kate rolled her eyes. "He's really not even worth talking about because he's totally not what I'm looking for in a man."

"Really? What is he like?"

"I can't deny that he's incredibly handsome. He's smart and responsible. He truly cares about his patients. He has a good sense of humor," Kate stated matter-of-factly, as if reading a shopping list.

"Oh, I see now. What woman would want a man like that?" Diane waved her hand with mock disgust.

Kate couldn't help but chuckle. "It's true. He is all that, and probably much more. But what I meant is that he's convinced that there's no room for love or family in his life.

He only thinks about his job. And I don't need someone like that by my side."

"He can be convinced of whatever he wants, but when true love knocks on our door, that's it. It's up to us to open the door or not, but it's not going away that easily. In some cases, ever." Diane's melancholic tone revealed that her words were not based on abstract ideas but on heartfelt memories. "Your Uncle Jamie didn't dare to open that door, and his stubbornness cost him the love of his life."

"You never told me why Uncle Jamie stayed single. I just assumed he didn't find the right person."

"That would have probably been much easier for him to bear than the thought of pushing away his true love."

"Did he sacrifice love for his career as a pilot?"

"No, in his case, that's not what it was about. You already know that we grew up in poverty and that our father left us when we were only babies. Our mom struggled really hard to make ends meet. We had no money, no family name or connections. When he was a teenager, he fell in love with a girl who was all the opposite. She was the daughter of the wealthiest man in town."

Diane smiled sadly. "Sweet Jane. She was such a lovely girl. She adored your uncle, and he was crazy about her. They made a beautiful couple. Even though her parents didn't want her to marry him, she confronted them and she was ready to give up her inheritance and her social status just to be with him. And what did he do? Instead of fighting for her, he got scared and ran away. He feared that he wasn't good enough for her, that, as time went by, she would come to despise him and leave him for someone of her own kind.

"He got a scholarship and went on to become a pilot. When he became successful and felt more self-confident, he came back to look for her, but it was too late. She was already married and had a baby with a man she didn't love. His fears and bad decisions denied both of them a chance to find happiness."

Kate stared at her mother, her lips slightly parted. Her uncle was a man of few words. It had never occurred to her that at the root of his solitary lifestyle there might be such a sad love story.

Suddenly, her phone chimed. She leaned toward the table to pick it up and frowned as she saw she'd received a text from an unfamiliar number. She swiped the screen to read it.

**UNKNOWN: I hope you don't mind I asked Nathan to give me your number. I keep getting great feedback about your project and I'd like to discuss with you how to expand it. Please, let me know if you're interested.**

Even though there was no name at the end of the message, Kate had no doubt that the sender was Blake. Her heart raced uncontrollably, and her palms started to sweat. If he wanted to talk to her about her project, he could wait until her Monday lesson at the hospital. How should she interpret the fact that he had gone through the trouble of asking Nathan for her phone number and contacting her out of work hours instead of meeting her in his professional environment? She frowned in confusion.

"Something wrong?" Diane asked.

"No, Mom. It's just work." Knowing Diane's romantic soul and unrelenting optimism, Kate was certain that her mother would see in Blake's gesture a sign that he was opening up to love. But what were the chances of that? She had to protect both her mom and herself from disappointment.

People could change. Blake himself would probably change his priorities someday and fall in love. Still, the idea that the person he might end up falling in love with could be her just sounded ridiculously unrealistic. If she wanted to avoid heartbreak, she needed to keep her relationship with him strictly professional.

She couldn't resist teasing him in reply to his text, though.

**KATE: I'm sorry but I don't know this number and you left no name. Who is this?**

Five long minutes passed without response. It probably took some courage on Blake's part to ask for her number, and she started to be concerned that her teasing might have made him feel embarrassed. But when her phone finally pinged again and she read his message, her lips spread into a wide grin.

**BLAKE: You can call me Your Highness :)**

**K**ate struggled to calm her uneven breathing as a nurse guided her through the hall to Blake's office. He had chosen to contact her in a surprisingly informal way, by texting her to a phone number that she had never given him. Still, he proposed for the two of them to meet to discuss the future of her project in a setting that was far more formal than the places of their previous encounters.

The short brunette knocked on Blake's door and announced, "Dr. Kelley, Ms. Watson is here."

"Thank you." He rose to his feet with a gentle smile, his gaze immediately locking on Kate's face.

As the nurse left the office, he gestured for Kate to take a seat.

She hadn't seen him in a week, and her heart was pounding so hard that she was afraid he might hear it across the room. She did her best to maintain a calm façade as her eyes inspected how neatly his strong chest and shoulders fit his lab coat.

Even though she tried to remind herself that her relationship with Blake was and should remain only professional, there was something inside her that seemed to sabotage her efforts to shield her heart and pushed her to go on with their internal jokes.

"Good morning, Your Highness." She bowed playfully before she settled into her chair.

“Welcome to my castle, Lady Watson.” The smirk he gave her sent a jolt of electricity through her. “I hope you don’t mind I took the liberty to ask for your phone number, because it’s for a good cause. You’ll see,” he hurriedly added in a business-like tone. The contrast between the fire in his gaze when he smirked at her and the formality of his clarification gave her a feeling that he himself was struggling with how to define their interaction in his head.

“Okay. Let’s hear it.”

“Since I talked to Kylie, I started reading research articles about the benefits of arts in health care and about the ways of integrating art programs in the clinical setting. I’d like to offer my contribution and help you expand the project.”

“Sounds great. Do you have any specific ideas?”

“I’ve been going through some good practice examples and it seems like the permanent art displays are increasingly popular in hospitals. I believe this could be an interesting idea for our pediatric unit. What do you think?”

“I’m glad you mentioned that because I’ve also been thinking about suggesting to paint the walls of the unit. But I don’t think we should simply paint the walls or hang the paintings of something that we consider beautiful or uplifting. We should engage the kids and find out what kind of world they would like to step into when entering the pediatric unit.”

Blake listened to her with interest. Kate couldn’t help noticing that even in his most business-oriented mode, he looked irresistible. His focused gaze and serious expression only added to the appeal of his perfect features.

“Stepping into a world? An interesting concept, indeed. So, do you suggest we talk to the children about what kind of images and characters they want to be surrounded by?”

“Yes, I believe that would be the best way to go.”

“I like that.” He nodded, his chin resting on his fist. “I’ll drop by before one of your lessons and we can discuss this with the kids.”

“No problem,” Kate replied.

While Blake continued to talk about other activities that could be organized at the hospital, a photograph sitting on his desk caught Kate's eye. She could only see the back of the frame, and she was dying to know who was in the picture that Blake Kelley held in his office. After their meeting at the coffee shop, she would have been certain that the only photograph the man would care to have in his private space could be one of himself. But what she learned about him over the last few weeks made her realize that he might be less self-absorbed than she had initially come to believe. She was suddenly so consumed by curiosity that she decided not to leave the office until she found out who was in the picture.

"Next week, I'll be speaking at the Institute of Art about heart attack prevention. Perhaps we could talk to people there and recruit a few art students to help you out with painting the unit. I can talk to a few foundations too, and we can get some funding for the project."

"It's impressive how resourceful you are when something piques your interest."

"Thank you." He bit into his bottom lip, his expression hard to read.

When talking about "piquing his interest," she had in mind the art project, but she quickly realized her words could also be interpreted in a way that had little to do with art. She was overanalyzing the words they exchanged and obsessing over who was in the picture set on his desk. Her intention to focus on her professional collaboration with Blake was failing miserably.

"Check out the book I bought recently." Blake stood up and turned his back on her as he walked to a bookshelf in the corner of the room.

Kate's pulse sped up. She had a few seconds to take a peek at the photo on his desk, and she felt like a little girl worried about being caught reading her big sister's diary. She rose from her chair, leaned over the picture, and sat back as quickly as possible. It was an old photograph of what Kate assumed was Blake's family. A smiling couple, dressed in the style of

the 90s, with three young children: twin boys about the age of seven or eight clinging to their father's neck, and a baby, dressed in pink, smiling in her mother's arms. Even though Kate could see the picture only for a brief moment, the warmth and happiness that radiated off it was unmistakable.

Tenderness washed over her as her eyes drifted back to Blake. Perhaps, after all, he was family-man material, even if he wasn't ready to admit it to himself. She struggled to keep her face blank as she waited for him to turn around.

"Look, I've been going to sleep reading about these people for the last few days," Blake said, handing the book over to Kate.

"*The Hundred Most Inspiring Artists in the History of Mankind*," Kate read the title out loud. "I can see that you're not only resourceful but also very thorough when you set your mind on something."

"I've never shown much interest in art at school, but I'm suddenly so fascinated. I even have my favorite painter now." He chuckled.

"And who would that be?"

"Tintoretto."

"Tintoretto? I can't believe it. I spent a month in Venice studying Tintoretto's early works and wrote my thesis about him."

"Really? You'll have to tell me all about that trip someday."

For a few long moments, they stared into each other's eyes in silence. The only sound came from the big clock ticking on the wall. The image of the two of them snuggling up in a gondola while gliding across Venetian canals flashed through Kate's mind. "Sure. I'd be happy to," she uttered, finally realizing that she hadn't replied to his request.

"I've been to Rome and Florence, but I've never been to Venice."

"It's one of those places you must see before you die."

“Oh, I hope I still have time then.”

“I’m sure you do.” Kate giggled. “Part of my job is to inspire people to let art touch their heart, and it makes me really happy to know that my project contributed to sparking your interest in something I care so deeply about.”

“Until recently, I would never have thought I would be saying this, but I realized that reflecting upon the artistic inventiveness and creativity even stimulates me as a physician. Thank you for that.”

With Blake’s every word, Kate had a growing suspicion that, once she left his office, not thinking about him would be harder than ever. A glimmer of hope flickered inside her heart. Perhaps Blake’s interest in her project was a sign that something was changing inside him. Perhaps he felt something too. After all, Liz was right. If he didn’t like her, why would he have invited her for a coffee that day? That “act of kindness to a stranger” thing that she had come up with never sounded really convincing, right?

**B**lake was tempted to text Kate as soon as she walked out of his office on Monday. He wanted to tell her he enjoyed talking to her and looked forward to seeing her again. But he knew he shouldn't. The connection he felt between them during their conversation was so strong that he started to wonder if he'd been wrong to believe that turning her into a collaborator would distract him from seeing her as a woman he was obsessed with.

She had invited him to visit her class on Thursday so they could talk to the children about wall-painting themes. But after she left, having to wait for three days before meeting her again suddenly seemed like an eternity.

Instead of considering his strategy to suppress his fascination with Kate unsuccessful, he found comfort in the idea that this initial excitement with their regular encounters would eventually fade away.

As he approached Kate's classroom on Thursday morning, he was treated to the sounds of kids' cheerful voices and laughter. This was particularly refreshing in a building that was usually filled with more unpleasant noises or, at best, silence. But Blake didn't need a reminder of how special Kate's effect on her surroundings was. He knew it all too well since the moment his eyes locked with hers for the first time.

"Blake!" Miguel, his six-year-old patient, shouted when he spotted him through the glass wall.

Blake walked into the classroom, waving at the children. “Hey, guys! How’s it going?” Determined not to show even the slightest sign of the turmoil swirling through his body, he greeted Kate with a nonchalant wink in her direction.

She replied with a nod and smiled. “As I promised, today we have a special guest. Ladies and gentlemen, please, welcome Dr. Blaaake Kelley!” Kate playfully gestured toward Blake and modulated her tone as if she were announcing a guest on a talk show. The students started giggling and clapping. It was obvious that creating a relaxed atmosphere in the classroom came naturally to her.

“Blake,” Miguel shrieked. “It arrived this morning! I got it! I got it!” He ran across the room toward Blake and wrapped his arms around his legs.

Blake bent down to pick the little one up. “That’s great, buddy!”

“What did you get?” Another boy couldn’t hold back his curiosity.

“Blake knows LeBron James. He asked him to send me his jersey before my surgery, and he did,” Miguel explained with a grin, towering over other children in Blake’s arms.

“I wish he was my doctor.” The other boy pouted.

“I don’t have to be your doctor. If there’s anything I can do for you, just let me know.”

“Really?”

“Sure thing.”

“Can you tell LeBron James to come to visit us here at the hospital?”

“I believe we can arrange that.” Blake nodded.

“What? Are you serious?” The boy’s jaw dropped, and his eyes widened as he looked around the classroom, apparently gauging his friends’ reaction. “Did you hear that?”

A few boys threw their fists in the air and stared at Blake in admiration.

“He’s a busy guy, so I can’t tell you how soon we can make this happen, but I promise I’ll do my best to get him to come here.”

“Wow,” the children gasped.

“I have his jersey. Can I ask him to sign it for me when he comes?” a girl asked.

“Of course.”

“I’ll ask him to sign my ball,” another kid said.

“Can we take pictures with him?”

“We won’t let him leave until he takes pictures with all of you,” Blake promised with a wink.

Claps and cheers filled the room.

Blake put Miguel down on the floor as he glanced over at Kate. “In the meantime, we wanted to discuss something really important with you,” he announced, trying to calm the children down.

“We need your help because you’re the real experts on this thing that we want to talk to you about,” Kate continued.

“What does it mean *experts*?” a little girl asked.

“An expert is someone who knows a lot about something,” Kate replied readily.

The girl grinned. “Ah! I’m an expert on Barbies then.”

“And I’m an expert on dinosaurs,” a boy added.

“Well, in a way, that’s what we wanted to ask you. We plan to paint the kids’ area of the hospital, and we need to hear what you’d like to see on your walls. We want to create some kind of a magic world for you, filled with the stories and the characters that you love.”

Kate’s eyes sparkled with excitement as she spoke. Her energy was contagious, and the children listened intently, hanging on her every word. Blake caught himself staring at her, lost in the sound of her voice and the sight of her beautiful face.

“Dr. Kelley, can you tell us what your favorite book was when you were a kid?” Kate snapped him out of his trance.

He cleared his throat, but before he had a chance to answer, a girl pulled at Kate’s sleeve and asked, “Why do you call him Dr. Kelley and not Blake, like we all do? Aren’t you friends?”

“They’re not just friends. He’s her boyfriend,” another girl intervened, giggling. The rest of the class burst out laughing at her words.

“Why would Kate call him Dr. Kelley if he was her boyfriend?” a boy questioned.

Both Kate and Blake remained silent for a moment while the kids commented on their relationship status. He looked at her, tenderness washing over him when he saw her blushing. No matter how much he tried to fight what he was starting to feel for her, it was clear that even children could notice something special between them.

He struggled to wrap his head around the idea that, since the moment she walked into his world, nothing had been the same. Very early in his life, Blake had chosen his calling. His motivation was so strong and his commitment to saving children’s lives so important and fulfilling that he didn’t pause to think that he might ever need anything else. He attributed the sense of loneliness that he occasionally felt to the fact that he had lived far away from his home since he got his scholarship and moved to Los Angeles at the age of eighteen.

But now his chest tightened at the thought that the lifestyle he had chosen for himself left no room for love and a family of his own. Was he really willing to sacrifice all that? The realization that he was questioning his decisions in this way for the first time terrified him.

It was probably this sudden feeling of vulnerability that gave his voice a colder tone than he intended when he blurted out, “We’re not friends or anything else. We’re only working together.”

It was as if he needed to remind himself rather than clarify for the children what his relationship with Kate was about. His gaze instinctively darted to her. She avoided his eyes, but the awkward expression he found on her face made his stomach drop. Did she look disappointed?

If she did, she quickly regained her composure. “Yes, Dr. Kelley is right. We’re just working together. So, let’s get down to work, guys. We’ll do a little bit of brainstorming. Does anyone know what *brainstorming* is?”

A girl shook her head. “I have no idea.”

“I think it’s like when there’s a storm in your brain,” Miguel offered, frowning inquisitively.

“You’re close, Miguelito. It’s kind of a creative storm.” Kate smiled gently and stroked the little one’s hair. “If we want to find a solution to a problem, we can get together and use our brains to storm the problem all together.”

As Kate talked to the children about the advantages of finding solutions as a group, the boy’s words echoed in Blake’s mind. *A storm in your brain*. The metaphor served him well to picture how Kate’s appearance in his life affected him. There was, indeed, a storm in his brain. But what worried him even more was the storm in his heart.

Sweat rolled down Kate's face, and she used the back of her sleeve to wipe it off. It was Saturday morning, and she had been out jogging for over an hour, trying to drown her thoughts in the soreness of her aching muscles, but the sounds and images kept playing on and on in her head.

*"We're not friends or anything else. We're only working together."* Since her meeting with Blake and the kids ended on Thursday, she had been convincing herself that she had absolutely no problem with that. If she had known that he was going to say that, she would have got ahead of him and said the same thing before he even had a chance to open his mouth. Instead, she just stood there, listening to his words and feeling foolish for ever letting herself think that his sudden interest in her project came from his decision to reconsider his priorities in life and his desire to get to know her better.

Blake didn't lie. They were not friends... or anything else. They had talked to each other only a few times. Her disappointment didn't come from what he said, though, but how he said it. Of course, she hadn't expected him to open up to the children, but it was his matter-of-factly tone, his emotionless countenance, his emphasis on the words "we're only working together" that struck her cold. He said it like he really meant it. They were simply nothing to each other.

For her part, she wished the statement were true, but the way the air rushed from her lungs every time his intense gaze locked with hers begged to differ. She hated to admit to herself

that she was drawn to Blake more than she'd ever even thought possible. Still, now that it was clear how he felt about her, avoiding the temptation of getting lost in his eyes while working with him side by side should not be so hard. She was mature enough to put an end to this ridiculous daydreaming.

Her steps heavy, she slowed her pace to a walk until finally stopping near the park exit. She bent down, resting her hands on her knees and panting. Who needed Blake? She would be fine. Actually, she was already feeling much better. As she inhaled deeply, her head turned to the side and she suddenly froze. Instead of her heart rate receding after the physical effort, she felt it pick up even more intensely. Her breath caught in her throat as she squinted to make sure the exhaustion wasn't taking its toll on her and that she was really seeing what she thought she was seeing.

About fifty yards away, Blake was sitting on a blanket under a willow tree with a beautiful brunette. Apparently in the middle of recounting something funny, he moved his hands in the air and changed his facial expressions as the woman tossed her head back, laughing like a little kid. She had perfect features and long, shiny hair, and she was clearly enjoying every minute of her time with Blake.

Realizing that she had been staring at them for a few minutes, Kate turned her head away and looked down, her hands still pressed against her knees. A burning sensation spread across her chest. She couldn't help but look at them once again, her stomach swirling with jealousy.

She told herself this was a sign she shouldn't waste her time on him. But her heart ached at the thought that there was so much warmth and complicity between Blake and the young woman sitting on the blanket with him. Perhaps over the last month he had really paused to rethink his life choices. The thing was that he didn't do it for her, but for someone else.

Kate straightened, an undefinable sense of loss lingering inside her. Her jaw tightened as she squared her shoulders and started walking, unable to resist one final glance in Blake's direction. The girl stretched out her arm, holding a selfie stick.

Blake wrapped his arm around her shoulder as both of them smiled for the picture.

Pressing her lips flat, Kate lengthened her stride, desperate to put as much space between them as possible. She was shocked to realize what a powerful reaction seeing Blake with another woman provoked in her. As she walked toward the place where her car was parked, she pulled her phone out of her backpack. She couldn't wait to share what she'd just seen with her sister. She didn't really need any advice, because she already knew that she finally had no choice but to forget about him. Still, she felt the need to get all the frustration out of herself to be able to move on.

Her mother, Elizabeth, Nathan, and William were the only people she had on speed dial. She pressed number two, and Elizabeth answered on the first ring.

"Hey, sweetie. I was about to call you." Kate could hear her nephew's voice in the background. "*Mikey, no, you can't color Mommy's bag. No, stop it, honey! Sorry, Kate, he's just—wait, Mikey, no!*"

"Can I drop by today?"

"Is everything okay?" Elizabeth asked, concern apparent in her voice.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I just need to talk."

"Is it about Blake again?"

"I'm afraid it is. Just one last time," Kate reassured her sister. "I don't want to talk about him ever again."

"If you say so. *No, Mikey, I gave you the paper. Look, here.* I'm really sorry, sweetie. You can come whenever you wish, of course. We'll be here. We can go pick up Mom later and take Mikey to the playground all together."

"Okay. I just finished running. I'm going home to take a shower and change. I'll be there by noon," Kate said, getting into the car.

She pulled a small towel from her backpack as beads of sweat still trickled down her forehead. Her elbows pressed

against the steering wheel, she buried her face in the towel, wiping both sweat and tears. It was clear that Blake stirred something inside her the moment she laid eyes on him, and that, despite her mind's objections, her heart fell deeper and deeper for him every day. But until she saw him with another woman, she hadn't realized the true intensity of her feelings for him.

Putting the towel back in her backpack, she remembered that she was going to see Blake on Tuesday at the Institute of Art. Should she just come up with an excuse and not show up? No. This initiative was meant to help the children at the hospital, and she wouldn't let her private matters interfere with that. She needed to introduce Blake to a student that her ex-professor told her was interested in collaborating with the hospital.

*William! Perfect!* William had a day off on Tuesday. She would feel more protected from the overwhelming power Blake's presence had over her if her best friend accompanied her. She grabbed her phone again and called him.

"Already finished jogging? It's been fifteen minutes," William teased, alluding to the conversation they'd had before she started running that morning.

"What do you mean fifteen minutes? I ran for an hour."

"Amateur!"

"Yeah. That's why you never dare to run with me. I'll be waiting for you next Saturday."

"I'm a busy man. Besides, I wouldn't like you to feel embarrassed, looking at my back in the distance."

"Sure. Scaredy-cat!"

"Did you call to brag about breaking the national record?"

"Well, actually it's about something more important. Tuesday is your day off, right?"

"Yup."

"You're coming with me then," she said, blowing hair off her face.

“Where?”

“Institute of Art.”

“If you promise to introduce me to a charming fellow artist, count me in.”

“I’m serious, Bill.”

“Me too.”

“Blake Kelley’s going to give a speech to the students there, and I need you to come with me.”

After Kate initially talked to her sister and Nathan about her first encounters with Blake, she decided to keep the conversations about him to a minimum. She convinced herself that the less she discussed her feelings for him, the less there would be to discuss. *Fake it till you make it*. Wasn’t that a popular saying now? Even though she had mentioned to William that Blake had opposed her project and that he eventually changed his mind, she didn’t tell him anything about how his handsome colleague made her feel.

“Did you have a problem with him again? Do you want me to talk to him?”

“No, no! Everything’s okay. I’d just prefer to go with you. Can you do that for me?”

“No problem. What time is this thing?”

“11:00 a.m.”

“Okay. Do you want me to pick you up?”

“I can pick you up at 10:30. Does that work for you? We can go grab lunch together later.”

“Sounds good.”

“Thanks, Bill. I really appreciate it.”

“No problem.”

When she hung up, Kate leaned back in her seat and covered her eyes with her hands. She did her best to keep her tone neutral while talking to her friend, even though she was

ready to burst into tears at any moment. Instead, she pressed her palms together and started to pray.

“**D**r. Kelley, I would really like to thank you for everything you’re doing for our community.” A short woman with curly dark hair approached Blake and shook his hand. “I work here at the Institute as a janitor, but I listened to you when you spoke at my son’s elementary school last December. It was so inspiring. You’re touching so many lives, Doctor.”

“Thank you so much for your kind words. I really appreciate your support.” Blake smiled at the woman gently.

“The defibrillator that you got the funding for was delivered last week and, as a parent, I can’t thank you enough for that. Trust me, I know what I’m talking about. I witnessed a terrible scene a few years ago where a device like that could have saved my neighbor’s life. God bless you, Doctor.”

Blake nodded as he listened to the woman. That was what his mission was all about, preventing as many heart-failure-related deaths as possible.

“You’re absolutely right. We must spread the word and provide the means because many lives actually can and should be saved. Thank you so much for being so appreciative of our mission,” he replied.

“I won’t keep you any longer. I’m sure there are many people who would like to talk to you, but I just wanted to let you know how much I admire you. I’ll keep you in my prayers.”

“It really means a lot. Thank you.”

Since he was a student, Blake had volunteered his time to promote heart-health campaigns, especially aimed at children and youth. People loved his energy and enthusiasm and respected his dedication and expertise. Whenever someone approached him to shake his hand or ask for advice, he patiently complied with everyone’s request.

As the dark-haired woman walked away, Blake scanned the hall in front of the auditorium for Kate’s face. He had texted her the evening before and she confirmed she was coming. *Sure*, was all she said. He hoped for something more than the four letters he’d received, but at least he knew she was going to be there. The last time he saw her, he had noticed her attitude toward him changed after he told the kids they were neither friends nor anything else. As soon as the words slipped through his lips, he regretted the way he’d formulated that sentence. But, in a way, the atmosphere that it created between them was exactly what he wanted: professional communication without intense gazes and playful banter. Or wasn’t it?

He felt his heart pound in his chest as Kate came into his sight. Pushing her bangs from her face, she giggled at something the person next to her was telling her. Blake immediately recognized William Evans and drew in a sharp breath. William and Kate’s brother-in-law were best friends. Had Kate ever been involved with him? Was there anything going on between them now? Blake frowned at the thought.

Kate caught his gaze and nodded, smile disappearing from her lips. Her brown hair was pulled back in a tight bun, and Blake’s eyes wandered across her beautiful face and slender neck. He hated the effect this woman was having on him, but no matter how hard he tried, there didn’t seem to be anything he could do about it.

“Hi,” she said as the two of them approached him.

“Hey, you made it.”

“You shouldn’t have doubted it. If I say I’ll be somewhere, I will.”

“That’s good to know.” A slight smirk crossed his lips, but her face didn’t even twitch.

“You know William, right?”

“I do.” Blake stretched out his hand, and William shook it firmly.

“Hey, man. How’s it going?”

“It’s good to see you.” Blake forced a smile as he told the lie. It wasn’t good to see Kate with another man. His own reaction to how relaxed she looked in William’s company surprised him, and he was suddenly desperate to know how close she really was to his colleague. “I didn’t know you two were friends,” he couldn’t stop himself from adding.

“Who? Us?” William moved his finger between Kate and himself with mock confusion. “We’re not friends.”

Blake felt his jaw clench, impatient to hear the rest of William’s explanation.

“We just met, and she offered me a doughnut if I came in with her.”

“He’s just being silly.” Kate glanced at William, nudging him with her elbow. “We’ve known each other forever. It was his day off. He didn’t know what else to do today, so he decided to join me.” She looked back at Blake and changed the subject. “A final year student showed interest in the art program at the hospital, and I promised I would introduce her to you before your lecture today. She’ll be here any minute.”

“Sounds great.”

“I don’t know how she looks. I just talked to her on the phone. But she said she would recognize you.”

“She knows me?” Blake looked confused.

“She mentioned she’d seen you at an event where you talked about preventing heart attacks.”

Suddenly, a tall redhead with big blue eyes touched Blake’s shoulder.

“Dr. Kelley, it’s so lovely to meet you. I’m Stephanie Molnar. My professor told me his ex-student was looking for volunteers for an art project that you set up at the hospital,” she said in one breath.

“Nice to meet you, Stephanie.” Blake shook her hand. “I have to correct you. We are looking for volunteers, but I wasn’t so smart to set up the project. Kate Watson was,” he explained as he gestured to Kate.

“Oh, yeah. We talked on the phone.” Stephanie nodded at Kate and quickly turned back to Blake.

“I told you about Dr. Kelley’s interest in expanding the project. We can—” Kate began.

“Right,” Stephanie cut her off, batting her eyelashes at Blake. “I saw you at an event a few weeks ago, but unfortunately I didn’t get a chance to talk to you. I’m a big fan of your work, and I’d be really happy to help with whatever you need. We can meet up whenever you want—even this evening if needed.”

It was obvious that Stephanie was more interested in Blake than in his work. He was used to women trying to impress him, but instead of feeling flattered, he was getting increasingly bored with their advances. In Stephanie’s case, what bothered him even more was the fact that she didn’t treat Kate with the respect that she deserved.

“That won’t be necessary,” he answered bluntly. “You can give Kate a call in the next few days and arrange a meeting. As I’ve already told you, she’s the boss on this project.” His eyes darted to Kate. She listened to them intently, her face unreadable.

“But I also wanted to talk to you about other things that I would like to propose to the hospital. I have many ideas,” Stephanie insisted.

“What kind of ideas?”

“Well, you know, I also have a degree in management, so I have some suggestions related to that field. I think we should grab a coffee together or at least meet at your office.”

“I’m afraid I’m not the right person to address those issues with, but if you get in touch with our front desk, I’m sure they’ll put you through to the relevant department.”

Stephanie finally seemed to get the clue. “Mm-hm. Okay, I’ll give Kate a call when I’m available then. I have to run now.” Pressing her lips flat, she gave them a terse nod before walking away.

“I’ll be waiting for your call. We can even grab a coffee together,” Kate called out after her, giving Blake a playful look. “You scared away our only volunteer, even though she was a perfectly kind young lady.”

“I certainly hope I did.” Blake rolled his eyes. “I don’t think she’s got what we need for this project anyway.”

“What are you talking about? I could see interest, enthusiasm, even passion. Sounds like an ideal volunteer to me,” William teased.

Kate couldn’t contain a chuckle. “I second that.”

Blake was happy to see that the tense expression he saw on her face when she arrived had relaxed, but he couldn’t stop wondering what caused her initial reluctance and whether there was anything more than friendship between her and William.

“Dr. Kelley, we’re starting in five minutes,” an older man with thick glasses announced.

“Thank you, Professor Goldman. I’ll be right there,” Blake said. “Let’s go in.” He motioned his head to the door as Kate and William followed.

Blake was a talented and experienced speaker, and he never got nervous before his public appearances. But he had never had Kate Watson in his audience before. He cleared his throat, his mouth dry.

“Come to the front row. You’re my guests. Besides, I wanted to take this opportunity to tell people about your project if you don’t mind.”

“About my project?” Kate asked in confusion.

“Is that okay with you?”

“Sure.”

After Professor Goldman introduced Blake and detailed his impressive list of achievements in promoting heart disease prevention, he stepped to the podium, welcomed with an applause.

“Hello, everyone. Thank you, Professor Goldman, for your kind words. Thank you all for coming. As you could hear, I’ve been busy speaking about heart health at a number of different venues over the last few years, but I have to say that I’m particularly happy to be at the Institute of Art today. And it’s not just a courteous phrase I use to open every speech. I’ve always respected artistic endeavors, but only recently have I realized the real power of your work.

“So, before I start today’s lecture on heart disease prevention, I’d like to make a confession. I recently opposed an art project in my workplace, claiming that art didn’t belong in a hospital. I humbly admit in front of all of you today that your fellow artist, Ms. Kate Watson, who’s here with us today, proved me wrong.”

Blake gestured to Kate, and tenderness washed over him as she shyly lowered her gaze. “The project that she set up at the hospital where I work has inspired and given hope and passion for life to so many patients that I couldn’t think of a better place but the Institute of Art to publicly acknowledge her efforts. Thank you, Kate.”

A loud applause arose from the audience, and the look of appreciation in Kate’s eyes stole his breath.

**K**ate's brush moved along the canvas in long, heavy strokes. Dark colors reflected the heaviness of her mood as her thoughts kept wandering to the day she saw Blake at the Institute of Art. When she arrived with William, she was determined to be cold and distant with Blake the whole time. She knew it was a childish reaction to the sight she had been treated to while jogging, but she just couldn't pretend that nothing had happened.

Still, seeing how he defended her from Stephanie's insistence on treating her as if she were invisible moved something inside her and put her at ease. And then, his public praise for her project simply left her breathless. The moment he mentioned her name in front of everyone, their eyes locked in a way that would have led her to believe that the connection between them was unmistakable, had she not seen him with his girlfriend in the park days before. Sadly, it was just a professional recognition from a kind and honest man.

His speech contained clear and accessible explanations of complex and unfamiliar medical concepts, peppered with vivid anecdotes. The audience was enthralled by his eloquence and passion. He was simply one of those rare people who effortlessly stood out wherever they went and whatever they did. Even though Kate found his presentation fascinating, at moments she struggled to focus on its content. More than once she caught herself imagining how it would feel to run her hands through his hair and touch his lips with her fingertips. Or even picturing herself in his arms, his lips pressed to hers.

The scene she had witnessed at the park suddenly flashed in her mind, and her heart dropped at the thought that another woman might be doing all that at this very moment.

She blinked away the tears welling in her eyes when she heard her phone chime. It was probably Elizabeth reminding her about her mom's appointment for tomorrow, which they had agreed to go to together. She left the brush on the table and grabbed the phone. Her heart nearly jumped out of her chest when she saw the sender's name.

**BLAKE: Hey there! Are you busy?**

Her hands started sweating as she fumbled with the phone. He had written to her the evening before the event at the Institute of Art, and despite the turmoil his text unleashed in her, she forced herself to reply with a simple *Sure*. What did he want now? Was this about their professional collaboration again? She wasn't going to see him for two weeks due to remodeling works in the hospital wing where her lessons were held.

**KATE: Not particularly. What's up?**

**BLAKE: I'm sorry to bother you, but I have an important question. I'd like to commission a portrait of someone very important. Do you do commission work?**

"A portrait of someone very important." Kate had no doubt who Blake referred to. He wanted her to paint his girlfriend's portrait. Fury, mixed with frustration, washed over her as she reread his text. Was he aware of how cruel this whole setup was? Probably not. Why would he know anything about her feelings for him? Or even if he did, why should he care about the fact that she wasn't able to control her emotions?

She rarely did commission work, but she was definitely going to do this one. She could even paint him and his girlfriend together if necessary. She narrowed her eyes defiantly as she typed her reply.

**KATE: That wouldn't be a problem.**

**BLAKE: Great. I know it's late, but is there a possibility to see you tonight so I can give you the**

## **photograph and we can discuss this?**

It was 8:30 p.m. After Kate came to her apartment from work, she had a quick dinner and rushed to her easel to release some tension. She was dressed in her sweatpants and a large T-shirt, her hair pulled up in a loose bun. Blake could drop by if he wished, but she wasn't going to change anything about her appearance. She wanted him to see that she didn't care about making an impression on him.

**KATE: Okay.**

She sent him her address as she nervously paced up and down the room. Settling into an armchair, she tried to read a book until his arrival, but she couldn't concentrate. After a while, she gave up and stood by the window, thinking about why this commission work was so urgent. Maybe his girlfriend's birthday was approaching and he wanted Kate to finish the painting in time for the occasion. Or it was a surprise gift to celebrate one month of their relationship? Because they couldn't have been together for more than a couple of weeks, right? She started to replay in her head all their conversations, trying to figure out whether she should have spotted any signs that he was seeing someone else.

She seemed to have been so focused on her own fascination with him that she fooled herself into misinterpreting his gestures and giving them the importance they clearly didn't have. She remembered how excited she was about the fact that he had purchased a book about famous artists. While for him it must have been only an innocent gesture, she read into it more than he obviously intended and let herself hope that his newly discovered interest in art might be related to his unconfessed interest in her. How could she be so naïve? To Blake Kelley, she was only that girl he once invited for a coffee and was forced to keep seeing in his workplace because of a project she'd set up there against his will. She inhaled deeply as her fingertips absentmindedly traced patterns on the cold windowpane.

Finally, a white SUV pulled up in front of her building, and she recognized the figure that got out of the car. Letting him into her apartment made her feel awkward. The man she

hadn't been able to stop thinking about since she met him was standing in her home at nine at night, and he was about to show her a picture of his new girlfriend.

As her eyes darted between Blake's beautiful brown eyes and his broad shoulders, it suddenly occurred to her that the woman whose photo he brought wasn't necessarily someone he had met only recently. What if it was a girl he'd been in love with all his life but he couldn't have her for whatever reason, so he stopped dating and focused on his work until he had his second chance at love with her? And now he was going to propose to her, and her portrait was his engagement gift. This scenario gutted her even more than the idea that he'd met someone new. *Enough!* Her mind was officially in overdrive. Blake couldn't be hers, and that was all that mattered. Why would she even care who this other woman was?

"I'm sorry I asked to come so late, but I really needed to talk to you. I appreciate you said yes."

He was wearing a pair of faded blue jeans and a long-sleeved white Henley shirt. She had never had a chance to see him in such a casual outfit, and she stifled a sigh at how gorgeous he looked. His perfect jaw was coated with a few days' stubble, and Kate's thoughts strayed to how it would feel against her cheek, her fingers.

"No problem," she said bluntly, forcing herself not to reveal any of the emotions that were coursing through her.

"This is the photo I told you about." He pulled out the picture and handed it over to Kate without even giving her a chance to invite him to take a seat.

She had been right all the time. The beautiful face of the brunette she had seen with Blake at the park was smiling at her from the photo. She gulped, her cheeks burning. "Pretty girl."

"That's Hannah. My sister."

Kate looked up at Blake, her eyebrows shooting up in shock. "This is your sister?"

"Yeah. Why? You know her?"

She was so relieved by this unexpected revelation that the truth tumbled out of her mouth. “I saw you two together at Wendy Park on Saturday, and I thought that...” She paused for a moment.

“What? What did you think?”

“I thought you were together... I mean, as a couple.” Kate had been so consumed by jealousy that she didn’t even allow herself to consider the possibility that Blake might not be romantically involved with the brunette. It had simply felt like holding on to false hope.

“Oh, goodness, no. She’s my baby sister.” He frowned in confusion. “Why would you think she was my girlfriend?”

“I don’t know. I saw you two so... so happy and relaxed, and I guess I just jumped to the conclusion.”

“And?” He locked his eyes with hers.

“And what?”

“How did you feel about me having a girlfriend?” His eyes narrowed.

Her heart started racing at the directness of his question. “Why should I feel anything about you having a girlfriend?” she asked, knowing she didn’t sound very convincing. If she had really wanted to feign indifference, she should have kept her mouth shut about seeing him at the park in the first place.

“I just hoped you might.” He closed the gap between them, towering over her.

“What do you mean you hoped I might?”

“What I mean is that I would be disappointed if you didn’t feel anything.”

“You’re saying that you’d be disappointed if seeing you with another woman didn’t make me jealous?” She felt the corner of her lips curling up into a smile.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. Because seeing you with William the other day did make me jealous.”

“William? You were jealous of William?” she repeated, surprised.

He nodded, his eyes still on hers. “There’s nothing between you two, right?”

“Of course not. He’s one of my oldest friends.”

“Good. Friends are good.”

He slowly raised his hand to her face, his thumb brushing her cheek. Her skin tingled as she tilted her head to savor his touch.

“So, were you?” he said in a low voice.

“Was I what?” She gulped, her mind already a blur.

“Jealous. When you thought I had a girlfriend.”

“Yes, I was,” she admitted, biting into her bottom lip.

He inched forward, looping his strong arm around her waist and pulling her in. A trembling breath shook her chest. Before Kate could say another word, he tilted her chin up with his free hand and brought his face to hers. Warm and soft, his mouth gently caressed hers until her lips parted and he passionately deepened the kiss. Electricity jolted through her as she shivered with excitement. It seemed like all the emotions they had been holding back for weeks suddenly spilled over.

Coming up for air, he whispered, “I haven’t been able to push you from my mind since the moment I ran into you that day in the lobby. This wasn’t part of my plan, but I can’t fight it anymore. I just can’t help....”

“You can’t help what?” she asked, still breathless.

“I can’t help falling in love with you, Kate.”

**A** silly grin kept dancing on Blake's lips practically since the moment he left Kate's apartment the day before. He had hesitated whether going to her place was a wise thing to do. Even though he really wanted her to paint his sister's portrait, his request could have waited. But as it turned out, he couldn't. He knew her lessons at the hospital were suspended for two weeks, and he was suddenly desperate to see her again. He hoped for a chance to talk to her, learn a bit more about what kind of relationship she had with William, perhaps even try to ask her for a coffee again. But a kiss? He couldn't have imagined that he would end up kissing Kate that evening. Now that he did, there was no point denying it. For the first time in his life, he was in love.

Facing his true feelings made him realize that his reservations about falling in love had been justified. It was the most intense, crazy, and distracting feeling he had ever experienced. But the truth was, it felt so right and so... inevitable.

Taking in the sweeping view of Lake Erie, he sat on the beach in eager anticipation. He inhaled deeply, his mind drifting again to the previous evening. He could have spent hours kissing Kate, but it was late and he didn't want to use the excuse of his sister's portrait to prolong a visit Kate hadn't planned for. He left after she promised she would meet him at Edgewater Beach today.

As he caught sight of her, he rose to his feet, his face lighting up. He had wondered how the kiss they had shared affected her and whether she had any regrets, but seeing her stride toward him with a grin as wide as his own put his mind at ease.

When she stopped in front of him, they gazed at each other for a few long moments, speechless. Instead of a greeting, she touched his face with her fingertips, as if making sure he wasn't just a vision. In response, he did the same. Caressing her soft skin, his hand slid behind her neck and drew her closer. As she rose on her tiptoes, he angled his head and their lips met slowly and tenderly. Her body molded against his to perfection, and he was certain she could feel his heart hammering off the walls of his chest.

“How’s that for a hello?” she asked as she finally pulled back, her eyes closed and her lips split into a smile.

“If that’s how we say hello, I must warn you I’ll need to be greeted more than once.”

She chuckled. “That won’t be a problem.”

“It’s weird how less than twenty-four hours ago all this was just a dream and now greeting you with a kiss suddenly feels so natural.” He trailed his finger against her lips.

“That’s exactly what I’ve been thinking.”

He nudged his head to the beach walk. “Shall we?”

She nodded as she started to stroll next to him. “I love this place. I used to come here often as a kid with my mom and sister.”

“Yeah, it’s one of my favorite spots in the city.”

“Does your sister live here too?”

“No, she was only visiting. She left yesterday. She currently lives in Boston. She recently graduated from Harvard with an A.B. in Chemistry and Physics. I already gave her a graduation gift the day of the ceremony, but it occurred to me that commissioning her portrait would be even more meaningful, more special.”

“More special than what? What was the other gift you gave her?”

“A new car.”

Kate nodded with a smirk. “A generous big brother.”

“She deserved it. Besides, there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for her.”

“An A.B. in Chemistry and Physics from Harvard? You must be very proud of her.”

“You bet I am!” Blake was nine years older than Hannah, and he took pride in his role of a fiercely protective older brother. Even though he left for college when she was only nine, he visited his family as often as possible and Skyped with them regularly, which allowed him and his sister to build a strong, loving relationship.

“And I’m sure she’s proud of you. All the work you do for the kids and their families, it’s truly inspirational.”

“Thank you.” He smiled at her softly, their arms brushing as they walked side by side.

“Do you have any other siblings?”

Blake felt his chest tighten. “I had a brother. A twin brother.” He paused, looking off into the distance. “He passed away when we were thirteen.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Kate said, her eyes shimmering with sympathy.

“His name was Harry.” Blake swallowed hard. People rarely asked about his siblings, so he didn’t get to talk about his brother much outside his family circle. “Such an amazing guy. Great basketball player. Funny, smart, kind. You have no idea what a noble, generous kid he was. Everybody loved him.” Even so many years after Harry’s death, his memory filled Blake’s voice with pain.

“How did you and your family learn to live without him?”

“Each one of us reacted in our own way. I was mad, so mad with the whole world for a very long time. I couldn’t

imagine that I would ever be able to smile again.” He ran his hand through his dark hair. “Hannah was only four back then. It was really hard to explain to her why he was gone. My father lost his faith while my mother held on to God harder than ever. My dad was lost and devastated. He couldn’t work for almost a year, he barely ate, he was sleep-deprived, and he finally got sick. My mom found her strength and peace in God, and she did all she could to help both me and my dad find Him again. He was our salvation.”

Kate grabbed his hand as they continued to walk. “It’s so refreshing to hear someone who has dedicated his life to building a reputation as a man of science and logic acknowledge the importance of faith in his life.”

“There’s nothing illogical about God. Actually, only with Him everything starts to make sense.”

“You’re absolutely right.” She smiled, squeezing his hand. “I grew up without my dad. I was only one when we lost him. But my mom never faltered in her faith. I’m so grateful she instilled the love of God in me and my sister because it allowed us to find our rock, our shelter in the storm that we knew would always be there, no matter what life threw at us.”

“Three strong women. It mustn’t have been easy for your mom to raise you all by herself, but she’s done a wonderful job.”

“Thank you. She’s an incredible woman.”

“I’m sure she is,” Blake said, interlacing his fingers with hers. He was about to add that he hoped he would meet her mother soon, but he stopped himself. He didn’t want to scare her away by sounding too eager, too desperate to be a part of her life. Still, he was suddenly certain that no other woman could ever make him feel the way she did.

In that moment, discovering if Kate preferred climbing trees or dressing dolls when she was a kid or who was her favorite book character sounded more fascinating to him than reading about the latest scientific findings in cardiology. And for someone who dedicated all his life to his work, that was saying something.

The air was warm and light, and many locals and tourists came to the beach to enjoy their evening out. But their faces and voices disappeared in a blur. Blake saw only Kate. Wearing a red and white floral dress, with dark, silky hair falling over her shoulders, she looked more beautiful than ever. Still holding hands and casting glances and smiles at each other, they kept walking in silence.

“Remember that day in my class when the kids asked me why I called you Dr. Kelley?”

“I think I replayed all our conversations in my head so many times that I almost learned them by heart. So, yes, I do remember that particular day just like all the others. What about it?”

“You told the kids we only worked together. How did you really see me at that moment?”

“Well, the truth would’ve been something like, ‘You know, I believe I’m falling real hard for your art teacher, but I’m doing all I can to fight the feeling and deny it even to myself, so I’ll just try to fool myself for a little longer and tell you that we’re just collaborators.’”

“I would’ve paid to see the looks on their sweet little faces after a confession like that.” Kate burst into giggles.

“At that moment, I would’ve paid to see the look on your sweet little face after a confession like that,” he said with a smirk.

“You saw it last night.”

“Which reminds me....”

“Of what?”

He tilted his head sideways. “Not to sound dramatic, but I’m dying for another hello.”

“Hello, Dr. Kelley.” Kate waved at him, feigning innocence.

Blake stopped in front of her as he cupped her face in his hands. “Hello to you too, Ms. Watson,” he said before his lips captured hers, delicately but firmly.

“E verybody loved it, baby. I’m so proud of you and your talent.” Blake wrapped an arm around Kate’s shoulders as they walked out of the gallery. “I made a video of all the paintings and shared it with my family. They wanted me to tell you that they’re all impressed.”

“Thank you. I really appreciate their encouragement.” Kate smiled. “But it seems to me that my mom’s friends approached her to praise my boyfriend more than my paintings,” she teased. “They’ve spent all evening discussing if you looked more like Cary Grant or Rock Hudson. I guess we all set our beauty standards in our youth.”

“The ladies clearly have good taste.” Blake cocked an eyebrow.

“Modest much?” She playfully nudged him with her elbow.

“And what did your mom say? Does she approve of your choice?” he asked. Underneath his air of self-confidence, it truly mattered to him to make a good first impression on Kate’s mother, and he had nervously anticipated their first encounter.

“Well, she’s looking forward to getting to know you in a more private setting, but her first reaction was, and I’ll quote her here, ‘Charming, charismatic, and certainly more handsome than both Cary and Rock.’”

Blake grinned, pleased with the fact that Diane liked him. Kate's long-awaited exhibition was a success, and even though it didn't give him much chance to interact with her family and friends, it was a nice opportunity to see them all in one place. They seemed like warm, easy-going, down-to-earth people who truly cared about each other.

"After so many years, your sister and Nathan look so in love."

"Yeah, those two are really made for each other. Thank God Nathan used his second chance to make things right."

"I never asked you how you handled their separation."

"After they split, I hadn't seen him for eight years, but when I finally did... oh, boy, I really gave him a hard time. I treated him much worse than Liz, to be honest. What matters is that he came to his senses and eventually made the right decision. If he hadn't, neither of them would have been truly happy ever again. And look at them now!"

"Yes, it was definitely worth it. What they have is truly remarkable."

Blake pulled his phone out of his pocket. He rarely turned it off, but this time he just wanted to focus on being there for Kate and enjoying her success. Two weeks earlier, when they had only started dating, he asked his colleague Dr. Stevenson to switch shifts so he could attend Kate's first solo show.

"Is everything okay?" she asked as he waited for the phone to turn back on.

"Yeah, you remember this was going to be my shift originally, so I just want to make sure everything's proceeding smoothly," he told her before typing a text to his colleague.

**BLAKE: I hope it's been a quiet evening over there.**

He put his phone back into his pocket as they kept walking down a busy street.

"Let's see what food choices we have in this neighborhood." Kate took her own phone out of her bag. "Do you have any special wishes for tonight?"

“Nope. Just a lot of hellos and I’ll be fine.” Since their first date, they still enjoyed playing with the word *hello* as a synonym for a kiss.

“You can count on that.” Kate gave him a mischievous look before glancing back at her phone. “There’s a Peruvian place three minutes away from here.” She showed him a picture of a seafood dish on her phone.

“Looks good.”

“Do you know any Peruvian food?”

“I tried some really good stuffed spicy peppers once.”

“Oh, I know those. I had a classmate from Peru. She was an awesome cook. I can’t remember what she called it, but I know it was chilies stuffed with ground beef. They were spicy, but not too spicy. I think I devoured three or four. They were de-li-cious,” she emphasized each syllable to make her point.

Blake loved Kate’s spontaneity, honesty, and passion for life. Whenever she talked about the things she enjoyed, no matter if it was her art, spending time with her family, or something so simple as Peruvian stuffed peppers, she gesticulated enthusiastically and her eyes shone like a little girl’s. The moments he spent with her made him realize that since he was a kid he had never felt so happy with his present and excited about his future.

“Look, Hannah sent me a picture of her living room with the portrait you painted hanging over the fireplace.” He held his phone up, showing her the photograph of the painting he had commissioned from Kate for his sister. “She loved it. My parents said they want one for their house too. But my mom said she doesn’t want you to work off a photo. She wants you to paint the whole family at our house in Stowe. I guess she’s just using it as an excuse to meet you,” he said with a wink.

“Really?” Kate’s cheeks turned pink. “I would love that.”

The rest of the evening passed in a giddy whirl of laughs, sweet kisses, and Peruvian music. It was almost midnight when they left the restaurant and started walking toward the parking lot.

The next morning, Kate had a plane to catch because she had been invited to attend art workshops in New York and Montreal.

“I wish you could come with me tomorrow. Seven days without you seem like an eternity.”

“I’ll miss you like crazy, baby.” He stroked her hair with his large hand, but pulled back when he felt his phone vibrate in his pocket. “Just give me a sec, please.” He held up a finger.

Dr. Stevenson’s text froze him on the spot. His face went pale, a heaviness descending upon his chest.

“Are you all right?” Kate frowned, apparently alarmed by the look on his face.

He kept staring at his phone, then closed his eyes for a few moments, inhaling deeply.

“What’s wrong, honey?”

“A thirteen-year-old went into cardiac arrest while playing basketball. He’s in coma now,” he finally said.

“Poor boy!”

Blake stood still, balling his hand into a fist and biting hard on his knuckles. *Harry! Harry! Brother!* He heard his thirteen-year-old self desperately screaming while shaking his twin’s limp body on the basketball court.

“You doctors are true heroes. It’s so hard to cope with the everyday reality of your job.”

After a long silence, his eyes met hers. “I can’t do this, Kate.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m terribly sorry, but I just can’t go on with this.” He shook his head, his chin trembling. “I can’t just carelessly walk around attending art shows and listening to Peruvian music while children are dying. These kids need me. I owe it to them.”

Kate lowered her gaze to the ground. “You... you can’t save everyone,” she stuttered.

His heart was breaking as he watched tears slide down her cheeks.

“This was going to be my shift, Kate. I shouldn’t have switched it with Stevenson. I should’ve been there for this kid. I told you my twin brother passed away when we were thirteen, but I didn’t tell you how.” Blake swallowed hard. “He also collapsed while we were playing basketball. One moment he was the strongest kid I knew, beating me by ten points and throwing a fist pump, the next moment he was lying down on the ground, lifeless.” Unable to hold back tears any longer, he brought her hand to his lips and placed a soft kiss on her palm before he squeezed it closed, as if trying to keep a piece of him in there forever.

She pressed her hand to her heart. “I’m so sorry,” she murmured through tears as she buried her head in Blake’s chest.

Blake wrapped his strong arms around her body, resting his head on top of hers. “Please, don’t hate me,” he whispered into her hair.

**S**mile! Smile! Kate chided herself while waiting for the children to enter the classroom. *You're here to cheer them up, not to bring them down.* After the classroom renovation and her trip to the art workshops in New York and Montreal, she was finally back at the hospital. It had been ten days since her solo show, and she hadn't heard from Blake.

At first, she felt frustration with Blake's readiness to put distance between them after everything they had shared during their short but intense time together. But the way she reacted to her brother-in-law's decision to leave his sister years ago taught her that anger couldn't bring peace and heal a wounded heart. She found her refuge in prayer, her art, and her family.

Still, forgetting Blake wasn't going to be easy. It was hard enough to push him from her thoughts even before getting to know him. But now that she could remember his kisses instead of imagining them, now that the memory of his gentle words and sweet touch tormented her... it was nearly impossible.

She closed her eyes, picturing the last time she pressed her head against his chest. *"Please, don't hate me."* His pleading voice lingered in her mind. No matter how heartbreaking being apart from him was, she could never hate Blake Kelley.

She had prayed every single day for the boy whose cardiac arrest on the basketball court had affected Blake at such a personal level. Eager to know how the boy was doing, she urged Nathan to inquire about the case. After she arrived from New York, she was delighted to find out that he was out of a

coma and that, under Blake's supervision, his recovery was going well.

Kate forced herself to focus on the task at hand as she pulled a pile of old magazines out of her backpack and placed them on her desk. She hoped the kids' excitement about the Pop Art collage project that she had planned for the day would distract her at least for a while. But the idea that her students would help her divert her attention from Blake was shattered the moment she heard their lively chatter as they approached the classroom.

"Blake is the best! I knew he would keep his promise. He always does," Miguelito spoke loudly, the excitement in his voice apparent.

"He's awesome! I couldn't believe he would ever get LeBron James to visit us," another boy replied. "Just nine more days! I'm glad I'll still be here by then."

Kate took a deep breath as she overheard the news. The fact that Blake had arranged for the famous basketball player to visit the kids at the hospital meant that the name of the man she loved and couldn't have was going to be on everyone's lips for weeks if not months. She felt like running home and curling under her sheets, but she reminded herself that these children needed her and welcomed them with the widest of smiles.

"Hey, guys! Long time no see!"

"Kate!" her students shouted in unison as they rushed to wrap their arms around her.

"We missed you," Miguelito said.

"I missed you too," Kate answered, tousling his hair.

"Amy and Lawrence went home, but we have a new student," he quickly informed her, gesturing to a tall, blonde girl.

"What's your name, sweetie?" Kate asked gently.

"Elizabeth."

Kate smiled. "My sister's name is Elizabeth."

Before Kate and her new student could exchange another word, Miguelito continued to fill her in on the latest news. “Blake’s bringing LeBron James to visit us.”

“That’s very exciting,” Kate replied.

“Do you know LeBron James too? Did Blake introduce you to him?” a girl asked.

“No, he didn’t.”

“Have you ever watched the Cavs at the Quicken Loans Arena?” an older boy questioned.

“I’m afraid not.” Kate felt her throat tighten. She wasn’t a basketball fan, but Blake wanted to share his passion for this sport with her and they had tickets for watching a match against the Boston Celtics from the court box next month.

Still, she couldn’t distance herself from LeBron James’s visit to the hospital only because it had Blake’s name written all over it. This event meant a lot to the children, and she was going to share in their enthusiasm. “Perhaps we can dedicate one of our future lessons to making a special Thank You project for LeBron to show him how much we appreciate his visit,” she suggested.

“Yeah!” the children shrieked.

“We can make a sculpture of him,” a boy suggested.

“I believe that’s a bit too ambitious.” Kate gave him a wink.

“But we mustn’t forget Blake,” a girl said.

*Forgetting Blake.* Kate sighed at the impossibility of the idea.

“Blake?” a boy repeated, confused.

“We should thank LeBron for visiting us, but we should also thank Blake for making it happen. None of that would be possible without him,” the girl explained.

“Right! We should make a Thank You card for Blake,” Miguelito agreed enthusiastically.

Kate nodded. "That's a good idea."

"Perhaps that will cheer him up a little bit," an older girl said.

"What do you mean?" Kate asked.

"He's nice with us and all that, but his eyes look kind of sad these days."

"Yes, that's true. He smiles and talks to us, but he doesn't joke that much anymore," a boy observed.

Children never ceased to amaze Kate with their perceptiveness and insight. She always walked out of the encounters with them inspired and refreshed, which sometimes made her wonder if working with them was more beneficial to them or to her. Now the kids even seemed to be willing to help her discover how the man of her dreams was coping with their separation.

"I'm sure he'll joke with you again soon," she said, hoping she was right.

"Yeah, especially because Blake's jokes are really funny," Miguelito said.

The boy was right. Kate loved Blake's sense of humor, and she missed it so much.

"Well, a nice Thank You card will certainly make him feel better," she assured them.

"I know it will, because he loves everything that we create here. We often give him our drawings and crafts, and when my mom and I were in his office yesterday, we saw that his walls were covered with all these things that we made with you."

"That's really cute," Kate blurted out, feeling her heart flutter in her chest. She squeezed her hand where Blake had left his last kiss as she thought of him filling his office with the artwork that the kids had created in her classroom.

"What are we going to do with these magazines?" the new student asked, pulling everyone's attention back to their daily project.

“Oh, that’s an excellent question, Elizabeth.” Kate eagerly welcomed the opportunity to finally stop talking about Blake. “Do you want me to call you Elizabeth? What do you prefer? We call my big sister Liz.”

“Yeah, I prefer Liz too. Everybody calls me Liz. Only my mom calls me Lizzie.”

“Okay, Liz. Look, today we’re going to make a Pop Art collage with cutouts from old magazines. Has anyone heard of the term Pop Art before?”

“Pop Tarts?” A boy squinted in confusion.

“Painting on Pop Tarts?” a girl asked.

Kate laughed. “That sounds like fun, doesn’t it? But no, here we’re talking about Pop Art.” She emphasized the words to make sure that everybody heard the name correctly. “It’s an art movement. In this case, Pop comes from the word *popular*.”

The boys and girls listened to Kate with curiosity as she started to recount them stories about the beginnings of the Pop Art movement and to show them the photographs of the famous works and artists. Before getting lost in her conversation with the children and their art assignment, it crossed her mind that Blake and she would have to talk about the wall-painting project sooner or later. She didn’t want to push anything, though. Her life was in God’s hands, and so was her next encounter with Blake. God knew best when, where, and how it was supposed to happen.

“**T**he study confirmed that children with a congenital heart defect are five times more likely to develop a pediatric cancer.” Blake pulled the article that he referred to out of his file and showed it to Nathan, who was seated across from him.

“Do they claim the risk is more related to a common genetic pathway or to radiation exposure and treatment?” Nathan asked, the look in his eyes focused and serious.

“Since it occurs so early, the genetic predisposition is more likely, but they think there may be some impact of exposures and treatment as well.”

“So, what’s the next step now that you joined the team?”

“Looking into how specific types of congenital heart defects affect pediatric cancer risk.”

“Has the funding for the project been secured?”

“To a large extent, yes.” Blake nodded.

“Recruiting you has been a really smart move on their part. You’ll be a great asset to the team. You’re not tempted to focus only on research and trade the hospital for the university lab?”

“No way! I clearly explained when I accepted the offer that I would never abandon direct work with patients. That’s my priority. It’s going to be a balancing act, but I’m sure my role as a researcher can only benefit from my role as a clinician.”

Nathan listened intently, his hands clasped together in front of him. He was four years older than Blake, but both of them had gained a great deal of experience and built an extraordinary reputation, considering they were still in their thirties. Since Blake arrived in Cleveland, they had shown deep mutual respect and interest in each other's field of work. However, this was the first time that Blake had been invited to Nathan's office since he started and eventually ended his relationship with Kate.

"I'm glad to hear that," Nathan replied, rubbing his chin. "And speaking of different roles in life, would you mind if I asked you a question?"

"Go ahead."

"I know it's none of my business and, please, stop me if it's inappropriate."

Blake felt his heart rate pick up at this introduction, certain that Nathan wanted to talk to him about Kate. He hadn't seen her in fifteen days, and he missed her terribly. His schedule was busier than ever: his work at the hospital, research projects, heart health awareness programs, fund raising events, preparing LeBron James's visit. But nothing could help him stop thinking about her.

After he lost his brother, he learned to live with the idea that he could have a good life but that he would never be truly happy again. The moments he shared with Kate made him reconsider that conviction. For the first time in so many years, he felt his heart burst with joy.

"I trust your good judgment, so feel free to ask me whatever you consider necessary."

"Are you sure you're doing the right thing?"

Blake opened his mouth to ask him what he meant, but the truth was he needed no clarification. Kate was very close with her sister and her brother-in-law, and they had been her confidants since she was a kid.

"Did she talk to you about us?"

“Surprisingly little. And in Kate, that’s not a good sign. She’s clearly having a hard time processing your... hmm, how would you actually define what happened between the two of you?”

Blake’s jaw stiffened. He hated the distance between Kate and him, he hated himself for causing it, and he hated the thought that Nathan could doubt if Blake had taken his relationship with Kate seriously.

“The days I spent with Kate were the best days of my life, Nathan. I love...,” he blurted out in one breath before stopping himself.

“You love what? Or should I ask whom?”

Blake drew a sharp breath, his eyes locked with Nathan’s. What was the point of denying the truth? “Before I met her, I only lived for my patients and I was convinced that I would never want anything else from life. But she changed everything. I’m not even sure where all that came from. Did she create that craving in me or had it always been there and she just brought it to life? I don’t know, but I suddenly felt a desperate need to love and be loved. Not by anyone or everyone. Only by her. I love her. I never loved a woman the way I love her.” Blake felt his jaw stiffen, shocked by his urge to expose his feelings with such brutal honesty.

Nathan remained silent for a moment, as if giving Blake time to process his own confession. “If I remember correctly, she used the same words to describe how she feels about you. ‘I never loved a man the way I love him.’”

“She said that?”

“You sound surprised.”

“But that night after her exhibition, I.... Did she—”

“Yes, she told me about the boy.”

“And about my brother?”

Nathan nodded slowly. “I’m terribly sorry about your loss.”

“A boy of the same age. Playing basketball. My shift.... It looked like a sign.”

“What sign?”

Blake hesitated. “A sign that I was sent here to find happiness in serving others, not in being loved.”

“Serving others is not incompatible with being loved. I’m sure the joy that Elizabeth’s love brought to my life made me not only a better human being but also a better doctor.”

“I don’t want other families to go through what my family had to go through when we lost my brother. I don’t want other kids to go away too early like my brother did. I want to help as many of them as I can, but I just can’t imagine my life without Kate anymore.”

“You don’t have to. She wants to be in your life more than anything.”

Blake sighed. His colleague’s words only confirmed what he already knew in his heart. In a world full of unrequited love, failed relationships, and broken promises, he was fortunate enough to find the woman of his dreams in someone who felt the same way about him. And what did he do? He ran away.

“You see me here, with all my credentials and stuff, and you might get the impression that I’m smart. I’m not sure if Kate ever shared my secret with you, but I almost won the Most Stupid Fiancé contest years ago. And the fact that I eventually didn’t win the title wasn’t really my own merit. Liz gave me a second chance. If she hadn’t, I would have definitely been not only the Most Stupid but also the Most Miserable man on this planet.”

“Kate told me she gave you a hard time about that.” Blake recalled her confession with a faint smile.

“Oh, yeah, she certainly did. But I deserved it,” Nathan admitted. “The point is, if you’re lucky enough to be loved by the woman of your dreams don’t let her go. Ever! You’ll meet other women, that’s for sure. But you’ll keep looking for her in

all of them, and none of them will be her. Trust me, you don't want to know how that feels," he said, shaking his head.

The memory of the pain Nathan's separation from Elizabeth had caused in him was still so vivid in his voice. Blake's chest tightened as Kate's beautiful smile and her sparkling eyes flashed through his mind. If the burden of missing her already felt unbearable, the lifetime of missing her was too hard to imagine.

The rain had stopped minutes before Kate finished her class. As she packed her messenger bag, she glanced out the window. A shiny rainbow splashed across the sky. Immersed in the silence of her empty college classroom, she sighed at the beauty of light and colors winning over the darkness of the clouds.

In the past, a sight like this would have filled her chest with joy, spreading her lips into a grin. But since Blake was gone from her life, smiling didn't come easy. Taking a deep breath, she popped in her earbuds and walked out of the room. The hallway was already almost empty. Eyes glued to her phone, she scrolled through her playlist. She needed something cheerful, something uplifting. But when her finger swiped across Adele's song "Someone like you," she simply couldn't resist.

As the lyrics spilled into her ears, tears started welling up in her eyes. She would never find someone like Blake Kelley. There was no one like Blake Kelley. Her steps heavy, she made her way to the exit, looking down and struggling to blink away her tears. Every word of the song felt like a dagger twisting in her heart, but she couldn't bring herself to stop it as the images of Blake's smile kept dancing in her head.

The smell of the wet ground filled the air when she stepped out of the building. She stopped for a moment, closing her eyes and lifting her face to the sky. A soft breeze caressed her skin as her eyelids parted again and she looked ahead.

And then, through the haze of her sadness, she saw Blake's face. As their eyes met, Kate felt her chest burst with anticipation. She hastily tore her earbuds from her ears. He stood in the distance, his hands behind his back. In an elegant navy-blue suit, his dark hair slicked back, he looked more stunning than ever.

Unable to move or breathe, she just kept staring at him. As he pulled a big bouquet of pink tulips from behind his back, he started walking toward her, his stride quickening with every step. An arm's length away, he didn't come any closer. Before either of them could say a word, their eyes were deep in conversation.

"I love you, Kate," he finally said. "I talked to Nathan last night, and I told him I never loved a woman the way I love you. But the whole truth is that I never loved a woman before I met you."

Kate shuddered, still speechless.

"I spent many nights praying for answers, and I finally got it. Harry was so full of love, so full of light and warmth. I'm sure he would be proud of my work with the kids, but he would be devastated to see me so isolated and lonely. Sadly, there are some losses in our life that we can't prevent, but there are others that we can. And I'll do everything in my power to avoid losing you."

This time Kate didn't even try fighting the tears. They ran down her cheeks freely as she reached for his face. "I love you too, Blake. Much more than I ever thought possible to love anyone," she whispered, her fingers running softly over his clean-shaven jaw.

Blake stepped forward, wrapping his arms around her waist, oblivious to the flowers still in his hands. His lips brushing her face, he dried her tears with tender kisses. "I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I want you to be mine, only mine," he murmured between kisses.

"I'm already yours, Blake Kelley. Will you be mine?"

“Only yours. Forever,” he vowed before crashing his lips against hers.

Kate got lost in his kiss as the urgency of his moves made it seem like he was claiming what was his, had always been his, and would be his for an eternity.

A few long moments later, they finally pulled apart. As he released her from his embrace, she smiled, gesturing to the flowers. “Are these for me? They’re beautiful.”

“Oh, sorry but these are actually for my aunt. She lives here next to the campus, and I was on my way to visit her,” he replied, his expression serious.

Kate frowned in confusion. “Really?”

He couldn’t help but crack a smile. “No,” he said as he handed her the bouquet.

“You silly!” She laughed, punching his arm. “You’re incorrigible.”

“Poor auntie, no flowers for her, I guess,” he continued joking.

“How did you know I love pink tulips?” She brought the flowers to her nose and inhaled deeply.

“I pay attention.” He smirked.

“But I don’t think we’ve ever talked about flowers.”

“I saw you had pink tulips on your desktop wallpaper.”

She smiled. “A good eye for detail, Dr. Kelley.”

“A good eye for everything that’s got to do with you, Ms. Watson,” he whispered into her ear, the warmth of his breath against her neck making the electricity crackle under her skin.

Only then the realization that she was kissing him in front of the college building dawned on her. Thankfully, there was almost nobody around. She tugged on his sleeve. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Good idea.” His large hand enveloped hers as they started to walk. “What do you think about going back to that Peruvian

place? I'd like to cancel the memory of that last night and start all over."

"I love that." She grinned.

Blake tilted his head, looking at her as they approached the parking lot. "You know that LeBron James's coming this week, right?"

"How could I not? It's all the kids are talking about."

"I know, it's really good to see them so excited. Look, after the event with the kids, the director is organizing a little reception in LeBron's honor, to show him her appreciation for his gesture."

"Poor guy, after having fun with the kids, he'll have to attend the boring reception with the grown-ups." Kate chuckled.

"Yeah, I felt the same way when I found out." He waved his hand. "However, would you mind if I invited you to join me for this boring event? As my date?"

"You want the whole hospital to see that we're together?"

He nodded. "Yes. It sounds like a good occasion to make our relationship official."

"You want all those good-looking female doctors to stop throwing themselves at you?"

"I would honestly appreciate it if they did." He rolled his eyes. "But I also want all those good-looking male doctors not to even consider the possibility of throwing themselves at you."

She giggled. "All right. I'll go with you. Let's show everyone that you're mine."

"Only yours, baby. Only yours," he said, pulling her hand to his lips for a gentle kiss.

## EPILOGUE

KATE

“**K**nock, knock! Who’s there? Harry. Harry who? Harry up it’s cold outside!”

Kate giggled as she glanced at Blake towering over their son while waiting for the little one’s reaction to his joke. His gaze glued to the baby’s face, he held the tiny feet in his hands.

“Look, he’s smiling. Kate, come here! He’s smiling,” he finally cried.

Kate left on the bed a stack of clean bodysuits that she was going to place in the dresser and rushed to the changing table. The two-month-old boy squirmed at the sight of his mother’s face and smiled even wider.

“Oh, my God,” she said with a sigh. “My heart melts whenever I see him smile. He’s so adorable.”

Blake tilted his head toward her, cocking an eyebrow. “Like father, like son.”

“Harry’s much more handsome.” Kate giggled. “But there’s no denying it. My mom and Liz have been saying it since the day he was born. To be honest, everybody keeps saying it. When I showed a photo of the two of you to a friend from Mexico yesterday, her comment was *como dos gotas de agua*.”

“What does that mean?”

“It’s used to say that you look alike. Literally, like two drops of water,” she explained.

“Did you hear that, Harry? We’re like two drops of water, my son.” Blake lifted the baby from the changing table and dropped a kiss to his soft forehead. “Or, using a drink of your choice, like two drops of milk.”

As Blake held Harry to his chest, Kate wrapped her arms around her husband’s waist from behind and pressed her head to his broad back. Inhaling his fresh scent, she smiled at the thought of all the things they had shared over the last two years.

It was an unstoppable sequence of unforgettable moments and life-changing experiences. How was it possible that something apparently so insignificant as bumping into someone and spilling his coffee could transform a person’s whole existence? But then, she felt that even if they hadn’t run into each other in the lobby that day, they would have ended up together anyway. They just had to. Theirs was the kind of connection that was so powerful that, no matter where they were heading, God would always make sure they came right back into each other’s arms.

Blake proposed to her seven months after his surprise visit to the college where she taught. Four months later, they got married in front of their families and closest friends in an intimate ceremony in a beautiful little church in Vermont. They spent their honeymoon in Venice, where between romantic rides in gondola and tasty Italian meals, Kate shared with Blake her passion for art. Upon their return to the States, they bought a house in the same neighborhood in which Liz and Nathan lived. And when it seemed like their life couldn’t be more perfect, they discovered that Kate was pregnant.

She still clearly remembered the moment her doctor told them they were expecting a boy. Their eyes locked, and even though they hadn’t previously discussed any names, they said in unison, “Harry!” Naming their firstborn after Blake’s late brother simply felt so right.

Harry's birth had been the most magical experience Kate had ever been through. The first time she felt his little body in her arms, her eyes filled with tears and an overwhelming sense of joy washed away physical exhaustion. Blake wrapped her and the baby in his embrace as Kate's gaze kept dancing between the faces of the two most important men in her life. Wishing the moment could last for an eternity, she felt like her heart would burst with love and happiness.

"Knock, knock," her mom's voice interrupted her thoughts as she walked into the room.

Kate chuckled, releasing Blake from her hug. "Please, not another knock-knock joke."

"Where is Grandma's little boy?" Diane asked sweetly.

"Here you go. A new diaper. Fresh and clean." Blake placed the boy in the woman's arms.

"That's my boy! Your cousin Mikey is going to be here any minute now. We couldn't wait for Mikey with a smelly diaper, right?" Diane said, carrying Harry to the living room.

Kate smiled to herself as Blake turned to face her.

"What are you thinking?" He traced her smile with his fingertip.

"After all my mom had to go through during her illness, I'm so grateful to see her so strong and cheerful, enjoying her time with Harry, with Mikey, with all of us."

"Yeah, she's really thriving. My mom called to tell me she got herself and Diane a couple of those T-shirts that say, 'That's my grandson out there.' I told her she should have waited a few more years because, for the message to make sense, your grandson should actually be out there, like in the basketball court or in the baseball field, rather than in your arms or in the stroller."

Kate laughed. "Imagine the two of them walking, all proud, in the park in their 'That's my grandson out there' T-shirts while pushing Harry in the stroller, and people are, like, 'out there where?'"

“But I could ask her to get me one of those ‘That’s my wife out there’ T-shirts,” Blake said, bringing his face closer and trailing kisses down her neck.

Kate closed her eyes, shivers running down her spine as Blake’s lips brushed her skin. “That’s actually a very good idea. I could go to your heart health promotion events wearing one that says, ‘That selfless, smart, funny, gorgeous guy out there is my husband. Look but don’t touch.’”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to get a banner instead of a T-shirt if you want all that to fit in.”

“You’re just too perfect, baby.”

“That makes two of us, Mrs. Kelley. And now let me kiss you before our guests arrive.” He took her face in his large hands and, without hesitation, planted his mouth over hers, their lips melting together.

## DOCTORS IN LOVE BOOK 1

### Never Stopped Loving You

After Nathan Parker broke her heart eight years ago, Elizabeth Watson left to work as a nurse with Doctors Without Borders while he went on to become one of the top oncologists in the United States. When her mother is diagnosed with cancer, Elizabeth is forced to face the love of her life again.

While half the globe separated them, Nathan could pretend she didn't exist. But having her around throws his orderly life into chaos as all his old feelings bubble to the surface. Facing their past is the only way to move on, but what does their future hold? Can true love ever die?

## THANK YOU

What a sad place this world would be for a writer without people like you...avid, passionate readers. Thank you for existing! Thank you for having such a beautiful, story-loving mind!

Thank you for taking the time to read Kate and Blake's story. If you enjoyed it, please, consider telling a friend or writing a review.

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