

THE

Right

CHOICE

DIFFICULT CHOICES

AVA GRAY

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BLURB

I've put myself in an impossible situation.

Giving my heart to two men has its consequences.

I thought I'd lost my fiancé when I fell in love with his doctor.

Gavin was my biggest support while Drew was in a year-long coma.

He took my shattered heart and showed me I could love again.

With Drew back, I'm torn.

Torn into half.

On one hand, I have to honor my commitment.

And on the other, I have to honor the music in my heart.

Making the decision is hard.

But will either of them still be here when I finally make one?

MADII

I stood with my feet in two realities, the dividing boundary tearing my heart in two. Draped across my fiancé's chest, I was so in shock I couldn't cry, or laugh. All I could do was shake—and it wasn't a comfortable feeling. Drew's arm draped across me weakly, his hoarse voice whispering things into the mass of hair I knew had smothered him. His parents, Alice and Henry, hovered around the end of the bed with Doctor Gavin carpenter—my fiancé.

Drew's voice broke through the haze of emotion and panic, filtering through the black strands of hair to meet my ears. "Shhh, it's okay, Madii. I'm here."

I clung to him, wishing tears would come, or a smile, or anything other than the gut churning sensation that threatened dry heaves. I heard Alice asking the doctor questions and trembled. When I had woken up in his arms to a dose of smelling salts, my heart rate had been so high the nurses wanted to take me down to the ER to be checked out, but Gavin had assured them I needed to see Drew. So here I was, stuck between the man I love and the man I loved.

It was supposed to be the happiest day of my life, and agonizingly enough, it was. But the bittersweet moment was more bitter than sweet.

"How... but I ..." My words came out jumbled as I sat up, peering down at the frail form in front of me. Drew's crooked smile greeted me, my hands clinging to his wrist. The nurses worked around us, monitoring vitals, taking blood, listening to

his heart rate. It was a flurry of activity in the hospital room, the likes of which had not been seen in more than a year.

“It’s okay,” he reassured me, though his grip on my hand was nothing like it used to be. Skin hung from his spindly arms, signs that his body had lain in that bed for months on end. His sunken eyes had a vigor that I hadn’t seen in so long. In fact, I hadn’t seen his eyes open for anything other than a doctor’s flashlight check since that moment beneath the surface of the Gulf of Mexico when we were scuba diving. That moment still haunted my dreams to this day, but thankfully no longer in the form of nightmares.

“But they told me you wouldn’t wake up.” A stab of adrenaline pinched my chest. I looked down at my bare finger; Gavin’s ring was gone. Someone had taken it; Gavin maybe?

Drew’s finger swept over my finger where his ring had been the day of our combined bachelor/ bachelorette party. Three days before our wedding and tragedy had struck. Now almost two years later, he was back, by some miracle. My brows furrowed in shock or confusion; I wasn’t sure which. I felt so many things at once I wasn’t sure what to feel. My eyes wandered back to his face, his thumb still brushing my ring finger.

I stared down at the finger where a ring should be—my ring, but not the one Drew gave me. It was gone. I had no recollection of how it went missing, where it was, or if I would get it back. My heart sank when I thought of Gavin. What if he had taken it back because Drew woke up and he didn’t want me anymore?

“It’s okay. Mom has the ring, okay?”

My mind spun. How long had I been passed out and what had they told Drew?

“They told you?” I stammered. Did he know I’d moved on while he was out? Did he know about Gavin? Had someone told him I’d fallen in love with another man, and I was supposed to marry him today? I glanced at the clock on the wall. I’d be walking down the aisle in a few hours if only I weren’t sitting next to a hospital bed.

“Yes, I’ve been in a coma for almost two years.” He cleared his throat weakly, and a nurse offered a cup with a straw. He took the small plastic straw between his lips and sipped, swallowing before continuing as the nurse took the cup away. “Mom said you were heartbroken. She said she had the ring, but I needed to talk to you about everything.”

So, she hadn’t told him yet. I didn’t know if that was a good thing or not, but for the moment I was a bit less tense. I took a breath and tried to keep my thoughts focused on the present, not on what my heart was panicking about.

“So, he will need a lot of tests. If he agrees to them, I’d like to do brain scans, MRIs, EEGs, the works. I want to know what happened in his brain and how we can make this happen for other patients.” Gavin Carpenter, neurosurgeon and third leg of this strange love triangle I’ve found myself in, talked softly to Drew’s parents.

I couldn’t look at him. I knew if I did, Drew would see it. Or Gavin would see how torn my heart was at that very minute. So, I stared at my hand, the way Drew held it gently, the startling lack of engagement ring on my finger.

“It was the new therapy!” Alice beamed, clapping her hands. I’d seen the tears of happiness in her eyes. Why wouldn’t she be? Her son was back from the dead. So why was my stomach about to empty itself?

“Are you okay? You seem rattled.” Drew squeezed my hand, as weak as his grip was. I forced a smile, though he knew me too well. I could see by the look in his eye that he knew I was not okay.

“I’m alright. Don’t worry about me right now.” I tried to listen in to what Dr. Carpenter was telling Drew’s parents, but the bustle of nurses around us made it difficult to focus on anything. That and my swirling thoughts. I was supposed to be getting married. Today was the day.

“You don’t seem okay.” Drew’s brow furrowed, but I shook my head.

“This is all so much. You were gone, but now you’re back.” Before I got the sentence out, Alice swept in. She sat on the edge of the bed opposite me, shoos a nurse away, and grabbed Drew’s spindly arm.

“Baby, you have no idea how Dad and I prayed for this moment. I knew. He was doubtful, and he hurt so bad because he believed we lost you. But I knew you were still here.” She swiped at a few tears and continued. “Madii and I just never gave up hope.”

“Don’t feed the boy lies, Alice. I never gave up hope. Just had a hard time with how I felt about it all.” Henry clamped his hand down on my shoulder, gripping me so hard it hurt. I winced and stood, giving them space to move in. Drew turned his attention to his parents, who needed time with him. And I backed away.

It wasn’t that I didn’t want to be by his side. It was what I had wanted from the moment I got to the hospital on the day of the accident. All those days sitting alone by his side, pining for him. But the weight in my chest wouldn’t allow me to enjoy it at all.

“Hey,” Gavin whispered. I smelled the musky cologne he wore. Instead of causing me to melt into him like I had for months, it made my heart feel panicked. I kept my eyes glued to Drew’s; afraid he’d see my racing heart. “Madii, we need to talk.”

I swallowed hard and planted myself at the foot of Drew’s bed. Henry and Alice doted over him, despite the fact that he was a grown man. A box of tissues sat on his stomach, and from time to time he handed one to his mother. I couldn’t hear what they were saying, they kept their voices hushed. And the nurses were still busy with their equipment, but I was frozen.

“Madison, please.”

Drew’s gaze focused on me when Gavin said my name. My shoulders tensed at the confused expression on his face. He had no clue what was happening, and all I could think was how it would destroy him.

“I’ll be right back, okay? I need to speak to the doctor.” Another fake smile emerged on my face, and I turned to leave with Gavin. He kept his distance, thankfully so. He must have sensed that I was really overwhelmed. What I wouldn’t have done to be lying in his arms right then, our connection strong and my heart full.

The minute we left the room, Gavin took me by the elbow and pulled me aside, where the wall kept us out of view from Drew’s eyes. Gavin’s eyes pleaded with me to end his suffering. He held more than just a chart in his hand. As he opened his palm and held it out to me, I saw the ring—the one that was supposed to be on my finger.

“I took it. I knew you would want to break it to him slowly. I didn’t think you wearing another man’s ring on the day he woke up would be a good thing for him.” He waited with his hand outstretched, but I felt like picking up that ring would be like picking up Thor’s hammer. I stared at it with guilt and shame. I didn’t deserve that ring. I didn’t deserve Gavin, and I didn’t deserve Drew. “Madii?”

The pain in his voice sliced through my chest. “Gavin... I...”

“You don’t have to wear it right now. I understand what it would do to him. I’m not heartless, okay?”

“I just...” My gaze fell to the floor.

“No, Madison. You’re not doing this. We are in love. We have a life planned. Our wedding is in 3 hours.” The way his tone suddenly changed from pained, to authoritative, shocked me. I lifted my chin to meet his gaze. He pushed the ring toward me, pinching it between his thumb and forefinger.

“He is alive, Gavin.”

“Yes, you knew there was this chance, but you and I have moved on. Remember?” His eyes bored into me, disarming my resilience. Tears pricked my eyes, and I shook my head, taking a step backward. But he pursued, reminding me of things I couldn’t process at that moment. “Our wedding? Three hours?”

“We have to move it. I can’t.... We have to see if it will even work now.” I bit my lip as his hand fell, taking the ring with it. A flurry of nurses exited the room, passing by us in a blast of loud chatter. One of them seemed to notice the tension between us and gave me a sympathetic look. How confused all of them must be by all of this too. Or maybe they would sit and gossip over lunch, placing bets about what would happen to the good doctor now.

I knew all of them liked Gavin. He was exceptionally good looking. The way his chiseled features and flowing brown locks made him look like a model—who wouldn’t like him?

“What do you mean, see if it will work? We’re in love, Madison. Or did you forget that you promised to be my wife?” The hurt returned to his voice and to my heart.

“Gavin, it’s not that easy. You knew how I felt about Drew. You knew how hard it was for me to let go.”

“But you did move on. You love me.”

“I do love you.” The tears rolled. There was no point in stopping them. I was so in love with this man standing in front of me. He was everything I ever needed. But Drew had been that for me at one point too. “I just...”

“*Postpone*. That’s it. We will postpone it. I can imagine all of this has taken you by surprise, and I know you’ll need space. I’ll make sure everyone knows. Hopefully it’s early enough to let the caterer know.” Gavin took my hand, turning it up, and placed the ring squarely in my palm. “We are getting married, Madii. You are mine now. And I’m not letting you forget that.”

As Gavin moved closer, I felt a stab of adrenaline in my chest. Frantic, my eyes shot to the door where the large window would allow anyone inside Drew’s room to see what Gavin was about to do. I stiffened as his arm slid around my waist. My hand shook, but I clamped it around the ring as he pulled me against his body. Instinctively, my face rose to meet him, our lips brushing across one another.

“I love you, Madison Springer. And I’m going to stand by your side, no matter what, because I don’t give up.” His hot

whispers against my mouth felt wrong, like I was betraying Drew. But Drew had been all but gone, dead to the world.

Trying to let myself relax in his arms, I kissed him back, but it was tainted. Soiled. He backed away and frowned, likely sensing my hesitation

“Only postponed.”

I looked away just as Alice opened the door to the room. Her expression said everything. Worry, fear, pain, hope, love. “He wants you.”

Gavin wiped the tears from my face, and I nodded at Alice. “Coming.”

She sighed and backed into the room, and I pulled away from Gavin. “I love you.”

I didn't know it then, but it was the last time I'd talk to him for weeks. If only I'd had that luxury with Drew. I needed time to sort out my thoughts because loving two men was not something I'd ever planned on in my life.

GAVIN

“It’s typical for patients like these to have issues. I’m on top of it, Dr. Carpenter.” Adam Baker DPT, took over Drew’s case over a week ago. After him waking up, it became apparent very quickly that he would need physical therapy to regain his full range of motion and muscle mass. And being a neurosurgeon, I was useless in that aspect. I lingered, visiting the room and Drew’s family, only because I felt somehow connected to the Heintz family.

“Thanks, Adam. I think you’re the best person for the job.” I offered the doctor my hand, and he shook it. Though his grip was strong, I often wondered how he managed his patients. I towered over his short frame—a whopping five-foot six-inches tall, to my six-foot-plus frame.

“Tell me what his support system is like.” Adam crossed his arms over his chest. Every doctor knew that recovery mode for any long-term patient was fraught with ups and downs. Patients needed a strong network of people who would encourage them, visit, and even help with certain aspects of the therapy.

My chest tightened at the question, because despite having some really involved and very supportive parents, I wasn’t certain how else to explain Drew’s support system. Madison had been visiting. I’d seen her daily coming and going, though she hadn’t returned any of my calls or texts, so I was giving her space. And I had no idea where we stood. One day I was falling asleep with her in my arms and the next she was seated at her ex-fiancé’s bedside.

“Maybe you can just discuss the specifics with his parents. I believe they are waiting on us in the room.” I gestured at the door which stood ajar. I heard talking inside the room but didn’t know who all were in there. Adam nodded and followed my lead. We waited for an orderly pushing a mop bucket to pass by, then I led him into the room.

Alice and Henry sat at his bedside, and a redhead with short, wavy hair sat across from them. Drew’s eyebrows rose when we walked in. He was seated upright, most of his monitors and tubes had come out over the past two weeks. He already had better color, but that was likely due to the fact that he was eating food again, rather than being fed by an IV. It always amazed me how quickly coma patients bounced back when they began eating instead of being fed intravenously. Even the marvel of medical science didn’t compare to what the human body could do when fueled correctly.

“Gavin,” Alice said, standing. She smiled warmly and walked over to me. “So glad you stopped by again. I’m so happy you’ve stuck around even though it’s not your job anymore.”

Her hair had been pinned back, revealing simple pearl studs in her ears. Alice was a classy lady, and beautiful for her older age. She reminded me of my mother, though a lot nicer. I had to chuckle at the mental trigger—comparing my mother to Alice was like comparing a mango to a sea sponge. No comparison at all.

“Sure, Alice. You know as well as I do what an interest I took in Drew’s case.” It was a lie. I hadn’t ever taken such an interest in a patient my whole life. It had always been Madison, right from the start. And she captured my heart.

“This is Dr. Adam Baker. He is the physical therapist we talked about.” I stepped aside for Adam to stretch his hand out.

Alice shook the doctor’s hand and Henry joined us, exchanging a handshake with him as well. “Nice to meet you, Dr. Baker.” Henry’s voice had more life in it than I’d ever heard. I felt very out of place knowing everything that had transpired between Madison and me and knowing that both

Henry and Alice knew as well. It was a very awkward interchange, every time I spoke with the family.

“Call me Adam.” After shaking hands, Adam walked up to the bedside and smiled at the redhead. “You must be Madison.” He extended his hand again, and Alice chuckled.

“No, dear. This is Emily Gutierrez from Ten News. She wants to do a story on our Drew. Isn’t that nice?” Alice cast a sideways glance at me, but I kept my expression professional.

Just hearing Madison’s name made me frustrated. Part of me wanted to leave the room just so I didn’t have to bump into her until she was ready to have the important discussions we needed to have. Another part of me hoped she walked right in there and handed Drew’s ring back to him. I’d seen her wearing it once, which told me maybe she wasn’t even sure where we stood. It wasn’t a good feeling to have.

“Oh, that’s nice.” Adam turned to Drew and smiled. “So, when are you going to get out of that bed and walk?” His joking made Drew smile. I could see what Madison saw in him. He was charming, even as emaciated and weak as he was.

“Well, I hear that is what you’re for.” Drew shifted and raised a hand to rub his eye, and I could see the effort it took. It would be months before he was walking again, even with the right nutrition and therapy. He’d lost almost all of his muscle mass. Skin hung from his arms and was loose around his neck. “So, tell me what I have to do to get better because I have a wedding to plan.”

The words carved a chasm in my gut. I knew I could not keep my face calm and professional, so I faked a smile and looked at Alice, who stared back at me with concern. Her brows were drawn together, and the pleading look in her eye told me she didn’t want me to make a scene. I wasn’t about to anyway. Not only would it be completely unprofessional, but I would never hurt Madison that way. It was obvious she needed a bit of time, and I wanted her to be certain of marrying me. I didn’t want her to have any regrets when she said, “I do.”

“Well, Drew. It looks like you’re in good hands here with Adam. I’ll leave you two to it. Alice, I’ll check back later next

week.” I had to get out of there before I let my anger get the better of me. Alice nodded and frowned.

“Yes, Gavin. Thank you for stopping by.” A tiny wave accompanied her drooping expression.

I bolted for the door, ready to be away from that scene and pretend I hadn’t heard him say he needed to plan a wedding. Had Madison already jumped back into that water? But our wedding was only postponed.

I closed the door behind me, and headed toward my office, hoping I wouldn’t run into anyone who needed my attention. I needed a break before I blew my top. As I approached the elevators on my way to my office, the bell dinged, and the doors opened. Madison stepped out.

She looked surprised to see me. She crossed her arms over her stomach and hugged herself. The light purple jacket she wore complimented her blue eyes perfectly. I loved when she wore that color. It made my heart stop for a second, to see her standing there looking so ravishing.

“Hey,” she muttered, stopping awkwardly. A strand of her black hair fell across her face, but she didn’t move it. I knew why. She was wearing his ring, and she didn’t want me to see it.

“Hey...” I came to a stop by her, cramming my hands into my pockets. The chance meeting gave neither of us any time to prepare what we might say to each other. Maybe it was fate, because had I had time to prepare a speech, I likely would have ended up getting angry and hurting her. This shock had me reeling.

“I, uh... Sorry I haven’t texted.” She looked down, keeping her hands crammed beneath her arms at her sides. More hair fell in her face, and my hand itched to move it, but I kept my hands in my pockets.

“Yeah, why haven’t you?” What I wanted to do was let her know what Drew just said and grill her. But if I had learned anything about Madison during the 16 months, I watched her by his side before she agreed to date me, was that I had to be

the supportive man she could come to willingly. If I pushed her, she'd run away.

"I'm sorry. It's overwhelming."

Her voice was small, her posture wilting. I couldn't hold my hands back, not when she obviously needed comfort. I couldn't imagine what she was feeling. What I was feeling was difficult enough. Just thinking of how torn her heart must be made me forget all about my anger. I reached out and pushed the hair behind her ear and she looked up at me, now standing closer to her.

"It's okay. I understand." I didn't really. But I was trying. If she loved me the way I thought she loved me, she would have told him by now. But maybe she just didn't want to hurt him.

"You do?" Another strand of hair draped across her eyes, and she reached up and pushed it away, revealing what I had suspected. The ring she had returned to Drew's bedside only weeks ago now clung to her finger. I hadn't expected that to hurt as much as it did, and I forced my face to remain calm despite the emotional upheaval going on in my thoughts.

I captured her hand and held it between us. "Why?"

I tried hard not to let any emotion seep through, but it was impossible. She was mine, promised to marry me, but his ring was on her finger. It should have been my ring.

"He doesn't know yet. Alice told me that the doctors don't want him getting too stressed or worked up. They said it wouldn't be good for his recovery." She pulled her hand away and looked back down.

Of course, I understood. I was "the doctors," the one who had told Alice and Henry that exact thing. I knew what it meant, and I knew that it was the right advice, but I was having a horribly difficult time keeping my own advice. The doctor part of me knew she was doing the right thing, no matter how long it took for Drew to be okay. But the man part of me wanted to smash that ring with a hammer.

"Yeah. I know."

"I'm sorry, Gavin. It's so confusing."

“Have dinner with me?” When I asked, she looked up at me. I could see the pain there in her eyes, and the love. Deep inside, she still loved me. And I wasn’t going to just give up. I knew whatever she had with Drew had to have faded so much by now they’d never get it back. And if I just stayed persistent and loving, she’d come to her senses.

“I don’t know.”

The elevator dinged again, and I looked up to see the redhead-reporter standing there. I hadn’t even seen her pass by me, but she watched us with a hawk-eyed gaze. Just what we needed, a nosy reporter telling Drew about Madison sneaking around in the hallway with his doctor.

I waited until she was safely in the elevator and on her way down before I spoke again.

“Listen, we have things to talk about. Okay? Say you’ll have dinner with me, and we’ll just see how it goes. No pressure.” I wanted to hold her against my body, feel the warmth of her lips against mine. I missed her. Her tender heart, her listening to me, her advice and encouragement, even her body. But what I needed most was for her to make the decision on her own to choose me again. So I waited.

She bit her lip and picked at her fingernails. I tried to pretend I hadn’t seen the ring, but it gnawed at me. I slid my fingers between hers and held her hand until she peered up at me with tears in her eyes and nodded.

“Okay.”

“Good. I will pick you up the night after tomorrow. I’ll text you a time.” God, I wanted her so bad, just to stake my claim and prove to her and Drew that she loved me. That she was mine.

She nodded again, and as I leaned in to kiss her, she backed away. “I gotta go. I’m sorry.”

It was like a kick in the gut watching her walk away, toward another man. The way her yoga pants hugged her curves would normally have sent my pulse racing, but this time all I felt was jealous rage. How could I be angry with her? She was

innocent. She was trapped in some strange obligation of her own making—I knew it. There was no way she still loved him.

And how could I be angry with Drew? One minute he was at his bachelor party, and the next he wakes up two years later. A victim.

I watched as she disappeared around the corner without so much as a glance back at me. The interaction was so cold, you'd have thought we were squabbling siblings, not engaged.

Frustrated, I continued on to my office, only to lock myself in. I ignored several knocks, three phone calls, and a slew of texts. With the lights dim and the blinds shut, I propped my feet up on my desk and leaned back in my chair. Madison Springer was the best thing that ever happened to me, and it felt like I was losing her to a ghost.

MAD II

I rifled through my closet as if it were the first date I had ever had with Gavin, wondering what to wear. I didn't care what I wore. I was more anxious about what we'd talk about than my outfit. And it wasn't that I hadn't thought about what to say, or what I *would* say. I'd done nothing but think about what to say or do for two weeks. Since the day my life got turned upside down for the second time.

"I'm beginning to think you have horrible luck, and maybe when I get married you shouldn't be in my wedding party." Violet sat on the end of my bed, cross-legged and snickering. She'd come home from college for a visit, and I had asked her to stay with me for a few days. Since I'd put space between me and Gavin, my evenings were lonely. I figured sister time was just what I needed to keep my mind occupied.

"Thanks for that vote of confidence." I wasn't humored by her jokes. Two bachelorette parties in a row that never resulted in wedding bells was enough to make me have my own doubts. I didn't need her jibes to make it worse.

Pulling out a pair of skinny jeans and a pale pink blouse, I spun around and held them up for Violet to see. She shrugged, scrunching her nose on one side. "You're going on a date, not to the grocery store. Shouldn't you look nicer?" Violet popped off my bed and bounded over to the closet, nudging me aside so she could sort through my wardrobe.

"It's just that..." I wanted to tell her this wasn't a date, that Drew and I needed to talk about things before I could

officially make my decision about Gavin or what my future held. But my words stopped in my throat.

Violet yanked the jeans and top out of my hand and hung them back on the rod, then pushed me aside. “You know, you need to tell Drew soon. If you don’t tell him, he will hear it from one of his friends, or one of your mutuals. Maybe even his mother.”

I winced, shrinking away from her to plop on my bed. I flopped backward so I lay there staring up at the ceiling. Swirls of texture had my eyes wandering the familiar patterns overhead. At times as a teen, I would lie on my childhood bed and try to make sense from the shapes, but tonight the only thing on my mind was how to get through dinner with Gavin, without having a mental breakdown.

“Are you listening?” Violet’s voice was muffled. She was buried in my closet waist deep, searching far to the back. I knew the only thing she was going to find back there were cobwebs and dust bunnies, but I let her keep searching. If she was buried in my closet at least she wasn’t lecturing me anymore.

“No,” I mumbled. I wasn’t listening. I was trying to block her out. Everyone had a piece of advice but the only thing that mattered was how I was feeling. The problem was I wasn’t even sure what I was feeling. How was I supposed to know how to handle this? Even the best internet gurus had no advice for me, specific to my situation. I’d have known if it existed because I spent hours in bed at night looking for some sort of advice.

“Ah ha!” She emerged from my closet holding the pale-yellow dress I’d worn on my first date with Gavin—well my first official date. She stood next to the bed, holding the hanger in hand, dangling the dress out so I could see it. “This one.”

My heart clenched at the sight. It seemed like so long ago when I’d worn that dress to the fancy restaurant with him. I was so uncertain what to even make of what was happening, but Gavin had been so kind, so understanding. He helped me through some of the worst grief of what I had thought was me

losing Drew. They say hindsight is 20/20 but my brain felt like even 20/20 wasn't perfect enough.

I saw it all so clearly now, like the sunrise over the ocean with no clouds in sight. Drew was always going to wake up, and I was supposed to wait. I had known it in my heart so strongly. That was why I had stayed by his bedside, sat there mourning, reading to him, visiting. For 16 months I never missed a day, until Alice convinced me to move on. And Gavin had been my escape, my oasis.

"Earth to Madii." Violet shook the dress, and it flounced around. "What the hell is wrong with you? You are engaged to the sexiest man alive. You have a ring that cost probably more than your car. You are totally in love, and you're looking like you don't even want him to come over."

"It's not so cut and dry, Violet. Drew was gone for almost two years. I moved on. I fell in love with Gavin. We were supposed to be on our fucking honeymoon right now and Drew is back." I covered my face with my hands and sighed. I sensed Violet's presence hovering over me, her shadow lingering across the bed.

"I get it that Drew is back."

I opened my eyes to take her in, wondering if she really sympathized with what was going on. She tossed the dress across the bed and folded her arms over her chest as she looked down at me.

"But you have to snap out of this. Drew knows something is wrong. I could tell when I visited the other day. Alice seems nervous and fidgety, and she keeps telling Drew it's because she's worried, he will go back into a coma, but I see his face. He has questions. Has he asked you about what happened while he was asleep?"

I sat straight up, frustrated. "No, he hasn't asked, and he wasn't asleep. He was practically dead." I wasn't sure why people saying he was asleep irritated me so much, but I was at my breaking point.

Violet sat down beside me, and the bed shook. “Okay, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. I know this has to be difficult for you. Have you spoken with Gavin about what is happening? Like what are you feeling about Drew being back?”

I stared at the small metal trash can that sat next to my desk. My camera bag sat on the corner of my desk, the strap draped and hanging down, almost to the trash can. A pile of tissues mounded on top of the can had spilled over and a few lay strewn on the floor. Evidence of my wrestling was scattered all around my bedroom—the unmade bed, my dirty laundry piled in the corner, weeks of mail left unopened on my nightstand.

Normally I was a very tidy person. I took care of my things because the space made me feel more at home. But since the moment Drew woke up, I had done nothing but stare at the walls. Bills went unpaid, and I barely ate. I hadn’t decided if his return had ruined my life or been the best thing to happen to me. I had moments where I cried sheer happy tears because my best friend was back. But when I sat by his bedside, I realized he wasn’t back, not yet anyway. We wouldn’t be mountain climbing or parasailing any time soon; he couldn’t even walk right now.

“I haven’t.” Gavin was a smart guy. I didn’t need to tell him how fucked up my heart was right now. I could tell he was giving me space to deal with things, but that he was right there too, ready to be my comfort when I needed him. It was how he and I ever had a chance. He had literally friend-zoned himself just for me.

“You really need to.” Violet took hold of my hand as if to comfort me, but her insistence that I do things her way irritated me. “Gavin deserves to know how much you’re wrestling. He is not going to sit around and wait for you for 16 months.”

Tears burned at my eyes, but instead of breaking down and crying for the millionth time. I let them turn to sheer rage. I stood and pointed at the door. “Please leave.”

“What?” Violet asked, hurt. She stood and peered at me; her expression sullen. “What did I say? I’m trying to help.”

“I just want to get ready in peace. Just leave me alone for a while.” I avoided eye contact as she walked past me into the hallway. In my small one-bedroom home, it would be difficult to avoid each other for very long, but I needed space. Processing my thoughts was hard enough when I wasn’t being pressured to do so.

Violet stopped and turned to me once outside my room. “I know that you’re going through something right now, but you can’t shut out the people you love. I’m not like Mom and her pushiness. She may have pressured you to move on when you weren’t ready, but I’m not doing that. I’m just saying, opening up and being honest about what you’re feeling is better than bottling it up and hiding from people.” She walked away leaving me with a scorching pain in my heart.

I shut the door and leaned back against it. Gavin would be here to pick me up soon, but I was nowhere near ready. Not for dinner, and definitely not ready to face the actual issue. I heard Violet shut herself into the bathroom, then I heard a soft knock at the door. With a heaving sigh, I pushed away from the door and opened it, dragging my feet as I headed toward my waiting guest.

Gavin was dressed casually, in khakis and a polo, his dark hair combed but hanging loose. The stubble on his chin always looked good, as if he intended to have a five o’clock shadow permanently affixed to his face. He offered me a smile and a half a dozen roses when I opened the door.

“You’re not dressed?” he asked, stepping in.

I backed away, smelling the roses to hide the frown I knew was on my face. “I’m not feeling so great today.” It wasn’t a lie; my emotions had me so tied up in knots I couldn’t focus. I wasn’t hungry, and I hadn’t slept well in days.

Gavin’s hand shot to my forehead, but I shied away. “I’m a doctor.”

“You’re a neurosurgeon, and it’s not that kind of illness, okay?” Turning my back on him, I headed for the kitchen to grab a vase. The open floor plan didn’t allow me any privacy. He followed on my heels anyway.

“We can order in, if that makes you feel better.” He leaned against the island bar that separated the living area from the kitchen.

I wanted to reply that what would make me feel better was to just reverse time by several months and never get involved with him, so my heart didn’t feel like it had been put through a blender. But I held my tongue, instead offering him a fake smile.

“Sure.” I pulled a vase from beneath the sink and filled it with water, then removed the plastic from around the flowers and set them in it. They were just another thing that would die and remind me of how fragile life was, hopes and dreams.

“Hey,” Gavin said, taking my hand. I set the vase down and allowed him to pull me into his chest. It felt safe there usually, but right now it felt foreign, like I wasn’t supposed to be there. “Let’s go sit down and talk, okay?”

He led me to the living room and sat down, tugging on my hand until I was seated next to him. I kept a space between us, but part of me really wanted to just crash into him. I felt like I had messed up everything, that nothing would be right between me and Gavin ever again, or me and Drew for that matter. Tears burned at my eyes before I even had a chance to speak. I lay down, resting my head on Gavin’s thigh.

He smoothed the hair out of my face and held me until I was calm, not saying a single word. Gavin was like that, the strong silent type. I felt bad for accepting his comfort without returning the gesture by offering him the answers he wanted. I knew what he wanted. He wanted me to tell him that we were okay, that Drew was my past and we could set a date to be married. I just didn’t know what the right thing to do was.

“Talk to me,” he said so hushed I almost missed it.

“I need space, Gavin.” A fresh burst of tears came out. How could I even think of marrying him right now, knowing what it would do to Drew? Yes, it had been months since the accident, and I had moved on, fallen in love, gotten engaged, and planned a new life.

But every time I looked at Drew in that bed, helpless and frail, I felt responsible. I had been the one to insist we should do scuba diving when Drew wanted to go hiking and climb. He was in that bed because of me, and for no other reason. No one could tell me any different.

“Hey,” Gavin said, forcing me to sit up. “I’m here. I’m not going anywhere, okay? You can take the time you need. I’m just going to be your support and comfort as you sort this out.”

I looked into his patient eyes and realized what I was doing to him. It wasn’t fair. No matter what choice I made, someone was going to get hurt. And I was going to hurt. I leaned on his chest, and he held me, squeezing tightly. One thing was for sure, I wasn’t getting married to anyone. Not Gavin, not Drew, not anytime in the near future.

GAVIN

My eyes searched the room for tissues but all I saw was a roll of toilet paper sitting on the end table next to an empty bowl with a spoon in it. It appeared either Madison had run out of tissues and used toilet paper instead, or maybe she had them in another room—her bedroom? I reached for the half-empty roll and tore a strip off, handing it to Madii. She sniffled and took it, then wiped her face.

The minute I walked into her house I felt the weight of grief press in on me. Dishes hadn't been done; piles of tissues lay on every surface. Madison was not a slob, but her place looked like one lived in it. It broke my heart that she was hurting so badly that she'd let things go like this. If I didn't think it would offend her, I'd offer to help her out. But I knew how fiercely independent she'd become since Drew's accident.

"It's going to be okay, Madii. I'm here." All I could do was sit with her and hold her against my side while she cried. But I wouldn't dream of being anywhere else. The separation between us for the past few weeks had been more than difficult. I'd sent texts and made calls, but they had all gone unanswered. I knew she needed space, but I had been growing impatient with her pushing me away. This dinner together was a vestige of hope, and so far it wasn't going according to plan.

Madison peered up at me for a moment but looked away. The shame written on her face yanked at my heartstrings. I had known she blamed herself for everything since the beginning, before we even had our first date. I still recollect the way she would sit across from me at lunch in the hospital cafeteria and

pick my brain about new treatments, or therapies that might wake him up. It was one of the things that drew me to her, the fact that she sat and waited on him, never giving up hope. Even his own parents gave up hope.

“Hey, it’s okay. Talk to me. I’m not upset with you.”

I tried to turn her to face me, but she was being stubborn, so I did what I had to. I picked her up and planted her on my lap until she stopped wrestling against me and straddled me.

Her stubborn streak showed through as she refused to meet my gaze, but I clamped my hands around hers, so she’d stop picking at her fingernails. The result was a glare in my direction. I accepted it gladly. At least she was looking at me finally, though I would have rather she not be angry with me.

“This is unhealthy, Madison. You need to talk to someone. So if that someone is not me, that’s okay, but please, for the sake of your mental health, find someone to talk to.” My grip on her hands tightened as she wriggled, trying to get away. Her chest heaved harder and faster, and I thought she was going to shout, but instead she began crying.

“This is all my fault,” she blurted out. Her jet-black hair cascaded around her face like a curtain as she doubled over and collapsed onto my chest, her head nestled in the crook of my neck. She blabbed on about something I couldn’t understand for a minute, and I wrapped my arms around her. I’d never seen her this upset, not even when the accident had first happened. She seemed more in shock back then. This was hysterics.

“Madii... shhh. Hey...” I smoothed my hands across her back, pulling her t-shirt down after it became scrunched up. Her sobs shook me, and so I held her more tightly. I wanted to ease her pain; I just didn’t know what she meant by this being her fault.

“Listen, I can’t understand you. I want you to take a few deep breaths and try to talk more clearly.” Grabbing her by the shoulders, I forced her to an upright position and snatched more toilet paper to put in her hands. I couldn’t believe she blamed herself for our wedding being postponed. My own guilt bubbled in my gut. I had known about the new treatment,

the possibility that it could help. I had been the one to keep it a secret from her and she had no clue I even knew. If she did, what would she think of me?

When she calmed a bit, she continued. “Drew... the accident...” Between jerking short breaths she spat the words out. “It’s my fault—I chose scuba diving.” She dabbed her eyes. “This... is all... my fault.”

Suddenly the reason for her shame dawned on me. She still blamed herself for his accident, and likely, she blamed herself for hurting me too. Now that he was awake, no matter what she did, it would hurt someone. Her amazing, wonderful, tender heart felt so much compassion it was crushing her. My heart instantly warmed at the realization that she loved me so much she knew I was hurting, and she didn’t want to hurt me.

I cupped both of her cheeks, using my thumbs to wipe away the tears that sluiced down her face, and pulled her toward me. The electricity between us was still just as real. Her lips brushed over mine lightly at first, then deepened as I intensified the kiss. Like we had never missed a beat, she returned my affection, her hands weaving through my hair and taking hold.

It wasn’t a kiss that led to sex, though I would gladly have made love to her right there if nothing more than to comfort her aching heart. This kiss felt like I was the oasis to a wandering soul lost in the desert of grief. Like she was drawing life from my lips. So, I offered it with no reservation, willing to pour out my life source just to keep her heart beating. Her tongue danced across mine, two lovers in a tango across a tightwire. Until she pulled away.

Her lips were red, scratched by my stubble, but they matched her swollen eyes. Her chest still heaved from crying, and her face was still damp, but she was calm now. I pushed hair out of her eyes, my groin aching as arousal built. I wanted her, but more so I wanted her to feel comforted. So, I tempered my body’s reaction and tried to focus on helping her feel better.

“Madii, none of this is your fault. Okay? You didn’t make that accident happen. You didn’t make Drew agree to scuba dive.

You didn't purposely give him faulty equipment or break his regulator. You didn't—"

"You don't know what you're talking about."

Madison snapped at me, cutting me off. She'd never been angry with me like this before, so I wasn't sure how to handle it. I sat in silence, letting her vent. Though when she attempted to get off my lap, I pinned her hips down, so she was forced to talk to me. She didn't seem happy about it.

"You weren't there. You didn't hear those conversations. You don't know how I pleaded with him to do what *I* wanted. And he did. He gave up his own bachelor party to do what I wanted to do, and then all that happened. And he almost died, and now look at him. He can't feed himself yet. He can't walk or hold a pen to write."

"You didn't force him to do that. You didn't know it was going to happen, and—"

"Let go of me!" She pushed at my chest, forcing her hips upward, so I released her. I hadn't come to upset her or fight, and I wanted to calm her down before things escalated.

After she stood, she pressed her hand to her forehead and began pacing, so I stood too. She had her back to me, but I followed her, right on her heels. And when she turned around, I was there. I wrapped my arms around her and held her tight against my chest. I half-expected her to wrestle away from me again, but she didn't. She stood stiffly, letting me hold her.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you angry. I wanted to comfort you. I was just trying to say that you don't have to feel guilty. He's not dead. He's here."

She looked up at me, sorrow in her eyes. "God, Gavin. I'm sorry. I'm not trying to be awful. I'm just hurting and it's overwhelming and I don't know what to do."

A noise came from her bathroom, drawing my attention in that direction. I offered a confused expression to her, and she rolled her eyes.

"Violet... my sister is visiting."

She seemed less than pleased, but I didn't pry. One difficult discussion was enough for one night. Instead, I made a joke, hoping it would make her smile. "So I guess that means I'm not getting lucky on your couch?"

Instead of drawing the desired smile, my joke brought on more tears. Madii gripped my shirt and buried her face in my chest and cried, so I held her again. The bathroom door opened, and a ravishing younger version of Madison stepped out, a single finger pressed to her lips to indicate I should be quiet. She mouthed the words "sorry" and tiptoed into Madii's bedroom, closing herself in.

"Hey, let's get dinner."

"I'm not hungry," she moaned, using my shirt to wipe her face.

"I was just joking, babe. I didn't mean to upset you." Loosening my grip on her, I slid my hand down her arm to her wrist. She took my hand and shrugged.

"I want nothing more than to run away from all of this chaos to a planet where none of this has happened. Making love to you would do that, but unfortunately, Violet is here, and my heart is a complete wreck, and it would not help me sort out what I'm feeling at all." She led me back to the couch. "And I'm not hungry at all, so if you want to eat something, you can order delivery. I just want to be with you if that's okay."

"That's okay, as long as you let me help you here." I pointed at the pile of crumpled tissues laying on her end table. The mess didn't bother me a bit, but it did reveal Madii's mental state. She was a tidy person, and this was completely out of the ordinary.

She grimaced in embarrassment and collapsed onto the couch. "Fine."

Her consent was all I needed. For more than an hour I listened to her talk about Drew and how guilty she felt. I didn't argue with her once, thankful she let me stay and hadn't thrown me out for the way I'd corrected her earlier. I cleaned up the place,

did the dishes, and took out the trash, and when I was done, I sat down next to her.

“Thank you for letting me take care of you. It’s what I want to do every day for the rest of my life. And just like I promised, I’m not going anywhere. I’m going to be as patient and loving as you need me to be, because I can’t imagine how you’re feeling.”

Her chin dropped, but she sighed contentedly. That was a step in the right direction. “I feel really confused right now, and I just need time.”

“That’s okay, Madii.” I tucked her hair behind her ear, and she turned her cheek into my palm. Then she lay down on my lap and snuggled up against me. “You really shouldn’t blame yourself, love. I know you feel guilty, but you shouldn’t. Okay?” My heart ached to comfort her in a more tangible way, but all I could do was listen and hold her.

Madison shrugged and picked at a string on the inseam of my slacks. “Then why do I feel so guilty?”

I tried to get her to sit up, but she refused, so instead I played with her hair. “Babe, it’s called survivor’s guilt. A lot of people have it. When you thought he wasn’t coming back, you blamed yourself. Now that he’s here, you feel like it’s your fault because you can walk, and talk, and eat, and all the things he can’t do.”

“I have to make him better...”

My heart wrenched when she said that. I started to realize that what she was feeling might be more powerful than anything positive I could offer her. The guilt she felt might just snare her and convince her to stay with him simply because she felt personally responsible for his tragic accident. But what sort of life would that be for her? And what did that mean for me?

MAD II

“Easy now,” the therapist cautioned, helping me lay Drew back in the bed again. After sitting up straight for nearly twenty minutes, Drew was exhausted. His body had been used to lying in various positions—turned regularly to keep his skin from getting bed sores—for the past two years. Doctors and therapists didn’t have to tell me that he had no strength. I could see it.

After getting him settled, I took a deep breath. I hadn’t been as active in the past few years as I was prior to his accident either, but I had the strength to do daily activities. I could only imagine what Drew felt like; he had to depend on others to feed him after the first few bites, because his arms tired so easily. He had even been put on a light and soft foods diet to start out, just to get his digestive system back to working like normal.

“That’s it.” Adam put an extra pillow behind Drew’s head as he adjusted the bed to a lower position. “Let’s rest for about 30 minutes and then we will get you sitting upright again so you can eat. I’ll check back here when lunch arrives. Alright?”

I nodded at him as Drew offered a few questions. They chatted but I ignored them. Everything about visiting Drew was tiring to me now. Depression had swallowed me whole, leaving little room for me to feel hopeful or encouraged. It was insane. I should have been happier than anyone on the planet, but I was down. So down that I didn’t want to talk to the man who loved me—either one of them.

“Bye, Madii. I’ll be back after a bit.” Adam waved as he walked out of the room. I wondered if he lived here. He spent so much time in this room the past week that it seemed like he never left. Maybe that was how it was with patients awakening from a coma. I had never experienced anything like this before, so I didn’t know what the norm was.

“Come sit by me.” Drew wiggled his fingers, leaving his arm to lay limp across his lap. Pasting on my bravest smile, I sat on the edge of his bed and folded my hands in my lap until his wiggling fingers brushed my arm. “Don’t you want to hold my hand?”

“Of course.” I slid my fingers between his and held his hand. It felt stronger than it had last week, but still he had a way to go. I was grateful for the help of Adam and the nurses. I knew it was their job, but they did it with such compassion that it felt like they genuinely cared about Drew and his recovery.

“I can’t wait to get on my feet and walk. When we walk down that aisle everyone will just go nuts. I talked to that reporter again this morning before you came by. She wants to come in and record some of my therapy sessions for the piece they’re going to do on me. Can you believe that? I told her I needed to ask you first, since you would be in the shots too. She said she’d call later.”

It was sort of exciting that the news media wanted to do a piece on Drew’s miraculous recovery, but I didn’t really want to be a part of it. The camera in my face while I was dealing with my unresolved issues just didn’t seem like something I wanted to do.

“Yeah, that’s okay.” I lied I know. But how did I tell him that I wasn’t interested in having my mental breakdown plastered on every television screen in the tri-state area, let alone the national news? I also did not like the idea of a report tagging along everywhere.

“God, baby girl. I’m so sorry. I’m so insensitive. I should have just told her no. I know this is all like a fucking yo-yo to you. I haven’t even taken time to ask you how you’re doing.” Drew squeezed my fingers, though it wasn’t much of a squeeze. The

sunlight streaming in his window made him squint at me, so I got up and closed the curtain to avoid his comment.

I didn't want to discuss my feelings. I had to be there for him. It couldn't be about me right then or I'd break down crying, and he didn't need that. What Drew needed was a strong support system that was excited that he was back and championing his recovery. The doctors had told me his mental state was directly connected to his physical health. If he got too down about the accident and the time he lost, he would not do as well in recovery. So, I pushed my feelings aside as best as I could and tried to be what he needed.

"There you go. No more sun in your eyes."

"Come sit down, baby. Talk to me." He patted the bed next to him, but when I relented and sat, I chose the same place on the edge of the mattress. I kept my fixed smile too, because I didn't want him to keep pressing me.

"What did you order for lunch?" There was nothing written on his whiteboard, where they kept records of his nurse and any other comments to be passed on to doctors or other staff.

"Turkey salad, but I don't want to talk about lunch. I want to know what's bothering you." Drew slipped his hand into mine again, and I almost pulled away. Why would I pull away like that? I loved him. I didn't even know what was happening to me.

"Nothing is bothering me. I'm so happy you're awake. I've missed you." That was true. I had missed him, and deep down I still loved him so much. Except, there was this new love in my life. A love that was stronger and deeper than the love I had for Drew. And I couldn't tell him. I couldn't even be honest with Gavin and tell him.

"But you seem troubled by something." His brow furrowed. "It was the reporter, wasn't it?" Drew knew me so well he could see through my lies, and backed into a corner like this, I was no good at coming up with something convincing on the spot. Not that I lied to him, but given the circumstances, I had no choice. What had been so many months for me of change and growth, had been mere seconds for him. He was the exact

same man he was the moment he passed out beneath the water, with the same deep connection to me that I was struggling to locate.

“No.” I blurted, but I wished instantly that I’d just agreed with him. It would have gotten me out of his next question.

“Then what is it?”

He stared at me, searching my face with his gaze. I felt my gut roll and hated the fact that when I got anxious, I also got nauseous. My pulse picked up, and my tongue felt thick and sticky. He wanted an answer, but I had none to give him. It had been two years since the accident. Two years was a lot of time. Anything could have happened. And so many people told me to move on. I felt tears welling up and I blinked them away, praying he hadn’t seen them. I was ready to force a smile when the door swished open and Pam, Drew’s charge nurse, walked in carrying his tray of food.

“Howdy, folks. I got your turkey salad here, with steamed veggies and a brownie on the side. Also, this protein shake ordered by the doc. He said you’re trying to build muscle, and this will help, so we keep sending them. This one is strawberry. I see you didn’t drink the chocolate one yesterday.” Pam sat the tray down on the small rolling table next to the bed and adjusted it higher, positioning the table over Drew’s lap. She pulled the lid off the main dish and steam wafted upward.

“Yeah, chocolate isn’t my favorite.” Drew scrunched his nose up and readjusted himself in bed.

Since when was chocolate not his favorite? Everything he ate before the accident was chocolate: cake, pie, cookies, shakes, you name it. And now he didn’t like chocolate? I offered a confused expression, but he ignored it.

“Well, we have vanilla and strawberry of this sort, but we also offer some citrus types too if you’re interested in trying those. More like a powdered drink than a milkshake, but they do the trick.” Pam tore the lid off the protein drink and plunged a straw into it, then pushed the tray closer.

I didn't care if Drew's tastes had changed. I was simply glad to have avoided that conversation. He picked up his fork and portioned a bite onto it, then lifted it toward his mouth. I could see his arm was still tired from the therapy he'd just done, so I scooted forward, ready to feed him.

"Nah, honey. Let him do it until he can't. The more he practices, the better." Pam's gentle lecture was enough to make me scoot back. It was painful watching Drew struggle. He dribbled on his chest, and she dried his face for him, hovering over him as he ate. I could have done her job, but the longer she stayed, the less likely he was to dive back into the sensitive topic of my emotions.

"Fuck, my arm feels like it weighs a ton." Drew dropped his fork onto his plate and sucked at the straw Pam thrust into his mouth.

"Well, you can stop your complaining now and find five things to be thankful about." Her motherly way made me chuckle. I covered my mouth and looked away because I knew Drew would likely snap at her, but the expected reaction did not come. When I looked back at Drew, he had his eyes closed, his face calm. I felt like I didn't even know him when he opened his mouth.

"Being alive. My parents watching out for me. My beautiful fiancé. The ability to breathe, and...."

"Me!" Adam's voice broke into Drew's list of things to be thankful for, and I turned to see him smiling. "I see Pam has you focusing on the positive. She is really great at that." Adam nudged Pam out of the way and took the shake from her hand. "Thanks."

At that, Pam turned and headed out the door. Drew took another sip from the shake and sighed contentedly.

"Yeah, sometimes it's difficult to stay positive. So, I'm thankful that Pam and Cecil both really keep me grounded." He rolled his neck. "Any chance I can just skip this meal?"

"Drew," I chided, "you need to eat in order to build that muscle back."

“She’s right. If you’re not fueling your body correctly, it will take longer to regain all those essential functions you lost.” The doctor set the shake back on the tray. “You know you’re lucky to have such a beautiful woman who cares so much about you. I heard from a lot of people how she waited on you day and night, reading to you, and visiting long after most patients’ loved ones stop caring. She’s a keeper.”

I shrank back inside myself, feeling a tiny part of my soul die. If either of them actually knew what I had done, they wouldn’t be singing my praise. But they didn’t know, because I hadn’t told them. I was too ashamed and confused.

“Yeah, she’s pretty perfect to me.” Drew reached under the tray table and took my hand, rubbing his thumb over my engagement ring. I shouldn’t have been wearing it. I should have just told them both that the engagement was off, that I needed time to figure out what I was even feeling.

“Alright, well, I’ll be back later this evening. We will do some more sitting exercises. By the end of the week, you should be good for a 30-minute wheelchair ride. If you can do that, then we can get you to the rehab lab where we can start working on those legs. Before you know it, you’ll be walking down the aisle.” Adam patted Drew’s leg and fixed his eyes on me. “Help him finish up eating, and I’ll see you two later.”

I nodded, certain that if I spoke, my voice would crack and give me away. Violet was right. Keeping all of this bottled up inside of me was going to kill me. And what little I had said to Gavin was only enough to take the edge off. I needed space to think. So, I shoveled food in Drew’s mouth, to keep him chewing and occupied. I didn’t want him asking anymore questions.

When he was finished eating, I told him he should rest, that I wanted to get food from the cafeteria, but really, I wanted to sit in my car and hide from the world. It wasn’t an exceptionally hot day, so I kept my windows rolled up and locked myself in, letting the tears flow freely. I saw Alice headed up to Drew’s room, so I sent her a text letting her know I didn’t feel well and decided to go home. The pressure of

trying to keep a smiling face when my insides were dying was too much.

All I could think about was Gavin—how he cared so much that he sat patiently and listened, even though I knew he really wanted his own answers. He wanted to comfort me enough that he was willing to let me walk away and work out my emotions, even if it meant losing me.

When I got home, I sat in my car and sent Gavin a text.

Madii 12:49PM: Want to do dinner, Friday night?

I got an instant reply.

Gavin 12:49PM: My place or yours.

It was so sweet that he instantly knew I would not want to go out in public.

Madii 12:50PM: Mine

Gavin 12:50PM: It's a date.

My heart breathed a sigh of relief, and I headed into my house to toss myself on my bed and pray the week went by fast.

GAVIN

A nice breeze blew over the back patio, cooling the heat of the day enough to make sitting outside to sip lemonade tolerable. The sun was high in the sky, and Mittens—my mother’s shih tzu—hid under the table in the shade panting. His drool dribbled onto my sneakers, but I tried not to pay attention. If I wasn’t covered in drool when I visited my parents’ place, it was dog hair.

For the moment, I was enjoying the afternoon in peace. Mom was inside making another pitcher of lemonade and talking on the phone to her girlfriend from the beauty salon she frequented. We’d been interrupted by the call, and Mom left me to watch the dog while she took the call. I didn’t mind. I was fulfilling my required duty as a son to keep her company while Dad was away on one of his many trips abroad for work. And I didn’t have to listen to her nagging me for a few minutes. So, it was a win-win.

I felt Mittens brush on my shoe and looked down to see him chewing on my shoelace. Without thinking, I nudged him away with my foot to discourage his bad behavior just as my mother walked out the door carrying fresh lemonade.

“Gavin Michael Carpenter!” Mom’s scowl made me straighten in my seat. It was a funny thing about that look. Even as a boy the only thing she had to do was look at me and I would correct my behavior. “Be nice to Mittens.” She turned on her baby talk, which she usually reserved only for her dog. “He’s just a baby, isn’t he?”

After setting the lemonade on the table, she scooped up the dog and held him like an infant, scratching his stomach and cooing at him. I was thankful he wasn't chewing my shoelace anymore. I was also thankful for more lemonade.

"So where is Dad this time?" I poured myself a glass and topped off Mom's too, then set the pitcher down. Condensation pooled in a ring beneath the large glass pitcher.

"Oh, you know. Malta or Saint Marie or somewhere." She waved her hand in the air and turned Mittens over in her arms, then sat down. "I never ask anymore. It makes no difference to me where he travels; I just wish he'd be home more often."

"Retirement is right around the corner, Mom." The breeze picked up, tossing a napkin across the table, and I caught it before it blew out into the yard. Mom settled Mittens on her lap and took a sip of her lemonade.

"Yes, retirement, and I have no grandbabies yet." Her narrowed eyes focused on me as I hid behind my glass, sipping it. "Now that you're available again, I'd love it if you would just try a date with Murielle's niece. She's so beautiful, and she is the director of operations at a consulting firm. Not sure what that means, but she's successful."

"Mom, I'm engaged." I bit my tongue, refusing to say more, but wanting to unleash on her. She hadn't liked Madison from the start, so it was no surprise to me that she was practically celebrating what was happening as if it wasn't affecting me emotionally.

"Oh, you say that. But you know as well as I do that girl had some issues. I mean, she was so hung up on a dead man—"

"Mom, please have some respect." I set my glass down a little harder than I should have, and the table jostled. "Drew was never dead; he was in a coma."

"Same thing." She shrugged and set her glass down. "You know it doesn't matter. What matters is that you can meet Murielle's niece and find out if you're compatible. I heard she just ended a bad relationship, so she is not only in the market, but also probably eager to get back on the playing field."

“Is that what this is to you? A game?”

Mom looked at me in stunned silence, batting her eyelashes furiously. “What do you mean?”

I tried to refocus my energy on the glass of lemonade, picking it up and having a long drink. I had always known my mother was a bit controlling and judgmental, but I hadn’t realized how much she disliked Madison until right now. I just didn’t know why. Madison was the best thing that ever happened to me.

“Just forget it.” My glass empty, I sat it back on the table and watched Mittens scratch behind his ear, hair flying around and landing on Mom’s slacks. She didn’t seem to care one bit. That dog was her replacement for me since the time I moved out—a surrogate child.

“Well, I spoke with Murielle, and Sammy, Sonya—” she touched her chin “—what was her name? Anyway, Murielle’s niece will be available next weekend.”

Mittens growled, staring out at the backyard where a stray tabby cat sauntered across the lawn. He was a guard dog in that aspect, chasing birds or cats or even squirrels off the lawn. In a split second, he tore off of Mom’s lap and raced across the grass toward the cat. Mom launched to her feet, her chair sliding away from her.

“Mittens! Bad! Come back.”

Mittens was just a dog, but at that moment I applauded him. He defended his property like the badass he was, barking and nipping at that cat until it climbed the old oak tree and hid high in the branches. I, however, had been a coward, allowing my mother to speak ill of my fiancé on more than one occasion. And it was time I rectified that.

“Oh, you bad dog,” Mom scolded, shaking her finger at the mangy mutt whose chest was proudly puffed out as he mounted the steps and curled up by my feet, still growling as he stared out across the lawn. Mom sat down, smoothing her pants across her legs, and instantly her face was a beaming smile again. “So, next weekend?”

“Mom, I told you. I’m engaged to Madison, and I am in love with her. I’m not available to date Murielle’s niece, or Lorna’s daughter, or the sister of the neighbor lady’s dog walker. I’m not available.” I turned my glass on the table, spinning it in the moisture puddled on the glass top.

“Well!” She huffed, pursing her lips at me. “That woman has all but moved in with her ex-boyfriend, and you think you’re still getting married? What on earth is this world coming to? Gavin Michael, I tell you, if you don’t get some sense knocked into you, you will end up alone like an old miser.”

“Good grief.” Raking my hand through my hair, I pushed my chair back from the table and leaned forward. The way Mom raised her voice drew attention from the neighbor who sat on her back porch a few dozen yards away, knitting. Her eyebrows rose as she gawked at us as if she had nothing better to do than to eavesdrop. I wondered if that was Murielle.

“She is just out for your money anyway. That much is clear. She doesn’t even have a real job. And why would she start dating you if she was in love with someone else anyway? She sounds like a gold digger to me.” Mom fussed with her hair, brushing it back out of her face. “Please tell me you didn’t get her pregnant. That’s just what this family needs, a scandal about an unwed mother using you for money. No woman will ever date you again.”

“Christ’s fucking sake, Mom!” I stood, not caring what Murielle, or the neighbor or anyone else had to say. “You’re talking about the woman I love.”

I stepped away from the table, offering the neighbor a glare, and she rose and gathered her things, disappearing inside her house. Then I turned back to Mom who shook her head, eyes raised.

“I taught you better than all of this, Gavin.”

“Yes, you taught me to see the best in people, which is what you’re refusing to do with Madison. We are getting married, like it or not. And if you want to see your grandbabies, whether that be in nine months or in two years, you will be nice to her.”

Turning to face the backyard, my back to my mother, I took deep breaths to calm myself. I usually let Mom do her thing, go off on me and lecture. It made her feel better or something. But Madison was the woman I loved more than anything. I planned to marry her because I was not doing this over again, dating and risking my heart just to have it stomped on the way my ex-girlfriends did.

“Oh, dear. You know I’m watching out for you, right?”

I felt Mom’s hand on my back before I even heard her coming. Frustration kept me so distracted. She had poured another glass of lemonade for me and held it in her hand, offering it to me. I took it but didn’t look her in the eye. I was sick of her pushiness, the insistence that I provide grandchildren for her because I was “38 and not getting any younger.”

Sipping the lemonade, I listened to her reasoning and justifying her poor behavior. The dog waddled around the grass, sniffing things and marking his territory. Part of me felt like she had deserved my blow up, but part of me felt ashamed.

“Gavin, you know, your Grandma Jean never liked me either, but the moment you came along, everything changed.”

She spoke of my father’s mother, who I could tell was a bit of a handful at times. I’d seen her act more controlling, nosy, and overbearing than my own other.

“You literally called Madii a gold digger.” My jaw set, I gave her a side-eye.

“Well, now. You can’t blame me for worrying about you, Gavin. Since you were about five years old and the little kid who lived down the street made fun of you and made you cry, I’ve just always worried that someone would take advantage of you. You have such a kind heart, and you’re so compassionate. Remember that tiny bird you found one year? You wanted to bring it in and nurse it back to health.”

It was just like my mother to lay it on thick. Her “mommy dearest” act was her go-to performance every time she irritated me, or I lashed out. It was her way of smoothing things over

without really taking responsibility for her actions or the hurtful words she spoke to me. It frustrated the fuck out of me, but there was no use in trying to change her now. The best I could hope for at this point was that she would adjust to the fact that Madison was the woman I wanted to be with the rest of my life. And as she said, maybe things would change once Madii finally gave her what she wanted—a grandchild.

“I have to go, Mom.” Thrusting the half-drunk glass of lemonade into her hand, I took her by the shoulders and kissed her on the cheek. “Please tell Dad to let me know what day and time he is getting in. I’ll drive you to the airport to pick him up.”

“Oh, Gavin, please don’t rush off. We were just having a lovely time here.” She snatched my wrist as I tried to walk away. Her eyes large saucers begging me to stay with her. Even Mittens came running up to the patio, his dog license on his collar jingling like a cat bell.

“Actually, I have a game of basketball planned with Nick and Jiles. They’re expecting me at the court in about 45 minutes, so I’d like to get home and change to be there a few minutes early. I’m not as young as I used to be and I need to stretch before we get too active.”

I winced as the words came out of my mouth, realizing they were the same words Mom always used to pressure me into settling down with her friends’ nieces or children. Time was of the essence to Mom, but to me, it was love that mattered.

“Oh, well, then have a good game.” All the melodrama in the world couldn’t outdo my mother when she turned on the act of a wounded parent. I wasn’t sure how my father survived so many years with her.

“I’ll see you later this week. When is your hair appointment?” I’d found that the only way to outmaneuver her emotional manipulation and passive aggressive tendencies was to pretend I didn’t notice.

After producing a large sigh, she said, “Wednesday at 3:30.”

“Alright, I’ll stop by around 2:45 then and we will get you to the salon on time. But I’m not taking Mittens this time. He covered me in hair last time.”

Mom rolled her eyes. “Fine.”

Turning to go, I ignored the tiny foot stomp of disapproval and kept walking. Mom always crossed the line, but never like she had today. She had upset me, but what upset me more was the fact that I was there defending Madison to my mother, and Madison didn’t seem to care. If she was going to be my wife one day soon, she was going to have to start acting like it. Maybe Nick and Jiles would have some advice for me, on how to let Madii know I was serious.

Or maybe we would shoot hoops and talk about Nick and Jiles’s relationships and they’d let me off the hook. Either way, a serious talk with Madison was on the cards for the next time we got together, which would be in just a few days. Since the moment she had invited me for dinner, I had been planning exactly what to say to her. This insanity needed to stop. She was mine—not Drew’s. We were getting married, and if I was going to defend her against my mother’s verbal attacks, I needed to know she was still in it for the long haul.

Time to put an end to the games.

MADII

Mom sipped the last of her tea and set the mug in the sink, leaning back on the counter as she wiped her mouth with her napkin. Violet had planned what she thought was some sort of intervention by inviting Mom and my best friend Lexi over to demand I open up about my feelings. I had tactfully avoided most of their prying, and even when Violet had been very direct about why she had invited everyone over, I made it clear I was not interested in discussing things and if she wanted to be pushy, she could leave. To which Mom had replied with her peacekeeping.

“Thank you for having us over, Madii.” Mom had changed so much over the past few months. I remembered a time only a few months back when I had dinner at my parents’ house and Mom started to get pushy about me moving on, letting Drew go. I had gotten so upset I got up and left.

Since then, she had been softer, more compassionate. And once Gavin asked for my hand in marriage—without even hinting to me that he was going to do it first—she had come around to support me unquestioningly.

“Yeah, Madii. I feel like I never see you anymore. Once you and Gavin got engaged, it seemed like you two spent all your time together, except for wedding planning.” Lexi pushed her empty mug across the small dining table where she sat. Violet sulked from the seat next to her.

“No problem, but I’m going to have to ask you ladies to leave. Gavin is coming for dinner tonight and I have a bit of cleaning to do first.” I picked up Lexi’s empty mug and peeked into

Violet's. She had hardly drunk anything. "You done?" I asked her, and she shrugged, her sullen expression telling me she was upset that her plan to corner me hadn't worked.

"Let's go, Vi. You can bring the car back tomorrow. Dad and I have plans." Mom picked her purse up off the counter and put the strap on her shoulder, tucking it beneath her arm. The growing crowd's feet around her eyes shifted as she smiled at me. "Well, if you two discuss a new date, let me know. I'd love to help make the arrangements again."

Violet pushed her mug in my direction and stood, leaving only Lexi at the table. "I'll be back in the morning." She sulked out of the room and Mom frowned sympathetically, waving as she followed Violet out the front door.

"So, the good doctor is coming over?" Lexi waggled her eyebrows. "Does that mean things are back on track?" She leaned back in her chair and tapped her fingers on the table.

Avoiding her grin, I picked up Violet's mug and emptied it into the sink, rinsing all of the mugs, including my own. "We haven't talked about it much. I'm taking things slowly, because it's been overwhelming emotionally."

"Ah, and that is why Violet was upset? She intended for us all to badger you into talking. Boy she is your sister, and she still doesn't know you. Does she?" Lexi chuckled and stood.

She knew me better than anyone in my life, even the third member of our clique, Crystal, who had strangely been occupied by her own new love interest lately. Leaving the mugs in the sink, I grabbed a towel and dried my hands then turned to hug Lexi before she left.

"Thanks for coming. Maybe we should have lunch sometime. You can visit with Drew a bit too. He's been lonely, and not many of his friends are even around here anymore. I heard Stewart was going to visit soon, but that was a rumor that Alice told us."

Lexi held me at arm's length after our hug, her eyes suddenly serious. "I'll come visit, but I need you to know something. I watched you with Drew, the ups and downs, and the way you

two fit. You seemed perfect for each other, and I was happy when you asked me to be at your wedding.”

“But...?” I was waiting for her lecture. She was the most outspoken person I knew, more so than Violet, so for her to have a strong opinion but not let me hear it was an impossible feat for her.

“But watching you with Gavin... Girl, he loves you. He is perfect for you. And you love him. You were happier with him than you ever were with Drew.” She seemed to notice my facial expression change and she added, “And that’s all I’m going to say. Alright?”

I nodded, backing away from her. She snatched her clutch from the kitchen counter and wiggled her fingers over her shoulder as she walked toward the front door. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!” she called, which made me smile.

My body tensed at the thought of that, with Gavin, tonight. I had no plan to put the moves on him, but it had been three weeks now and I missed him. It was the entire reason I had decided to text him and invite him for dinner. Lexi may not have been entirely right about how happy I was with Drew, or how it differed with Gavin—in my opinion—but she was right. Gavin did make me happy.

I leaned against the counter with the dish towel in hand, staring at the floor. For the moment my mood was lighter, maybe because of tea with my family and best friend, or maybe because the distraction took my mind off my stress. But for one reason or another, I felt hopeful for the moment. The front door shut, and I sighed, turning back to the sink to load the mugs into the dishwasher.

“You’re too pretty to be standing there doing dishes.” Gavin’s rich, warm tone filled the room, causing a warm shiver down my back. And before I could turn around, he was wrapped around me, face buried in the side of my neck. “God, I miss you.”

I smiled. It was a good feeling having his arms around me again. I tried to push away the nagging guilt that riddled my thoughts and dropped the towel in the sink. Turning in his

arms to face him, I breathed him in. He smelled like fresh-cut grass, maybe with a hint of his musky scent, but it was welcoming.

“I didn’t hear you come in.” Draping my arm around his shoulders, I laced my fingers together and welcomed a kiss from him.

“Lexi was on her way out.” His hips pinned mine against the kitchen counter as he leaned in, his hands searching my back as he devoured my lips. When he pulled away, I could see the hunger in his eyes. It wrapped around my heart and warmed me, sending waves of desire through my body.

When I looked at Gavin’s face I saw Drew’s smile, and I had to look away, forcing myself to not think about him.

“You, okay?” Gavin asked. He loomed over me, his presence so close I could feel his heart thudding against his ribs.

“I’m okay,” I mumbled, pressing against his chest. “What do you want to eat?” I squirmed away, uncomfortable but determined to have a good evening. I might have decided last week that I was definitely not getting married to anyone any time soon, but I could at least maintain the connection I had with Gavin. He had been such a good friend, and God knew I needed one right then.

“Oh, anything sounds fine to me.” Gavin followed me out of the kitchen area to the couch. I sat down, pulling the basket of assorted take-out menus out of the small cabinet beneath the coffee table. I slid it across the table and then sat back.

“Take your pick.”

He sat down next to me, ignoring the basket, his eyes trained on my lips. “I see what I want right here.” Leaning in, he looped an arm around my waist and pulled me toward himself, my hips sliding beneath this as he bent forward. His lips met mine with such ferocity I had to pause to catch my breath.

“Gavin, I’m not sure...” It was all I got out before his mouth covered mine again, his tongue tracing my bottom lip. His teeth nipped at my lip so I nipped back and wrapped my arms around his waist as he pulled me farther down on the couch.

This was not how I saw my evening going at all, but I ached inside to feel that closeness I had with him.

“Shit, I miss you.” His teeth sank into my neck, and he slowly lowered his weight onto me as I scrambled to straighten my legs before I was crushed.

“Gavin,” I said, my neck arched back, “I thought I told you I needed space.” My mouth protested him in word, but my body responded to his touch indeed. My groin pulsed with unmet need, even as my hands tugged at his tucked-in shirt.

“Can I just take care of the woman I love? Because I know what you need. And what you need is to forget everything else for a while and just let me love you.” His soft growl as he ground against me made my body tense. I wanted him, but that stood at odds with the growing sense of guilt in my chest.

I pushed his chest, hoping for a breather, but he continued pursuing me. Taking both of my wrists into one hand and pinning them above my head. His relentless kisses made me whimper. I didn’t know if I wanted him to stop, or just ravish me.

“Gavin... please...” My pleas were met with more aggression, his hand holding firm on my wrists, the other working at the button on my jeans. He knew exactly what I enjoyed, and I could tell he intended to give it to me, if only I could shake the weight in my gut. “Gavin...”

“Shhh.”

He stopped, one hand on my arms, the other in the open fly of my pants. His eyes locked on mine, and I could see the need in them. The way his chest heaved, the hard bulge in his pants. I hadn’t stopped to think about him for a split second over the past three weeks, but my heart in that moment leapt from my chest and all I wanted to do was please him.

“You are going to be my wife, Madison Springer. And more than anything else, I want you to know how wanted and needed you are. I love you. And if I have to hold you down to prove it, I will. Now, are you going to fight me, or are you going to let me love you?”

For a moment, I wanted to protest, to tell him I wanted to take it slow. But I knew myself. And given the last few weeks of wrestling, if the adventure-seeking woman inside of me didn't just take over right now, I'd find a way to convince myself that it wasn't right, that I belonged to Drew still.

“Shut up and fuck me,” I told him, squeezing his hips between my thighs. My pulse raced. I felt alive again for the first time in weeks. I threw caution to the wind and lifted my head, meeting his as he crashed down onto me. I twisted my arms, but he refused to ease up. Instead, his grip got stronger, so I fought back, biting his lip again.

Gavin winced and chuckled, sliding his hand into my jeans. His thumb pushed on the outside of my panties, rubbing my clit before slipping down lower. I felt the moisture there, soaking into the silky fabric. He felt it too; I could tell the moment he smiled against my mouth.

“Good girl...” His thumb pushed hard against my opening, as if he wanted to tear the fabric away for faster access. I raised my hips up to meet his touch, but he clicked his tongue and pulled his hand away. “Who is in charge here?” There was a playfulness in his eyes, and I grinned at him.

“Well, if you don't start making things happen I guess I'll have to take charge.” I gyrated my hips. “You started this, so you better make me forget everything before I change my mind.”

Though my tone was playful, the words delivered their intended meaning. I knew my expression pleaded with him to just take charge because in my heart it was what I wanted—someone else to make the decisions, to tell me what to do. I couldn't do it anymore. I just wanted a break.

GAVIN

I couldn't get her clothes off fast enough—or mine. I never thought Madii would let me swoop in and sate my lust like this, but whatever had gotten into her, I wasn't complaining. The minute I leaned in to hug her, and I smelled the scent of her shampoo on her hair, I needed her. And when I had laid her down on the couch and felt her lips against mine, I knew she needed me too; she just hadn't known it at the time.

“Fuck, I miss you,” she panted, attempting to get my fly open. After I let her hands loose, it was the first place they went. And I was elated that she had responded this way. I hadn't planned on this happening, but once it started, I didn't want it to end without both of us getting release.

I stood, taking the waistband of her panties and jeans in my grip and pulled upward. She laughed as she fell back, her feet popping into the air as her pants pulled free. She lay there looking up at me as I opened my fly and yanked my pants off, then my shirt. For so long I'd only seen tears and sad eyes, but the lusty way she took me in reminded me of how amazing this woman was.

Madison was the type of woman who could push every button I had simultaneously without batting an eyelash, and she took pleasure in it. Just thinking of the way she made my body feel had my dick dripping. And it wasn't just how she made me cum. She did things to my mind, made my heart race, made me forget where I was and even who I was. I'd get lost in her every day if I could.

“Don’t just lay there. Take your shirt off, or I’m going to do it. And if I do it, I’m going to use it to tie you up and do bad things to you.” I tossed my clothes to the side and Madison scrambled to free herself from her shirt. She had it up over her head, but her arms were still trapped in it when I wedged myself between her legs. “Ah, too late.”

With one hand I held her arms over her head, and the other I grabbed her left breast, squeezing it. She moaned, arching her head back as I lowered my lips to her nipple and sucked, then pinched it between my teeth. The hiss of pain mixed with pleasure hit my ears, telling me she was pleased, and the scent of her arousal screamed at me to taste her. But not yet.

Bringing my attention back to her lips, I kissed her, then took a handful of her hair and pulled her head back, exposing her neck. “You’ve been holding out on me.” I playfully scraped my teeth along her skin while simultaneously grinding my cock against her moisture. I felt it slide around, searching her folds for entrance. “I know you’ve been missing me. Why haven’t you come begging for this sooner?”

A firm tug on her hair made her whimper loudly, her hands scrabbling across my back as she attempted to position her pussy for me to slide into it. “Fuck, Gavin. God, I need you inside me.”

“Ah, but I’m in charge, remember?” I deftly wrapped her t-shirt around her arms a few times, ensuring she could not free herself. Then I brought her arms lower, pinning them between us. I kept my grip on the shirt firm.

“Yes, you’re in charge... Oh, that’s tight...” She winced as I pinned her arms down, but her hips still rolled beneath my body. “Fuck... please. I want you in me.”

“You’ll get it. Just be patient...”

I stole another kiss before slowly crawling backward, keeping my hold on the shirt that bound her arms. She had shaved, her firm clit eliciting a strong sensation of hunger in me. I flicked my tongue across it, tasting the liquid cocaine her body produced. I couldn’t resist. I was addicted, diving in and thrusting my tongue inside her. She tasted like salted honey,

and the way she shuddered when my stubble scraped along her inner thigh made me grin.

“Fuck, Gavin. Eat me...” Madii raised her hips again, pushing against my face, so I pushed back, sucking at her and stimulating her clit with my tongue. Her body writhed despite how I held her down, until she freed her hands and reached forward. She ran her fingers through my hair and grasped at me, pulling me into her. I looked up, seeing her head back with a lust-filled smile across her face. I could feel her movements around me, her tight muscles, squeezing at my tongue as I explored her.

Soft moans of pleasure escaped her, and I became more aroused, reaching down and stroking myself. I wanted to penetrate her, but more than that I wanted her to feel amazing, so I continued working at her pussy, sucking her and enjoying her juices. I could feel her nails digging into my skin, but I didn't relent. Even as her gasps of pleasure grew louder and more frequent, and her hips pushed harder into my face, I continued.

“I'm going to cum,” she moaned. “Oh fuck, I'm going to cum.”

As she said it, I immediately stopped and grabbed her hands, forcing them away from her clit, denying her the orgasm. “Remember, I'm in charge here.” I smirked and looked at her pleading eyes. She pouted and attempted to rub herself once more. I gently moved her fingers away with each attempt, knowing she had been right on the edge. Even the slightest breath across her pussy may send her into climax, and I wanted to control that.

I took hold of both her ankles, folding Madii in half like a pretzel, then placed her hands on each of her ankles. “Tell me you're my good girl.”

“I'm your good girl.” She gripped her ankles and held her legs like that.

I stood up, and stroked myself, looking at her lying on the couch, slippery and wet for me. I stepped forward and rested my dick on her pussy. Madii thrustured upward trying to get me

to penetrate her but was unsuccessful. “Who’s good girl are you?”

“I’m yours.”

“Whose?” I smeared my cock in her juices, sliding it across her tender, hardened clit. She twitched with each pass, whimpering.

“Yours, Gavin, I’m your good girl. Now stick your dick in me, and fuck me, please!”

I pressed myself against her, watching her face as the length of my rod buried itself into her body, striking the back wall of her pussy. Madii gasped as I climbed on top of her and leaned into the thrust. She let go of her ankles, wrapping her arms around me. She gripped me tightly with each thrust, almost gasping. Her hand brushed against my hair, and she kissed me, tasting herself on my lips. She tensed up, and I felt her body squeeze me as her coil snapped.

“Do it, please, Gavin. I need you to cum in me!” Madii moaned, and I could feel the pressure of my own release building. I forced myself into her one final time, pushing as deep as I could go. She gasped as the end of my dick pushed against the opening to her womb. My orgasm came, hot seed spilling out inside her body. I collapsed on top of her, her hands stroking the hair on my head and her legs slowly easing back to a more natural position. We lay there, breathing heavily holding each other, still locked together as we were.

“Shit, I missed you.” My breaths came in heavy pants, my face buried in her hair. She ran her fingers down my back, lightly scratching with her fingernails. We were both moist with sweat.

“I love you,” she whispered. I thought I heard her snuffle, but my heavy eyes—weighed by lust-induced giddiness—wanted to shut. It wasn’t even that late, but sleep called to me. So, balancing myself on one arm, I pulled out, and turned her on her side, then cradled her there.

I had come to tell her that it was time to make her decision. I needed reassurance that things were going the right direction,

some sort of acknowledgement that me standing up for her to my mother was the right thing to do. But this—hot sex that reminded me how she caved into me and chose me—it was enough to confirm what I knew. She was mine.

Madison reached up and pulled the throw blanket off the back of the couch and together we situated it across our bodies. She didn't say a word to me, though I could hear her soft crying. Knowing her, she was feeling one of two things: emotional connection to me, or remorse for what we'd just done. I didn't want to know if it was the latter. I didn't want to argue with her.

Somewhere in the middle of the night, she stirred and beckoned me to her bed where we'd be more comfortable. Still not sharing her thoughts with me, I simply held her until we fell back to sleep. My stomach growled loudly upon waking up next to her, so I decided to make her breakfast. Letting myself out of the bedroom, I found my clothes on the floor by the couch and dressed, then headed for the kitchen.

In her fridge I found the ingredients for a terrific breakfast, so I set to work. Bacon and eggs, toast and jam, orange juice, and a cup of coffee—two creams, two sugars—rested on the table when her bedroom door opened. I expected her to slowly amble out and sit down to enjoy a meal with me, but her rushed movements and raised eyebrows told me she hadn't planned on eating.

"Is everything okay?" I stood with a butter knife in hand, ready to spread jam on her toast as she grabbed the coffee and kissed me on the cheek.

"Late for therapy... I'll call you. Lock up when you leave." Madison slurped a drink of the scalding liquid and winced before setting the mug back down and rushing out the door. I stood there gawking, disappointed and slightly frustrated that I'd gone to all the work to prepare this meal for her and she just up and left. Being the loving supportive fiancé was difficult when you craved attention your partner was giving to someone else.

Defeated, I tossed the knife into the sink and began deglazing the pan. The least I could do was clean up so she didn't come home to a messy kitchen. I was about to dump her plate of food in the trash and do dishes when the door opened up. My eyebrows—along with my hopes—raised, only to drop as soon as I realized it was Violet.

“Oh, I didn't know you were here.” She smirked at me, wagging her eyebrows. “Had a good night?” Violet meandered into the kitchen and sat down at the table. “Looks like you're eating for two, alone?” She peered up at me.

“Uh, yeah. Madii was running late. You can eat if you want. I doubt she will eat it cold later.”

“Sure, Gavin. But only if you sit and eat with me.” Violet slid the plate of food I'd prepared for Madii in front of herself.

I joined her, sitting across the table, but not feeling like eating anymore. Violet devoured the food as if she hadn't eaten in days and I wondered how she kept her trim figure. I picked the food, deciding to eat a slice of bacon.

“You know, she really loves you. She's just torn. Right?” Violet spoke with her mouth full, a trait I found to be a bit obnoxious, but as the sister of the woman I loved, I tempered my disgust.

“Yeah, I think I know.” The bacon was cold, and a bit too done, but I ate it anyway.

“I don't think you know.” She eyed me as she shoveled more food in her mouth. Thankfully she chewed and swallowed it all before she spoke again. “When we were kids, our grandma gave Madii this awful sweater. So, fucking ugly, but it was grandma. She had to wear it. She'd put it on top of some other shirt she liked, and when she got to school, she'd take the ugly sweater off.”

Stumped, I watched her eating, trying to decipher what she was saying to me. I couldn't stomach eating any more bacon, so I dropped it on the plate and opted for orange juice. At least it was still cold.

“I don't understand,” I said between sips.

“Drew is the ugly sweater, man. Madison does things because of pressure, or obligation that she’d rather not do, just so she won’t hurt people she loves. She cares about Drew’s family, and I believe she still cares about him, but she *loves* you.” Violet’s lips pursed and she cocked her head. “Drew is the ugly sweater she takes off to have what she wants. She’s obligated to take care of him for whatever reason in her mind.”

As Violet continued to eat, I sipped the OJ and thought about what she said. With everything I knew about Madison, I believed Violet was right. Madison had told me more than once that Drew being in that bed was her fault. So, what if she was staying with him because she felt so guilty that he had the accident, she felt obligated to care for him until he was better?

The plate nearly empty, Violet stood and picked it up. “Thanks for breaky!” Scraping the remnants into the trash, Violet placed the plate in the sink and disappeared, leaving me to my thoughts. I had to find a way to show Madison that she was not to blame, and Drew’s accident was not her fault. She needed to take off that ugly sweater for the last time and stop doing things she felt pressured to do and choose what she *wanted*.

MAD II

The comfortable recliner in Drew's room had been replaced by a hard wooden armchair. I sat perched on the edge of the chair with my phone in trembling hands. Drew was out of sorts, grumpy with everyone due to the level of pain he was in. Therapy was not being kind to his body, and Adam had just left to see about getting him some pain medication with a promise of returning shortly.

I found myself buried in my conversation with Gavin, who was being flirtatious and forcing me to use my best poker face to avoid unwanted questions from Drew. Since the night we'd shared together, we hadn't been on another date, but we spent large amounts of time on the phone or texting each other. Every time I thought it was a great time to ask Gavin for a bit of space to think things through, he did something or said something amazing to hook me and pull me in.

So, there I sat, trying to hide a smile at his flattery and compliments. My thumbs flew across my phone screen, typing a reply to him. It was incredible how he could say simple words my heart needed to hear, and they calmed the raging storm inside my heart. Never had I been so cared for or loved, and I knew it.

"Fuck," Drew shouted. My eyes snapped up to see him grimacing in pain, trying to wrestle with the bed sheets as he shifted position. They had him dressed in gym shorts and a t-shirt, a welcome change from the hospital gown he had been wearing for months. His therapy had been going well, but the muscle pain was really getting to him.

Remaining calm, I finished my message and hit send, hoping Adam would return to shield me from the worst of Drew's nasty attitude. I didn't blame him. I'd have been grumpy too if it were me in that bed, laid up and struggling to do basic human things. But I could do nothing for him, so I turned my attention back to my vibrating phone as another message from Gavin came in.

Gavin 5:45PM: Well, you're the best, and the prettiest, and the sexiest, and you're my favorite.

I couldn't help but smile, but the moment the grin crept across my face, Drew screamed in pain again, then turned his frustration on me.

"What the hell are you smiling about? Can't you see I'm in pain?"

Swallowing hard, I locked my phone and slid it into my pocket, standing quickly and making my way to his bedside. I helped him untangle his legs from the blankets and then put a pillow behind his head. At least he was able to move about a bit now, instead of needing the male nurse to come in and help him just to turn over.

"I'm sorry. I just... I'm here." I situated the blanket across his bare legs and sat on the side of the bed.

Drew's angry scowl melted into a look of sorrow. "God, I'm sorry, Madii. This is just really difficult."

My heart sank at his apology. If it weren't for me, he wouldn't be in this condition struggling like this. I was the reason he was in pain, and I was so selfish. I had been sitting there texting another man while Drew suffered. I almost burst into tears at how guilty I felt, but he slid his hand into mine.

"God, I'm sorry," he said again. "Please don't be sad. I didn't mean to snap at you." Drew held my hand tightly. I could tell the difference in his strength in just the short four and a half weeks he'd been back with me. The therapy was really working.

"No, it's not you. It's that—"

“Shhh. No need to say anything. I’m an idiot. You sat here for almost two years waiting for me while I was just a lump of flesh on a bed. You are my queen. I love you. I am sorry I let my pain cause me to be grumpy and snap at you.” Drew’s soft expression of affection warmed my heart.

As I stared into Drew’s eyes, I remembered how patient he normally was with me. Before his accident, he never got harsh with me or raised his voice. He was a wild spirit at heart, free to climb mountains, jump out of planes, or walk on a tightrope over a fire. But his calm demeanor was what drew me to him. And sitting there seeing how bad he felt for something that wasn’t even his fault helped me realize how foolish I was truly being with Gavin.

“Drew, I’m so sorry you’re here, that you’re suffering. I know that I was the one who wanted to do the scuba diving and had we gone hiking and climbing the way you wanted, none of this would have happened.” I felt tears burning my eyes at the confession. It was the first time I had been able to put into words how I felt and say that to him, and the apology did not match the failure on my part.

“Hey...” Drew’s voice was firm but not harsh, and he pushed my loose black hair behind my ear before pulling my chin up to meet his gaze. He leaned forward, his face inches from mine. “This is not your fault. I chose to get in that boat. You knew underwater stuff wasn’t my thing, but I did it for you because I love you.”

He hovered there, hand on my chin, eyes locked onto mine. It was the first time I had allowed him to be that close to me, for fear he’d see it in my eyes, that I loved another man. This time, however, I sat there feeling the intensity of the moment. Tears trickled down my cheeks and he wiped them away. There was a familiarity between us, a comfort in being so near another individual. Not the sparks of chemistry and passion that electrified the air when I was this close to Gavin.

“I love you, Madison.” His breath pushed across my face, and I felt him touching the ring on my finger. There was no doubt in my mind what he was going to do. I could tell by the way

he licked his lips, his eyes alternating between my eyes and my lips.

I tensed, unsure how I even felt about it all. I was in love with him, wasn't I? I was supposed to get married to him at one point, and here I was feeling averse to him kissing me. We'd done far more than kissing when we were dating, so why were my shoulders tensing, and my body pulling away as he leaned in?

As his eyes fluttered shut, his lips parting to close in on mine, the door swished open and Adam's barking laugh interrupted. I stood to my feet, stepping away from the dangerous proximity of Drew's lips, and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Here is your ibuprofen. The nurse will check on that muscle pain a bit later, but I'm telling you; if you just drink those protein shakes and eat more meat; you'll not be in so much pain. Your body needs protein to build the muscle it has lost and that's the pain you're feeling. You are working so hard, now fuel your body. It knows what to do."

Adam handed Drew the capsules and a glass of water, and I moved away from the side of the bed, leaving Drew's hand to drop to his lap. I avoided looking at his face because I didn't want to know if he was upset or disappointed by the interruption. I also didn't want to feel guilty again. My stomach was churning as it was.

My phone buzzed, but I didn't dare pull it out and look at it. I knew it was Gavin. He had probably texted me to ask why I hadn't responded, and I didn't have any reason except one he didn't want to hear. I mouthed "I'll be back" to Drew as Adam went on about the next week's therapy and headed for the door but just as it swished open, Adam called me.

"Madii, you'll want to hear this!" His smile was encouraging, and Drew looked upset, so I lingered there at the door. I didn't know what could be so exciting that I'd have to stay there when I felt so panicked, but every single action I took was on display at the moment. Every breath, every gesture, every facial expression. I was the actress on a stage and the critics were cruel. This was the performance of my life.

“Just need the toilet...” Poor excuse to leave the room, but I needed to get a breath of air and think of a logical reason why I would not want to kiss my fiancé.

“Just one sec?” Adam turned to Drew. “So, after the progress I’ve seen here this week, I am thinking in just a few weeks, you’ll be ready to move home. Or maybe to a nursing home where they can care for you if needed. If you can afford at-home nursing, you can just go home and have Madison, your mother, and a visiting nurse take care of you.”

The good news drew me back into the room like a magnet. Drew was all smiles, and I pasted a smile on my face, but following the almost-kiss, my gut was a churning mess.

“So, a few weeks? Like two? Three?” Drew pushed himself more upright and his eyes bounced between Adam’s face and mine. When he focused on me, I tried to be a bit happier. It was, after all, very good news for him. And if it was good news for him, then it was good news for me too. At least, it should have been. So why didn’t my heart feel like it was good news?

“It depends on how hard you work, but yeah, two or three.”

It seemed his pain was suddenly gone, frightened away by happiness, or diminished by the endorphins released when he got the good news. I was happy for him too, though a sudden apprehension about him moving on and fully recovering smacked me. If he was this intense while trapped in a hospital bed, unable to do much, how would he be when they let him go home? He insisted on talking about our future and the wedding, but I had tried so hard to focus him on the current situation and his healing.

They talked for a while longer while I stood there locked in my head. I didn’t pay attention when Adam left the room, and Drew snapping his fingers in front of my face is what brought me back to reality. I blinked a few times and focused on his face. His smile faded and his brow furrowed.

“Earth to Madii.” He frowned at me and leaned back in bed the moment we made eye contact. “What’s going on? You don’t seem happy.”

I shook my head, trying to push away the negative thoughts I was having. The smile I tried to force onto my face refused to reveal itself, so Drew got a strange mixture of my nervous apprehension and a half smile.

“Is everything okay?” He patted the bed beside himself, and sensing that the mood for a romantic kiss had passed, I complied, settling down beside him. My blood pressure had to be through the roof from the amount of anxiety and stress I was under. I should have seen a doctor for it.

“I’m okay. This is all happening so fast now. You know? I know it doesn’t seem like it’s going fast enough for you, but I went almost two years without you, and in the past nearly five weeks, everything has changed.”

Drew took my hand and kissed it. “Yeah, I can imagine. You learned how to exist alone. You probably felt really lonely and adapted to a level of isolation. This has got to be overwhelming for you.”

I wanted to agree. More than anything, my heart felt like it was scrabbling for connection, but I couldn’t find it with him. For years it had been so easy to fold into his arms, feel his heart beating and listen to his words, and let my heart connect to him. But he had been gone. I had made a connection with someone else, and that connection was so strong right now.

The only thing I could do was nod, because while Drew was halfway correct, he was also wrong. I had definitely gone through that phase of being alone and adjusting to being alone. But I had also moved on, and what I was wrestling with right now was how to tell him I’d moved on, and how to face the guilt of destroying his body and life, then breaking his heart too. I was stuck between both of them, and I couldn’t only sit there and nod.

GAVIN

“Well, all I am saying is that the postage to send these gifts back is ridiculous. You could literally drive them back faster. And I think maybe Madison should be the one doing this, not me.” The ring of a cash register in the background of our call was piercing, causing me to pull my phone away from my ears. Mom was at the post office doing some errands for me while I sat trying to relax on my break.

I had been listening to her complaining about returning my wedding gifts for at least 15 minutes, and I was trying to be patient. Despite my calm replies, the conversation was escalating, and I was growing more frustrated. I felt like she had no clue what I was going through and even if she did, she didn't care.

I tried to explain, “Mom, my work hours are not conducive to getting things returned. By the time I'm off work, the post is closed and even on weekends I have to do rounds in the morning when they're open.”

“Yes, but what about her? She should be doing this, not me.” Mom's voice took an edge that made my frustration worse, but I bit my tongue rather than snapping at her.

The nurses break room, where I sat at a table eating a snack on my break, was bustling with noise and activity. I didn't want to embarrass myself by shouting at her, and it was getting more difficult by the minute. Pam, one of our charge nurses, walked by, staring at her phone, and smiled at me, so I forced a smile

and nodded at her. And once she was out the door, I took a breath and engaged with my mother again.

“Mom, I told you. She is going through a lot right now. It is really difficult for her, what’s happening, so I told her we would take care of everything. All of the gifts were here in town, and her parents and sister live a few hours out of the city, so it made sense.” Another nurse left the room, and I breathed a sigh of relief that only myself and one other nurse were there.

Mom shouted something, but I could tell her phone mic was covered. I knew she was at the post office, so I didn’t think much of it. There was more muffled talking and then I heard a bell jingle, followed by honking and some traffic sounds.

“I swear, sometimes people just irritate the daylights out of me.” I heard a car door shut and then an engine, and I knew Mom had climbed into her car. “I just don’t understand if she wants to be your wife so bad, why is she spending all her time with another man right now. Doesn’t she know how that will ruin your reputation? I mean, Gavin, if your wife can’t be bothered to run your errands for you, what type of woman are you marrying?” When she got like this there was no reasoning with her. Her voice turned almost hostile, and I bit the inside of my cheek in anger.

I couldn’t take it anymore. As much as I tried to keep myself calm and focused, to not draw attention to myself, I was about to snap. And given the fact that Madison and I were speaking again following our encounter that night at her house, I knew we were going to make it. I also knew my mother would not let up until I put my foot down. Dad had a way of doing this, but for me it had never been as easy, likely because I was her little boy whom she parented for so long. But I was a grown man now, and it was time she started respecting me and my choices.

“Okay, Mom. I have been so patient and understanding about so many things, but I am really hurt. I’ve asked you to not speak of Madison that way. It is unfair and disrespectful. If you want to destroy my relationship with you, then keep doing what you’re doing. It’s working.”

My eyes popped up as Adam Baker strutted in eating a bagel slathered in cream cheese. He parked himself across the table from me just in time to hear my mother's prattling about choices and boundaries. She talked so loudly I had to hold the phone away from the side of my head just to understand what she was saying, and Adam's eyebrows rose in reply to a few choice words she said.

"Listen, Mom. I think I am going to have to call you back. When you decide that you can be civil when it comes to my relationship with Madison, we can discuss this further."

I hung up before she could reply again, more due to the embarrassment factor than anything, but I didn't really want to hear her angry, hateful lectures any more today. After locking my phone and dropping it to the table, I scrubbed my hands over my face, hoping I wasn't flushed from being so embarrassed. Adam had one eyebrow raised as he chewed a bite of bagel.

"Problems with the lady?" He spoke with his mouth full, which was sort of rude, but not all men were as considerate and had good manners as I did.

"Nah, my mom. She hates the woman I'm dating. We are going to be married soon, but there has been a slight kink in our plans which caused a delayed wedding. Mom seems to want to point out every flaw Madison has and just hammer away at my respect for her. She just doesn't realize it's not hurting me and Madii; it's hurting my relationship with her."

"Strange." Adam offered a look of contemplation, then took another huge bite of his bagel and stared at me. He had a dab of cream cheese on his upper lip, so I pointed to my lip. With a stupid grin, he reached for a napkin from the dispenser in the center of the table and wiped his mouth clean.

"What's strange about my mom hating my soon-to-be wife? It's not like it's the first time in the history of mothers-in-law that this has happened." I spun my phone around on the table. Adam finished chewing and wiped his mouth again before replying.

“No, no... I think it’s strange that you’re getting married to a woman named Madii, when that new patient I took on a few weeks ago, his fiancé is named Madii also. Small world.”

No kidding. If only Adam knew exactly how small this world was, he wouldn’t have that dumb grin on his face. As he chewed the final bite of his bagel, I sat stewing over Mom’s harsh words. The last time this had happened, I had walked into Madison’s house ready to give her an ultimatum. She needed to choose me. But once I saw her, and realized we were alone for the first time in weeks, the only thing on my mind had been connecting with her.

I felt no different this time. I wanted to storm into her home and demand she choose me, but that would only force her into Drew’s arms faster. No, I knew Madison. She needed time and space, comfort and connection. The slow game might have been the most difficult one to play, but if I played well, I felt that I’d have what I wanted in the end.

Absently, I changed the subject. “So how is that new patient doing?” I thought if I directed the conversation back toward Adam’s work, he’d let up on the conversation with my mom, and in doing so I could forget it ever happened.

“Ah, you know. The guy is struggling like most patients do. He’s doing well—likely he’ll go home in a few weeks.”

That thought cheered me up a bit. If Drew went home that meant he was doing well and recovering, and maybe Madison would finally break it to him and come back to me. I picked up my phone, shoving it into my pocket, and I was about ready to stand and leave gracefully when Adam continued.

“It’s so good watching patients recover.” Adam dusted the crumbs from his hands and pants as he talked. I had to agree; even if I didn’t particularly care for a patient’s personality or family, it was always good seeing them get better. “I’ve watched that couple go through some really hard days, but just earlier today after therapy, I walked in on them kissing. It felt like finally he is turning a corner and getting his life back. That makes my soul happy.”

“Kissing?”

I tried to keep the emotion out of my voice, but my hands turned to fists without my consent. I sat straighter in the chair, breathing deeply to calm my instantly racing heart.

“Yeah, well, maybe kissing? Anyway, it was cute. They jumped apart like school kids caught smooching in the bathroom.” Adam chuckled.

Rising to my feet, I cleared my throat and turned to the soda machine. It didn’t take a debit card, so I fished quarters out of my pocket, nervously dropping one.

“You okay, man?” Adam picked up the quarter and handed it to me, but my hand was shaking so bad I couldn’t keep my composure.

“Yeah, probably my blood sugar dropping or something. It’s been a long day.” Lying to him made me feel sick but hearing that Madison had kissed—or almost kissed—Drew made my emotions fly into a rage. “I’ll just get a soda and be fine.”

“Sure, well I’m heading out for the day. Take it easy.” Adam slapped me on the back before leaving, and I turned to find myself completely alone. I leaned my arm against the soda machine and my head on my arm. Was I totally blind to this whole thing? Was Madison still so in love with Drew that she would go back to him and leave me?

The machine accepted my quarters, and I pressed the button for a lemon-lime cola. It dropped into the collection tray, but I stood there leaning against the damn machine like a mannequin frozen in place. It only made my mother’s words more hurtful, because now I feared they were true. The problem was I still couldn’t storm into Madison’s house and demand she love me. She either loved me or she didn’t. Ordering her around wouldn’t help me out.

“Penny for your thoughts? Or quarter...” Cecil, the night charge nurse on this floor, bent and picked up a coin from the ground, one I must have dropped that Adam hadn’t seen.

“Thanks,” I told him, turning to take it. I reached into the machine and pulled out my soda, hands still shaking from adrenaline and anger.

“You need to talk, son. Looks like you’ve seen a ghost.” He offered me a compassionate expression and stepped back, his mop bucket sitting behind him, mop handle gripped in his left hand.

Cecil was one of the kindest men I knew. At least 20 years my senior, he’d seen some good days and some bad. I’d talked with him about life, patients, the hospital, and even previous breakups. I wouldn’t have called him my friend, per se, but he was friendly. And before I could stop them, the words spilled out of me.

“Just frustrating. You know? Madison and that guy...” Cecil had been Drew’s night nurse the entire time Drew had been in a coma. He had watched Madii and I grow closer, and he knew we were engaged. It was no secret amongst most of the staff on this floor. Adam was clueless because he only visited once patients woke up—not while they were still out.

“Yeah, I’ve seen that.” He grimaced and shook his head. “Damn shame how love so vibrant can be so fragile.”

“You mean her and Drew?”

“I mean you and her.” Cecil pulled his mop out and placed it in the drain pan, squeezing the rope strands until the excess water drained back into the bucket. “I’m not sure what she had with that guy, but I’m giving you my honest assessment, doc. She loves you. I’ve seen it even after he woke up. She loves you. You just hold on to that.”

Cecil pushed his rolling mop bucket to the back corner of the room and slapped the rope mop on the floor. I watched him start mopping for a second, then opened my soda and headed toward my office. He was right. Madii loved me. I just hope she loved me enough—more than she loved Drew—to remember the future we had planned together.

MAD II

We stood in the bathroom accessories aisle at the local home improvement store in the mall, staring at grab bars I could install in Drew's shower. Adam had encouraged us to make everything as adaptable as possible, that Drew would need help for the first several weeks, but later he would be back to normal. So, I wanted to find one that could be installed and taken out without leaving lasting marks on the walls or other parts of the house.

The choice shouldn't have been as difficult as I was making it, but I had so much going on inside my head it was difficult to focus. Lexi stood to my right; her arms hooked around my right arm in an awkward but comforting hug. Violet stood to my left, phone in hand texting someone while she loudly smacked her chewing gum. My head throbbed with a headache, and I just wanted to sit down.

"I still don't see why you're the one doing this. If you all agreed that Drew should go to his parents' house because you work and you can't be with him round the clock, then why isn't his mother doing this? Or his father?" Violet shoved her phone in her pocket and crossed her arms over her chest before smacking her gum again.

I sighed at the thought of having to explain for the tenth time that day why I was doing the shopping and not Alice or Henry. "I think we've been over this, Vi." They had an option for a balance pole with hand grips on it that was spring loaded, tensioning between the ceiling and floor. I crouched down to read the box, ignoring Violet's comment.

“You’re going to buy Drew a stripper pole?” Lexi snickered and I eyed her. She was covering a grin, which made me smile too.

“I don’t honestly think this kind will work. I need something for him while he is in the shower in case, he loses his balance. This type would only be for getting in and out of the shower. The shower curtain would get in the way of him using this for support once he’s in.”

A bit frustrated by the lack of options this store had, I stood and rubbed my temples, willing the headache away.

“Drew will be disappointed there is no stripper pole.” Lexi hooked her arm around mine again and grinned like an idiot. “And no stripper... You know he was such a thoughtful groom, turning down the idea of strippers for the bachelor party. Maybe you should get him one for his coming home.”

A feeling of remorse washed over me as yet another reminder of my past with Drew surfaced. The day had been full of them because Lexi had been a member of my wedding party, and we’d done lots of wedding shopping like this previous to Drew’s accident. Violet hadn’t made the day any easier either, constantly bringing up the fact that Gavin didn’t know what we were doing or how I was helping Drew settle in at home. I *had*, however, let him know that since Alice was retired, Drew would stay with his parents when he was right out of the hospital.

“Uh, I don’t think Gavin would appreciate you talking about Drew and getting him strippers. I think—”

“Violet, please.” I turned to her, pushing my bottom lip out a bit. “This is difficult enough as it is.” I was tired. I didn’t want to listen to her anymore. My heart couldn’t take it.

“It’s difficult because you know you should be with Gavin, and you aren’t. You’re taking care of a man whose heart you’re going to break when you tell him you’ve been leading him on.” Violet nonchalantly pulled her phone from her pocket again and began replying to another text message. I couldn’t believe she was being so forward with me, when she knew how difficult of a position, I was in.

“Hey...” Lexi pulled my attention away from Violet. She must have sensed me getting angry with her. She tugged me down the aisle to the end cap where they had swimming pools and gear lining the center aisle. “Look...” She picked up something and laughed. “We should buy one for Drew’s homecoming and tell him to wear it when he bathes.”

Turning the package around, she showed me the bright yellow goggles with matching snorkel. Pictures of bubbles and a girl swimming, wearing the snorkel, decorated the front of the packaging. It was a cheery picture of a happy activity, but it prickled my heart instantly. One minute I was in the store, searching for safety accessories, and the next I was deep below the surface of the Gulf of Mexico watching Drew helpless and dying.

I turned to reach for him, he was farther away than I thought. His arms were stretched out to his sides, his hands limp. I kicked my flippers to propel myself toward him. It was difficult to move as easily in the bulky scuba gear, but I managed. Drew’s back was to me, and it appeared he was playing a joke on me. The little wisps of his hair not pinned down by his scuba mask floated away from his head—rebellious arms reaching outward.

I laid my hand on his shoulder, expecting him to turn, but he didn’t. So I tapped harder, pulling at his shoulder. The joke was not funny, and he was not responding. Maneuvering so I could position myself in front of him. I noticed his eyes were closed. If I could have spoken, I would have let him have a piece of my mind, and for a moment I was frustrated with him. But then I saw the way his lips had a blue hue to them where the regulator puffed them out.

I felt a jolt of pain in my chest as adrenaline released. Both hands on his shoulders, I shook him hard, not wanting to believe what I was seeing. Frantic, I spun around, hoping to see our scuba instructor nearby, but the group was too far away now. Cloudy water separated us at a distance far enough they’d never see my panic.

“Yoo hoo!” Lexi was snapping her fingers in front of my face, and I felt tears streaming down my cheeks. “Are you okay?”

Sudden panic gripped me. My eyes darted around the room and seeing that I was not there in the water watching Drew drowning, I freaked out. The flashback was more real than anything I'd ever witnessed. I felt like I was going to be ill. So, I turned and ran, leaving the girls behind. I raced out of the home improvement store into the main concourse of the mall and into the crowd of people streaming past.

Weaving in and out of the mob, I sobbed, tears blinding me. An elderly woman took the brunt of my panic when I bumped into her, sending her ice cream cone skittering across the ground. She was shocked but not hurt, and I didn't stop to see if she was okay. My hurried run-walk only grew more intense until I was winded, and I found myself at the exit at the end of one of the concourses.

There was a small café there, with tables and chairs arranged in front of the store front. I collapsed onto one, using napkins from the dispenser situated in the center of the table to wipe my face. The cold, green steel was less than comfortable, but my legs wouldn't carry me any farther. I took deep breaths to try to calm myself, but the crying wouldn't stop.

When I had finally caught my breath and blown my nose, I folded my arms on the table and laid my head down on them. Lexi and Violet would find me soon enough, and I'd have to answer for my ridiculous outburst, but at this point my emotions had hit critical mass. If I didn't figure out what to do soon, I was going to lose my mind. The war between what was right and what I wanted was raging in my heart. I knew that I had to do the right thing, but I felt angry that what I wanted didn't appear to be the right thing.

"Oh gosh, we found you." Lexi sat down across from me, shaking the table as she grabbed my hand. I saw her shoes and recognized her voice. I also saw Violet's shoes from my vantage point, and despite the fact that my running away had nothing to do with anything she said, I felt like she was going to rub it in my face anyway.

I felt a hand on my back and knew it was Violet's, so I was surprised it hadn't come with a tongue lashing. Violet was too much like my mother to not have at least thought of something

hurtful to say to me at this moment. I was grateful she hadn't opened her mouth.

No one said anything until I sat up and dried my tears. Lexi's frown, and her comforting hand on mine helped, but didn't remove the confusion or frustration I felt—not to mention the strong emotion from being triggered. I had dealt with nightmares and bad dreams for months following the event, but nothing so strong as what I had just experienced.

"It's okay, we're here." The calming voice was not my best friend; it was my sister. Violet sat down next to Lexi and placed her hand on top of Lexi's on top of mine. "Talk to us."

My lip quivered. Violet looked like she had been crying too. Her makeup was smudged, and her nose was rosy. She squeezed our hands together and gave me a forced smile. Lexi joined her in the tight hand squeeze.

"What happened?" Lexi pulled a tissue from her pocket and handed it to me. I welcomed it, as it was much softer than the brown paper napkins I had been using. After drying my eyes, I blew my nose and stuffed the used tissue in my own pocket. A group of noisy teenagers walked by, and I wanted for them to clear out before opening my mouth.

"I just had this strange flashback of being under the water. I think it was the snorkel or something. It was like I was there again, with him, while he was drowning." I blinked my eyes rapidly trying to keep the tears at bay. I didn't want to cry anymore. I wanted to be okay now.

"Oh, sis." Violet pulled out another napkin and pushed it into my hand, and I sat back in the chair. "Listen, you need to talk to someone."

It was the same rhetoric I'd heard for months. A therapist, a doctor, anyone—I needed help. But what I needed was not some talking head to listen to me spout out my story. What I needed was someone to make decisions for me that I could be happy living with.

I shook my head firmly. "No, I'm fine really. All of this went away early on. I think it was the snorkel Lexi was joking about

and just the pressure of taking care of Drew so much. I'm on edge. I'm not happy. I feel so messed up." Dabbing at my eyes so I didn't make my skin raw, I tried to smile but Lexi saw through it.

"What is making you feel messed up?" She searched her pockets, I assumed for another tissue, but only looked frustrated with empty pockets.

"I don't know. They say follow your heart, but what if your heart can't decide what it wants, or what is right?" I shrugged. It was the first time I'd actually vocalized my thoughts, and suddenly I didn't care what was right. I wanted what I wanted. It was like that night when Gavin came for dinner, and we never ate. I knew I needed him. But what about Drew?

Violet squinted her eyes and leaned her head sideways. "What do you mean, what you want, or what is right?"

"Drew is in this place because of me—"

"Madii—"

I held my hand up to silence them both as they tried to protest and cut me off. "No." I shook my head. "I'm not listening to you two say it's not my fault. I know I am the one who convinced him to go scuba diving. So he is in this place because of me. It is only right for me to make sure he is okay. You know?"

"No, I don't know." Lexi furrowed her brow. "Are you saying you're taking care of Drew because you feel guilty about his accident? That you'd stay with him and lead him on to make him think everything was okay, then leave him once he was recovered?"

"No, no..." I covered my face, ashamed for even hearing her say that. The thought had crossed my mind, but I had quickly tossed it out. Drew deserved better.

"If I know my sister, she is not thinking that." Violet sighed loudly. "She's saying she would rather just stay with Drew because it is her duty now, and even if what she wants—and it clearly is what she wants—is to stay with Gavin, she would

sacrifice her own happiness, just to make sure Drew didn't suffer anymore."

Lexi pulled my hands down from my face and stared into my eyes, her expression of pain and confusion tugging at my heart.

"I want to go home, guys." I stood and turned toward the door, knowing they would follow.

"Madison, you need to talk to Gavin. Or I will." Ignoring Violet's comment, I kept walking. They had no right to judge me or make the decision for me. If only I could make the decision for myself.

GAVIN

Jiles threw a handful of popcorn at the TV and shouted as the opposing team scored a goal. Nick joined him, swearing at the goalkeeper as the clock counted down toward zero. With only two minutes left in the half, our team was down by two points and poised to enter halftime at a loss. The guys and I often shared friendly wagers on soccer games, but today was all friendly, no gambling.

“God, these idiots need to pick up their game. You see number 22? He just let that guy walk right past him with the ball. Ridiculous!” Jiles shoved some popcorn in his mouth and munched on it as the ref reset the ball to midfield and backed away. As soon as the whistle sounded, our team was off, making a series of well-placed passes and runs. With only 19 seconds to go, they made a shot on goal from the top of the 18, which the goalie deflected. It was returned with a beautiful bicycle kick into the upper righthand corner of the goal and all three of us leapt to our feet cheering.

Nick and Jiles exchanged a high-five, their typical routine, and we all touched beer bottles together. Saturday afternoons were something of a tradition for the three of us. If we weren't on a basketball court somewhere, we were watching a soccer or football game. With the dreary weather outside today, we opted for indoor entertainment.

“Another round?” I asked them, realizing my beer was almost empty. I turned toward the kitchen to get a few new beers as they calmed down.

“I'll take another,” Jiles responded.

“Nah, man. I can’t stay much longer.” I glanced over my shoulder to see Jiles pressing his hand to Nick’s forehead.

“You sick, man, or has your lady got you whipped?” Jiles chuckled.

Nick swatted Jiles’s hand away and laughed. “Shut up. I do fine on my own.” Nick’s chest puffed out and Jiles smacked it playfully.

“Ah, so it’s the lady,” I chimed in, pulling two beers from the fridge and snagging the bottle opener before heading back to the living room. Jiles had muted the TV and both men were seated on the couch again. Popcorn littered the carpet, but I didn’t mind. The cleaning lady would be along to vacuum the floor on Sunday, so a little mess never hurt. I was such a clean person anyway, she hardly ever had anything to do.

“Nah, listen guys. I’m going to ask her to marry me.” Nick grinned like an idiot, and Jiles offered a celebratory slap to his back, but my heart clenched inside my chest. I walked back into the living room and sat down, handing Jiles his beer, and forced the most genuine smile I could.

“Congrats, man. That’s awesome,” Jiles told Nick, cracking the beer open with the small bottle opener on his key chain. I cracked mine open too and had the sudden urge to chug it just to drown the frustration roiling in my gut.

“Dude, I didn’t mean to bring up a bad subject.” Nick tipped his beer up to his lips and finished it off, then set the empty bottle on the table.

“Nah, it’s okay.” I took a long swig of my drink. “You’re happy. You should be happy. It’s time for you to celebrate.” I tried to celebrate with him, but all I could think about was what Adam had said. Madison had either kissed, or almost kissed Drew last week. I hadn’t had the courage to bring it up to her—mainly because I didn’t want to argue with her and end up pushing her away.

“You look pretty pissed. Did something happen with the lady again?” Jiles sat down and propped his feet on the table, and Nick sat too, leaning forward, elbows on knees. The room

suddenly felt half the size, like it was closing in on me and my anger.

“One of the doctors told me they thought they saw Madii kissing Drew one day.” I ground my teeth together to avoid letting a growl of rage out. Then I pinched the bridge of my nose.

“Oooo, harsh.” Nick shook his head. “I might just need that beer.” He stood and disappeared, and when he returned, he had a full beer in hand.

I handed him the bottle opener and he popped the top and took a swig, letting the cap fall to the carpet. At this point I didn’t even care.

“Did you ask her about it?” Jiles put his feet on the floor and leaned forward, matching Nick’s earlier posture. “I mean, what if it is just a misunderstanding? Communication is the best policy.”

“Yeah, well we text and stuff, but this is the sort of thing I have to talk to her about in person. You know?” The beer went down more smoothly with every drink, and I noticed it was almost halfway empty already.

Nick slurped a bit as he took a drink, then rolled his eyes at me. “You just need to put your foot down. Tell her she needs to make the choice now, or you’re just gone. Like, take charge, you know?”

I knew that was how Nick operated, but I also knew if I did that to Madison, she’d be walking away. She wasn’t that type of woman. She did appreciate me being assertive, but not bossy, so giving her that type of ultimatum was not going to work.

“I think what Nick is trying to say is that you should communicate.” Jiles scowled at Nick and set his drink down. “When my wife and I have a disagreement about anything, I’m always the first to try to talk it out and work on it.”

“No, what I was trying to say is be a fucking man. Like, she’s spending her days with another man, Gavin. That’s pretty fucked up if you ask me.”

I had to admit, even though my mother had said some of the same things, when my best friends put it like this, I had to agree. Madison wasn't respecting me or my patience with her. She was purposely avoiding my invitations and calls. It was time for her to make a decision.

"Just tell her she's being a bit—"

"Fuck, man." Jiles cut Nick off just as I was about to stand up and slug him. No one talked about Madison that way. If I wasn't tolerating it from the woman who gave me life, there was no way Nick was going to speak about her like that.

"Easy," Nick said, leaning backward and holding his hands in front of himself defensively.

"You might talk to your woman that way, but I will *never* speak to Madii that way. Got it?" My flared nostrils and fisted hand must have given him the hint.

"Yeah, sorry. Sheesh. I was just trying to help." Nick stood, taking his beer with him. "I should go. I'll give you a call tomorrow once I pop the question."

I ignored him as he walked out and listened for the front door to shut behind him. Jiles kicked back again, propping his feet on the coffee table. He seemed to be tuned in to the game again, his eyes focused on the muted TV. The game was the last thing on my mind now. I had tried hard all week to keep this frustration from mounting. I found myself going for a run that day Adam had told me about Madii and Drew, and it had helped me refocus. But now all my nervous energy was turning into a rehearsed speech I'd give her the next time I saw her.

I wasn't going to wait either. I pulled out my phone and dialed her number, not even caring that Jiles was still seated on my couch watching a silent television. The phone ran through to her voicemail, and I hung up. Repeating the process three times, I got the point that she was not going to answer, and I would have given up if I hadn't noticed Jiles staring at me.

"Just leave the goddamn message, man. She's in a shower or something, okay?" He leaned forward, picked up his beer, and

then relaxed back into his lounging position.

Jiles was right. If I didn't say it when I felt the urge to say it, I would regret it. So, I dialed her number again and waited for it to go to voicemail again.

"Madii, I think you should come over next weekend. We haven't spent much time together and there is something we need to talk about." I almost hung up, but decided to add, "And I love you. Don't forget that."

After hanging up and putting my phone on the coffee table, I finished my beer and stared at the TV. The game no longer held my interest, but I humored Jiles by acting like it mattered. All I could think about was Madison. Except, I found another thing sprouting into my mind from time to time. It was an ugly image that I'd be horrified if my mother knew I even thought about it.

I had a dream that I played Drew in a game of basketball, and he started beating me, besting me in points. But instead of letting it go, playing the game, I started to get defensive, and aggressive. I ended up beating the shit out of him in that dream and sitting in my living room right then, watching the soccer ball bounce around the screen, I wanted to make that dream a reality.

The more I stewed, the angrier I got. Drew was the one thing stopping me from having what I wanted—what I felt was rightfully mine. Madison was supposed to be mine, and I had never wanted anything more in my life. Jealousy was such an ugly thing, but dammit if I wasn't jaded and inflamed with jealousy. I knew I had to calm myself down, because it wasn't doing me any good to get all worked up. I was not about to go assault a coma patient in mid-recovery. And I wasn't about to fuck up what I had with Madison by going off on either of them. But dammit if she didn't make up her fucking mind, I was going to lose mine.

I picked up my phone and dialed her number again, listening to it ring. I held it to my ear as Jiles sat forward and raised an eyebrow at me.

“Dude, put the phone down. She’ll call when she’s ready. Ignore Nick. He is a moron. If his woman lets him treat her that way, so be it. I’ve been married for years. Listen to me. Just be patient, and she will come to you, and you’ll work it out. If she doesn’t then you have to let go or it will kill you.”

I threw my phone at the couch, and it bounced and landed on the floor, the screen dark. If only I could just let go and trust that she would come to me. The problem was waiting wasn’t my strong suit. And neither was this game of “will I get chosen.”

MAD II

I stood for a long moment outside Gavin's front door, holding the plate of brownies with trembling hands. I came with one intention. I had to tell him that I needed some space. After speaking with Violet at length this week—she stayed with me all week because she was worried about me after my outburst—I had made up my mind.

Both Violet and Lexi had told me that it was unfair to intentionally lead both of them on when I knew I'd choose one of them. So, I decided to only lead one of them on. Still not a great idea—I knew that—but Drew was going through a lot, and he couldn't handle a bitter breakup like this. And the way the report had been hounding us during his therapy appointments lately, I never had a chance to have a good talk with him anyway.

I heard the door unlock, and as it pulled open, the wonderful aroma of something hearty and savory wafted out to greet me. It smelled like pasta and garlic, and it wrapped around my senses and swept me through the door into Gavin's home. He wore slacks and a polo, as if he had just gotten off work. His smile greeted me as he took the brownies from my hand.

"Just in time..." Leading me to the kitchen, Gavin carried the brownies. The lights were dim, candles perched all over the living and dining areas. Flower petals had been strewn around on the floor and counters. Vases of roses decorated the counters and the table too.

I marveled at the table, set for two. Covered in a fancy black tablecloth, it hosted silver flatware, decorative plates, heaping

portions of lasagna and breadsticks, a massive bottle of wine and stemware, and red napkins folded into the shape of swans. I held a hand in front of my open mouth. Gavin had never gone to this extent for me before, and honestly, I was in shock.

“What? Why?” I stuttered, slowly lowering myself into a chair he held out for me.

“Because you’re worth it, and it’s about time I showed you how much you mean to me.” Gavin helped me push the chair in and I could do nothing but gawk at the delicious spread. It smelled so appetizing I wanted to dig in and feast. My stomach growled; my mouth watered.

“This is all...” I wanted to say too much, but what it was, was perfect. How on earth would I ever tell him that I needed space now? My heart dropped at how amazing it all was, and how my plan to break it gently to him, let him down easy, was not going how I thought it would.

“Wine?” Gavin screwed the corkscrew into the wine cork and opened the bottle, pouring two glasses each about half full. He set one in front of me, and my hand reached for it immediately. If they had been trembling before, I was in all out earthquake mode now. The wine went down smoothly, and before he had even sat down, I had him refill the glass.

“Thanks,” I told him as I sipped the second glass. “Why all this, Gavin?” Curiosity got the better of me as I took my first bites of the meal. The flavors of tomato sauce and pungent cheeses mingled on my tongue, delighting my tastebuds.

“I told you. I love you, Madison. I will do this every night the rest of our lives if it means you’re mine. There is no length to which I will not go to show you how much you mean to me.”

The first bite of my breadstick was heaven on my tongue. The salty garlic was a perfect complement to the pasta. We talked about the meal and how he’d had it catered in. I asked him about the roses, and he told me it didn’t matter how much they cost, but I knew it had to have been a thousand dollars or more to pull this off. And by the time my belly was full, and my plate was empty, he had me so relaxed, I was putty in his hand.

“Should we retire to the living room? Maybe we can share a few of these brownies. They look delicious.” Gavin took the clear wrap off the plate of brownies and picked it up, then offered me his other hand.

I slid from the chair and stood, bringing my full glass of wine with me—refilled only moments before. If I was going to be brave enough to tell him what I needed, I would need that wine. But for now, I wanted to enjoy this moment. I knew it would be the last of its kind for a while. So, I followed him into the living room and snuggled in beside him on the couch.

“Here.” He handed me a brownie as we sat, leaving the plate on the coffee table. “This is really good.” After taking a bite, he spoke with his mouth full, brownie crumbs falling to his white shirt.

I grinned at him as I took a bite. I knew how delicious they were because I had sampled them already before I came, but it was nice to see my hard work being appreciated.

“This whole night is so special, Gavin. Thank you for doing this for me.” The brownie melted in my mouth, and I sipped my wine to wash it down.

Gavin turned slightly on the couch and brushed a few crumbs from the corner of my mouth. He smiled. “Looks like you’re enjoying them too.”

“I enjoy you...” The automatic response came out of my mouth without my consent. It was a way we used to playfully talk to each other—before all this chaos with Drew ensued. Gavin’s stare got intense, his hand lingering on my cheek. The space between us sizzled with energy.

Before I knew what I was doing, I leaned in to kiss him. The kiss came in a crashing, passionate fever, making the wine spill out onto the carpet and the glass drop next to the inevitable stain. My fingers weaved through his hair as he grabbed ahold of my belt and waistband. He pulled, forcing me onto his lap as the stubble on his beard scraped at my face, his tongue pushing into my mouth and sliding against mine.

“Shit... I need you so bad...” His breathy words stirred something inside of me, and I yanked at his polo shirt, untucking it. I wanted to put my hands on his skin, to feel the heat of his arousal in my palm. I started working at his belt buckle, but he suddenly stood, lifting me and tossing me over his shoulder so my ass was in the air.

I laughed, pressing my hands against his lower back as he held me firmly by my thighs and carried me down the hall. It got darker as he went, and once in the bedroom, the overpowering scent of roses and perfume filled my nostrils. He tossed me onto the bed amongst more rose petals, and I bounced a few times before he came at me like a ravenous wolf.

I couldn't say a word. He was on me and claiming my mouth for another kiss before I even thought of what to say. He hadn't even given me a chance to enjoy the decoration he had done. His body melded against mine, pinning me to the bed as he ground against me. I could feel his hardened cock through his pant leg and mine, begging me to free him so he could search me out.

“Gavin... shit... I want you.” My moans did not go unheeded. He pulled my shirt up over my head and threw it away, scraping his teeth over my breasts as he unfastened my belt and pants. After freeing my lower half, he rose up, peeling his own clothing off as I removed my bra. I wanted to feel him hot against me. My hands clawed at his sides as he peered down at me and stroked himself.

“Who do you belong to?”

His question stung my heart, as if he were intentionally forcing me to make my choice in that moment when I was helpless. I needed him. My body ached to feel his comfort. My groin clenched unconsciously, the moisture between my legs urging me to answer him correctly so I could be satisfied, but my heart turned in my chest, anxiety creeping in.

“Who do you belong to?” he asked again, leaning forward. I could smell his aftershave, and the heat of his body radiated onto my skin, though he remained inches away.

“You...” I mumbled, caving to the primal lust that controlled my damn pussy.

“Say you’re going to be my wife.” He held his dick near my opening, his head sliding up and down my wet slit. “Say it.”

“I’m going to be your wife,” I whimpered, inching lower on the bed just to feel him slide into me. At the same time, he diverted his attention to the small bucket on the nightstand that held a few drinks and the ice to chill them. When leaned back, his hand held a few ice cubes. He smirked at me as he put one in his mouth.

“What are you doing?” I asked, pushing away from him as he bent low, his mouth nearing my nether region. I chuckled, when his cold tongue flicked across my clit, then shrieked at how cold it was.

“Hold still,” he growled, pushing his tongue across my skin. He licked up my inner thigh, then put more ice in his mouth. His hand now empty, he pulled my legs apart and zeroed in on my pussy.

“Shit, but it’s cold,” I hissed, letting him do what he wanted with me.

He didn’t respond, his mouth full of ice now. As his tongue sank inside of me, I felt something else sink too—ice. I shivered, arching my back up as he began to suck at my soft folds. He pushed his fingers into me too, forcing the ice deeper into my cavity, and the contrast between his heat and the chill made me shudder.

“God, I want you in me. Please, fuck me.”

Gavin pulled away as I lifted my hips to meet him, and then crawled forward. I didn’t have to wait another second. His cock glided into me, even hotter than his fingers. It made me groan with satisfaction to just feel him there, but when he began to work his hips, thrusting and maneuvering, I clenched.

“Oh, you like that, do you?” His voice was low and sultry, taking a gravelly tone I hadn’t heard before. “Come on, tell me you like it.”

“I like it... fuck do I like it.” Now clawing at his sides again, I found my rhythm with him, my body preparing for what I could tell would be the most intense orgasm I’d had in years.

My pussy clenched around him, the ice inside melting and dribbling out across my ass as cold water. My body tensed, my head arching back, and then it came. The thought of drawing blood with my fingernails dug into Gavin’s back never occurred to me in the moment as my eyes shut, and my body rose up to meet his.

“Good girl...now say you’re mine.” Gavin bit down on my neck, his thrusts still drawing the ecstasy from my groin. I sputtered and gritted my teeth as pleasure sounds escaped my mouth, but I could not speak. “Tell me you’re a good girl. Tell me you’re mine,” he repeated.

“I’m... yours...” I managed to squeak out, and he fucked me harder, thrusting firmly into my back wall. I thought he’d bruise me, but I didn’t care. Even when my orgasm slowly started to peak and fade out, he continued his movements. They felt no less glorious without the spasms and jolts of passion controlling my body.

“I love you,” he grunted, burying his face in my hair, his beard scraping the top of my shoulder. His hot body lay heavily on mine, and for a moment I thought he was about to go, but he slowed, holding his hips tightly against mine for a few seconds. When he pushed a hand beneath me and rolled to his back, I gasped and laughed.

I was suddenly on top of him, straddling him with his girth buried inside me. My hair, disheveled and a mess, hung around my face and shoulders, and I balanced myself by leaning on his stomach. Gavin began thrusting upward, pumping into me again. At this angle, I could cum again quickly, but the chilling sensation of the ice was gone now, which left me wanting more.

I reached for the ice and took a handful. Gavin grinned at me. “I knew you’d like that.”

As I rose up, he slid out of me, my sex smeared all over his cock. I pushed as many ice cubes in me as I could stand before

I felt like my pussy would be frostbitten, then grabbed his dick and held it up so I could slide back down around him. It was instant gratification, his hot cock in my full cavity. It stretched me and filled me so full I wanted to scream.

“Oh, good girl,” he whispered, thrusting hard into me. I knew the ice would melt quickly, and I wanted to cum again. So, I took his hand and splayed it on his own stomach, pressing his thumb to my clit. I didn’t have to give any more explanation; Gavin’s thumb pressed and massaged my clit as I rode him.

For an awkward moment, we collided into one another until I let him take control. I relaxed on his body, and he fucked me, one hand working my clit, one hand squeezing my breast. When the orgasm came washing over me again, this time I didn’t hold back. I let out my screams of enjoyment, and barely heard Gavin mutter, “I’m going to cum.”

After being filled with ice, his release felt like lava, but I didn’t care. My body was electrified with intense sensation in every nerve ending. My pussy felt like it had taken a beating when I collapsed on top of him and lay across his chest.

“You’re going to have a mess,” I told him, thinking of the way I felt ice water and cum draining from me.

“Totally worth it...” I could hear the grin on his face through his words and felt the kiss to my forehead when he had finished speaking. I loved this man more than anyone else my whole life. So how did I tell him it was effectively over?

GAVIN

Madison rolled off me and I turned to my side as she did so I could hold her. I felt the mess to which she referred both on me and on the bed, but I didn't care. Blankets and sheets could be washed and right now the only thing that mattered was talking with her. She lay panting, her hair in a mess covering her face, and I wrapped an arm over top of her and pulled her against my body. Her breasts pressed against my chest. I could feel her chest still pounding.

"You are so amazing," I whispered, softly kissing her damp forehead. Part of me wanted to lay in that moment forever, to never interrupt the sweetness that was our intimacy, but another more visceral part of me demanded I speak. I hadn't forgotten about her escapade with Drew. It lingered in the back of my mind even throughout our sexual encounter. I didn't understand how she could commit so fully to me in that moment when it was obvious, she still loved him.

"I wish I could stay here forever." Her words echoed my thoughts. She snuggled into my chest and tucked her arms between us. I felt the tension there, where intimacy and passion should be. It was a cancer growing between the two of us, infecting each interaction with her, or thought I had of her.

"Yeah..." As calm settled over us, I felt the time to speak was now. If I didn't say what I needed to say when I felt the urge to do it, I knew I would continue to swallow it just to take care of her. And while it wasn't in my nature to be selfish, it was about time I took care of myself too. "Listen, can we talk?"

My chest tightened as she pulled away. She stayed close enough that our legs were still tangled together, but I could see her face now at least. I didn't want to jump right into an ultimatum, so I picked a topic I thought would be safe. After tucking a strand of her loose black hair around her ear, I dived in.

“How are your parents?” I saw the flash of relief cross her face, then she shrugged. It was almost as if she were preparing for my attack or something, or maybe she had things she wanted to say to me too but hadn't gotten the courage up to say them yet. Either way, she was there in my arms, and we had just made love. So that had to count for something, didn't it?

I pulled the corner of the blanket over us as the air conditioner kicked on, the vent right above my bed. Madii shivered and licked her lips before replying.

“Mom and Dad are fine. They ask about you a lot. They ask about Drew a lot too. I think Dad is really frustrated with me and confused, but Mom is being supportive for the first time in my life. It feels odd.” She snuggled a tiny bit closer, pulling the blanket down behind her back. “How is your mom?”

I could tell the question wasn't genuine, but I said nothing. I didn't blame Madii for not liking my mother. After the few interactions she'd had with Mom, I knew she disliked her. Mom had been ridiculous—something I was still trying to remedy.

“And Lexi?”

This beating around the bush thing sucked. I wanted to just shake her and tell her we were getting married in the courthouse tomorrow by the justice of the peace. Unfortunately, the long game had served me well so far, and patience was a virtue—one I was not exceptionally good at, but a virtue all the same.

“She's okay. She is like an anchor for me while Crystal is away. She's got this new guy she hangs with and she's spending all her free time with him.”

I often forgot how young Madison was. I was a decade older than her, and all of my friends or associates were married already—all but Nick. But Nick had been a player for so long, I didn't see his relationship lasting long anyway. Me, however, I was a lone wolf. I always have been. Settling down was always on my mind, but my career had always come first—until Madison.

“You look upset.” She peered up at me with pouting lips, her hand splayed across my chest. I had been up for a promotion only a few months before Drew woke up. I'd told Madison about it and she was excited for me then. I told her I'd give it up to be with her. We hadn't discussed it again since then, but I knew it was about to spring up again. What she didn't know was I needed to know if she was serious before I made my decision about it.

“I'm okay.” The air around us continued to chill like the tone of our conversation. Minutes ago, the room had been aflame with passion, and now we were exchanging small talk like old friends catching up. As if the entire world were beginning to implode on me, I had to say something. “Actually, I'm not okay.”

Her eyes widened and I felt her body grow rigid in my embrace. We stared at each other as the anxious tension grew. She had to know what I was thinking. Maybe she didn't know that Adam had told me about her kissing Drew, but she wasn't stupid. The situation was fucked up. I deserved answers, especially given the fact that she had made a commitment to me.

She swallowed nervously but before she had a chance to open her mouth, I opened mine. “Madison, you know I love you more than anything. This whole night is supposed to be proof of that. But this past several weeks has been a torture, watching you going into another man day after day, not even knowing what you're thinking. You haven't been talking to me about what's happening, or how you feel. I'm defending you to my mom and my friends.”

“I need answers. I need to know that you are still committed to me. And if you are committed to me, then I need things. Like

for starters, I need you to stop wearing his ring, start wearing mine. Stop seeing him daily. And let's set a date. Let's let our friends and family know we're okay."

Madison rolled away from me, sitting on the edge of the bed. I saw the goosebumps pepper her skin in the light from the candles and she shivered. Her arms at her sides, bracing herself, she hung her head. I thought I had been cautious, patient and thoughtful. I kept my tone calm and peaceful; I hadn't raised my voice. I wanted to be supportive, but I had needs too.

"Stop seeing him daily?" The anger laced through her tone cut me. She didn't turn around to look at me, nor did she get up and walk away. I found the latter a comforting thing, until she swiped at her face, clearly crying. "He almost died."

"Madii—"

"He was my best friend for a very long time before I met you, and he laid in that bed for almost two years in a coma, and he almost died. It was my fault, and I am trying to fix what went wrong. And you're asking me not to care about him?" The more she spoke, the more rage filled her voice. "I can't believe you. I really thought you understood. And all this—" she gestured around the room at the flowers and candles "—was just to get me into your bed?"

"No!" I sat up, snapping the covers back. "No. Don't you do that." Bolting to my feet, I grabbed my pants and hopped on one foot as I put them on, then flicked the light on.

Madison stormed around the end of the bed and started searching the pile of clothes frantically. "You know me better than that, Madison. I would never do that to you. I am in love with you. I did all this because I need you. I wanted to help you relax and have a good evening."

She glared at me as she began dressing, cramming her feet into her pant legs without even bothering to put her panties on. Her messy hair only made her look more attractive to me with her devilish brown eyes. I grabbed her shirt and held it, knowing she would be forced to come to me to retrieve it.

“So, you wanted to butter me up then make me choose? Really nice. You’re a real piece of work.” Angrily, she snatched her bra off the footrail of the bed and slipped into it, hooking it and adjusting her breasts. “Give me my shirt.”

“No. We need to talk. You can’t just walk out angry.”

“Give me my fucking shirt!” Madii held her hand out and glared at me, but I refused to cave in. I saw the angry tears. I knew how she felt, but I wasn’t going to back down.

“Madison, you have hidden things from me since day one, and I never said a word. When Adam told me you kissed him I—”

“He what!”

Her eyes grew wide in shock, and she stared at me, pulling her hand back.

“Adam said he walked in on you and Drew kissing.” Given the look on her face, I felt instantly ashamed. I had let someone else’s interpretation of a situation be my only determining factor as I made assessments and judgments on Madison’s character.

“Well, he doesn’t know what he saw. I have not done anything but hold Drew’s hand and I’ve only done that because he needs support and care.” Madii’s chest heaved, but her voice softened. “I can’t believe you’d think that about me.”

The way her tone changed from anger to hurt as her shoulders dropped just about crushed me. I handed her the shirt and looked away, trying to sift through the barrage of emotions I was feeling. I was an asshole, that much was clear, but I still needed answers and commitment.

“What happened then? What did he see?” I tried to stay rational even when it was challenging me.

“It’s true. Drew would have kissed me, and I had no way of getting out of it until Adam walked in and interrupted us. I was really relieved about that.” Her lip trembled as she spoke. She dressed silently, pulling the shirt on over her head and finding her slip-on shoes and putting them on.

When she sat down on the edge of the bed, I could see the fight had gone out of her. I felt like it escaped me too. We were just two broken people trying to decide which way was up in a very difficult situation. The problem was, it was my heart that was being destroyed now, and there was nothing I could do about it.

“Drew needs me, Gavin. He’s not ready for me to just dump him and I’m the positivity keeping him going right now. If I walk away right now, he will quit on his recovery. He’s out of bed and using a wheelchair, but they have him starting to walk and stuff. I know once he gets home, I will feel better about this, but for now I just need space.”

“That’s why you came tonight, isn’t it. You were going to ask me to back off?” My gut churned. How could this be happening? The more time she spent with him the more certain she became that she didn’t want me. Now she was pulling away even more, right after we just really connected again.

Madii nodded and let a few tears fall. “I’m not trying to hurt you. I just don’t know what to do.”

“Well, if it’s that difficult to choose between me and him, then just choose him.” I clenched my jaw and stared at the open door, refusing to see what her expression was. If I saw that my words hurt her, I would tell her I didn’t mean what I had just said. I couldn’t do that. I had to be strong. “Because if you really wanted me, there would be no choice.”

“Gavin, don’t be ridiculous.”

“I will not be anyone’s second choice.” I turned my head away, praying I could diffuse the anger boiling in my chest and not snap at her. The bed jostled and I heard her shuffle across the carpet. I sensed her lingering at the door for a moment, so I added, “If you don’t make the choice soon, it’s just over.”

Madison left without another word. I heard the front door shut and had the urge to race out to the driveway and beg her to forgive me for being such an idiot, but I didn’t. No matter how hard this was to do, it would be harder still to sit around watching her fall back in love with that bastard and leave me

anyway. If it was ending, I was ending it with my dignity intact.

MAD II

Creeping through the hospital, trying to hide from Gavin, was the worst feeling in the world, but it was what I had resigned myself to doing. Today was the day Drew was headed home to be with his parents. Gavin and I hadn't spoken since that night at his place when I had left him in silence. Eleven days total we had been separated without so much as a call or text message.

I would have been a liar to say that I wasn't curious how he was doing, but part of me felt a huge weight off my shoulders without him pressuring me daily. I hadn't exactly forgotten how much I loved him though, and nights without his goodnight messages or cute snaps on Snapchat were difficult. I hadn't been sleeping well. Violet noticed how I hadn't been eating either and sternly reminded me that I'd already been through mourning for Drew once, that I shouldn't "lay another man in the grave before his time."

That had ended in a horrible argument, and she had gone to Mom and Dad's house. And I had cried myself to sleep that night. Despite the toll all of this was taking on my physical body, I had determined to be there for Drew. None of this had been his fault and he was suffering like a trooper, and on this, his day of release, I had to have a brave face. So, there I stood, waiting until Doctor Gavin Carpenter walked away from the nurses station before rounding the corner to go to Drew's room.

When I thought the coast was clear, I headed down the hall, the heels of my shoes clicking on the floor. But I heard his

voice echo down the hall and almost leapt out of my skin. The closest thing to hide behind was a tall rolling cart that held trays of food, and I ducked behind it before he made his appearance, walking out of what looked to be a break room or something.

I stood there surrounded by the aroma of crappy hospital food with my back to the hall. And trying not to eavesdrop on his conversation with another doctor about something, I kept my head down and waited for him to walk away. It was one agonizing moment after another until the conversation faded out into just white noise. My eyes locked onto a tiny corner of wallpaper that had peeled up from the wall; I wanted to pick at it, but I kept my hands folded together in front of myself.

The nurse came and pulled the cart farther down the hall, closer to Gavin and nearer to the center of my panic, and I followed cautiously. Thankfully the nurse did not see me and question what I was doing, but someone else did. Before Alice and Henry saw me, I heard them. She was talking so loudly, I thought maybe the entire hospital heard her.

My eyes flicked to Gavin's face as the loud chatter neared. His calm expression—professional and polite—instantly shaded darker as they approached, and when they caught sight of me and Alice squealed with delight, Gavin looked in my direction.

“Madii!” Alice charged toward me, holding her arms out like she was going to hug me. “Oh, today is such a good day. My baby boy is coming home!”

Inside I wanted to smile, but even after Alice had captured me and took me into a tight squeeze, my eyes remained fixed on Gavin. Anger washed over his face, and he turned away from me, but I lingered there, wilting. My heart felt paralyzed, like the moment in the boat when Drew wasn't breathing, and they were cutting his wetsuit off of him. I stared until Henry put his arm around me and ushered me away from the spot.

A glance over my shoulder proved Gavin had gone, but he'd taken my heart with him. The happiness I should have felt in that moment vanished and was replaced by an intense need to run to Gavin, to explain what was happening. To make things

right. But Henry's firm arm held me right next to his side as we walked to Drew's room. I couldn't breathe or think. My feet felt like lead, and it were as if my senses stopped functioning. Alice spoke to me, but I didn't hear her.

It wasn't until someone snapped their fingers in front of my face that I came back to myself. Blinking rapidly, I looked around to see Alice, Henry, and Adam watching me. Drew was nowhere in sight, which confused me, but I was glad. I needed a bit of space in that moment anyway. I wouldn't have wanted him to ask what was going through my mind. It was bad enough that Alice was giving me her concerned mom look.

"Are you okay, dear?" She took my hand, patting it. "You don't look so good."

My hand felt like ice in hers, and I noticed how it was shaking a little. I hadn't even realized that Henry still held me up, pinning me against his body like a sentry guarding my balance.

"Are you okay, Madison? Do you need to sit down? Have you eaten recently?" Adam took my other hand, pressing two fingers to my wrist and watching his wristwatch.

"I'm okay." I tried to pull away, but they held me there firmly.

"Pulse is thready and weak... You seem a bit dehydrated. Let's get some water." Adam let go of my wrist and pushed the nurse call button as Henry guided me to the couch at the end of the long narrow room. Just as I sat down, the door to the private bathroom opened, and Drew appeared, wheeling himself out in a wheelchair.

He instantly looked concerned and headed my way. "What happened?"

"Oh, Madii just had some sort of episode." Henry told Drew as he took a few steps out of the way.

A knowing look passed between me and Alice. She had seen the expression on my face, and she had seen who I was looking at too. She knew this was because of Gavin, and she had to have known how I felt too. Alice knew I was engaged, how much I loved Gavin, how hard it had been for me to move

on and leave Drew lying in that bed in a coma and just fall in love with another man. Her eyes, in that singular glance, communicated more than a thousand conversations could.

“I’m fine.” I tried to reassure everyone, but honestly, I knew I wasn’t fine. I felt lightheaded and Violet’s harsh words about taking care of myself came back to haunt me. Adam stood behind Drew’s wheelchair and opened a bottle of water—I assumed from a nurse who had brought it in.

“Drink,” he ordered, pushing the water in my face.

So I obeyed the doctor’s orders, tipping the bottle to my lips and drinking deeply. It was cold and hurt my teeth, but I kept drinking until half of it was gone.

“What did you eat today?” Adam handed me the cap for the water, and I screwed it in place as I thought about what I actually *had* eaten today.

The day had been a blur. I had been so worried about making sure everything was perfect for Drew and his bedroom was ready, I hadn’t stopped to eat. After saying goodbye to his parents at their house, I went home to shower and change, and then came straight to the hospital.

I shrugged, unable to answer them.

“How often do you do this?” Drew’s concern was evident. His voice simultaneously lectured me and comforted me at the same time. I felt drawn to him, but not the way I should have. I knew that connection was broken there, but I didn’t know how to get it back. I didn’t know if I wanted it back. I didn’t even know if I wanted any connection anymore.

“How often do you skip meals, Madison?” Alice sat next to me, laying a hand on my thigh.

“I don’t know. I am just not hungry. I don’t think about food.” I felt like I was on an episode of *Intervention*, where they circle up and confront you about your drinking problem or something. Lucky for me I was saved by the highly obnoxious red headed reporter.

“Hey! Today is the day!” She was overly happy, and bubbly and I wanted to cram her camera down her throat so she’d

choke on her bubble gum. But I was thankful for the distraction because I didn't want to have a showdown with Drew's whole family over my eating habits.

Adam was the first to turn around, then Henry. Finally Drew peeled his eyes off of my face and addressed the reporter. She wore a stunning green suit and emerald-colored heels to match. She'd gotten a haircut since I last saw her. Her pixie was complemented by stunning silver earrings and bright red lipstick. She looked more like a CEO than a reporter.

"Ms.?" Adam extended his hand.

"Emily Gutierrez, Ten News. I'm doing a report on Mr. Heintz here and his fantastic recovery. My piece just wouldn't suffice without a few shots on his coming home day."

I could have peeled her fake smile off her face like a sticker and plastered it on the front page of the paper. There were just some people who you knew were so fake they would never be believable. Drew had taken a liking to her, strangely enough, however, so I tried to stay out of it.

"I'm glad you got my message." Drew turned his wheelchair to face her. "You never responded so I wondered."

I noticed a spark of interest in Emily's eyes as she looked at Drew, draping her hand out like a wet rag for him to take. He was such a dunce; he slapped his palm against hers and offered a manly handshake instead of the obvious gentle kiss to the back of her hand she was wanting. I didn't know why the jealousy ran so deep considering I was the one who had effectively been cheating on Drew for months now, but I just hated that lady so much.

"Emily, can you get a shot of our whole family?" I stood and took hold of the handles for Drew's wheelchair and pulled him away from her, nestling in next to Alice. Henry grinned and Alice offered a bit of a shocked expression that dissolved into a smile.

I watched as Emily's plastic smile faded and she reached for her camera. After a few snapshots, she let the camera hang

from her neck again and pulled a small notepad out of her pocket, poised with pen in hand to take notes.

It was gut wrenching watching Drew show interest in another woman, even if it was just because she wanted to do a story on him. I didn't think for a second that her advances would amount to anything because Drew was set on me. Still, my gut reaction told me more about my feelings for this man than the past few months had, which only made the day more of a whirlwind, and my emotions more of a tangled mess.

While Drew and Emily talked, I turned to find my water bottle which I had dropped in my haste to keep the reporter away from Drew. She asked a question that Alice laughed at, and Alice started talking, which left Drew's attention free. He gave me a concerned look when I sat down, and mouthed the words, "What's wrong?"

I shook my head, forcing a smile. "I'm fine," I whispered, trying to discourage his questioning while the reporter was around. I could play it off as being grumpy because I hadn't eaten, but I'd rather do that when Emily wasn't around. So, I kept that smile on my face until he turned back to answer another question of hers and prayed that Gavin was not around when I left this room. I didn't need another encounter like I'd had right before coming into Drew's room. That would really give me away.

GAVIN

I bounced on my toe; hands held at the ready. Jiles and I circled around the ring, staring each other down. Our usual basketball afternoon got converted to a boxing match at the gym due to rain and Nick bailed on us in favor of his new fiancé. I hadn't had the best week anyway but running into Madison as she visited Drew at his discharge from the hospital had set me off. It had been almost 48 hours, but I was still charged and ready to go.

Jiles took a jab at me, but I dodged it, ducking and sidestepping him. His left hook left an open shot for me, so I took it, jabbing his ribcage. After he recovered and got into position, I charged at him feigning a right cross, and smacking him with a left uppercut when he went to defend. His stance was wrong; his feet faltered, and he stumbled backward.

"Dude, harsh..." Jiles wheezed as he regained his center of gravity.

"You fight like a girl." The trash talk between us was typical of a day like this, but the anger that laced through my words was not. I had been bottling up my emotion for so long, it was starting to seep out into every relationship. Even calls with my mother had become a thing of the past because I got so irritated with her that I just ended up making an excuse not to answer or hung up on her early.

"Well come at me then, pretty boy. A real man taps into his potential." Jiles lunged with a solid left cross, striking me across the jaw so hard I saw stars. Whatever he did, unlocked my inner beast.

I stumbled backward for a moment, then came at him with all the fury inside of me. I unleashed a barrage of strikes, right hook, left uppercut, right jab. One after one, I pounded my blows into his torso, keeping our rule of below the neck in the back of my mind, but I was like a wild animal. He backed into a corner of the ring, protecting his body as I continued to assault him.

Eventually, he shouted at me, his mouth guard making it impossible to understand what he said, but I gathered the context of his communication and backed off. The canvas felt tiny as I walked around it, punching the corner pads as I went. I was a caged animal, and Jiles was my prey, caged with me and easily accessible.

He tore his sparring helmet off and tossed it to the canvas, then spat his mouthguard out. “What the hell, man? This is supposed to be friendly!” Jiles wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his arm and yanked a glove off. As he lifted his shirt, I could see the damage I’d done. His ribs were aflame with redness and some deep purple already setting in. “Fuck.”

I felt awful, but at the same time I still needed release. The rage penned up inside of me needed to come out, and I had no outlet. When a woman felt this way, they’d just cry and feel better, but a man had no way of getting things off his chest like this. So, I just felt like smashing things to feel better, and that had unfortunately unraveled on one of my closest friends.

“Fuck, I’m sorry, man.”

Tearing my own sparring helmet and gloves off, I headed toward Jiles who was nursing his injuries. He allowed me to lift his shirt up a bit farther to look. “Hold still,” I told him, feeling his ribcage. It didn’t appear anything was broken, but he was going to be sore for a while.

“What the fuck happened? I mean, what has you so angry?” Jiles stepped away from me and took off his other glove, bending to retrieve his items from the canvas. “It’s still that girl?”

“She’s not just a girl!” I snapped, snatching my gloves and helmet. I regretted the tone I used, but not what I had said. Madison was not just some girl to me. She was the love of my life. This was different than any of the other women I had dated. Madii was my world, and I had lost her. I had let her walk out of my house believing I was pushing her away.

“I get that.” Jiles followed me as I ducked between the ropes and hopped off the apron to the gym floor below. The next sparring pair climbed up to take our place and we headed to the locker room.

“God, it’s so fucked up, Jiles. Even though I didn’t take Nick’s advice, I was still a complete asshole.” Sweat dripped from my hair to my face and I rubbed it away. The gym wasn’t exactly the place I wanted to get into this, but this is where it was coming out, so I just let it out. “I fucked it up so bad. I told her I wasn’t going to be her second choice and to make her decision, and she walked out of my house and hasn’t spoken to me since.”

“Oh, harsh.” Jiles pushed the locker room door open, and it swung wide. We strolled inside avoiding the backswing, and steam from the showers hit us. The light fog-like mist in the air made it difficult to breathe, but it was a necessary evil. “Gosh, man. Sounds like you just need to call her. Tell me you’ve tried calling?”

I shook my head. I hadn’t and I didn’t know if I should. I told her what I wanted, but she hadn’t reached out. The thought that she might not know if I wanted her to call did occur to me at one point, but I had been so upset about things, I hadn’t cared at that moment. I had been patient and understanding for far too long; I needed to retain my dignity.

“Fuck. You’re ruining your own chances by being an ass. I told you communication was the way.” Jiles stripped off and tossed his sweaty clothes and sparring equipment into his gym bag before heading to the showers with a towel. I followed suit, not saying much. I was too stuck inside my head with the rage.

After we showered and dried off, we returned to our lockers and dressed. Jiles put on a nice button-down shirt and jeans.

“You going out or something?” I asked, returning to my work clothes, which is all I had with me.

“Yeah, the lady is out on a work trip, so I thought I’d hit up the club and have a few drinks.” Jiles shrugged. “Perks of married life when the wifey has to travel for work. I never get in trouble, but I don’t mind looking, if you know what I mean.” He winked at me, and I turned away so he didn’t see my disgust.

“Yeah.” The placid agreement was all I could offer him. If Madison was mine, I’d never do that to her, even if she was out. She would be my fucking queen.

“You should come. Get out there. Live a little. Maybe get laid or something, and it will take your mind off this shit.” He sat to put his shoes on, and I pulled mine out of my locker. I didn’t want to go home and stare at the ceiling again, and it was still early, so I agreed to go.

“Yeah, okay. But just for drinks. I have no intention of ‘getting laid’ because my heart is taken.” I shoved my wet towel into my bag and zipped it up. If having some whiskey at a bar kept me from being alone for the next few hours, I’d take it. Madison wasn’t going to call me magically and tell me she broke it off. I’d given up that hope long ago, along with a piece of my heart.

* * *

I was three drinks in and feeling fine before I felt relaxed enough to enjoy the evening. Jiles kept making eyes at women, and every time they’d come by to talk to him, he’d point them in my direction. Multiple times I told him to stop sending me women, but he continued playing wingman regardless.

“Just loosen up a little. Have some fun tonight. Flirt with them or something. It doesn’t mean you have to take them home or marry them. Just live...” Jiles raised his beer up to indicate to

the bartender he wanted another, and then slapped it down on the bar. “I’m using the John. I’ll be back.”

My drink sloshed as he pushed off of me and walked away, and I turned toward the bar, hoping to discourage any unwanted attention. Unfortunately, that didn’t work. Jiles had been gone for less than a minute when a hand smoothed up my back and fingers tangled in my hair. I spun the barstool around to see a salaciously dressed blonde, cleavage bursting through the neckline of her top.

“What’s a tall dark stranger like you doing all alone?” She sipped a brightly colored drink with a slice of lime perched on the glass’s rim and winked at me.

“Does that line actually work?” I tried to make my voice sound as unappealing as possible, dry, moody.

The woman chuckled and sat down, resting her hand on the top of my thigh. She leaned forward slightly, giving me a more than ample view of her breasts, and I looked away.

“Really, though. Why are you alone? You’re good looking and based on the shoes—” she looked down at my Sperry’s “—you’re wealthy.”

“Yeah, I’m not really alone.” I sipped the whiskey in front of me and set it back down, hoping to shoo her away quickly.

“Ah, the guy with you? Sorry, buddy. I didn’t know.” She raised her eyebrows in shock, and I cringed.

“No, I don’t ride the stick, if that’s what you’re thinking. My fiancé is just not with me tonight.” I laughed at the absurdity of her assumption as relief washed over her features.

“Well, then... You want to go have a little fun with me? Maybe we can grab coffee in the morning?” The seductive way she sipped her drink made my body tense. She was hot; I’d give her that. But Madison was the only thing in the world that I had ever treasured like this—enough to push away my boyish wild side and fly straight. If I didn’t have Madii there, if I wouldn’t risk hurting her, the caged animal inside of me would pin this woman to the side of my car and fuck her until she couldn’t walk.

But I would never do that to Madison.

“I’ll pass.” Shrugging, I turned back to my drink again, and prayed she went away. After a few minutes, she turned and walked away, likely pouting. I sat there until my drink was finished and Jiles came back. I could tell by the way he was walking he’d need an Uber, so I scheduled one and left a note to call him when they arrived.

As he sat down, the bartender brought his next round and I stood.

“Going?” He looked surprised, but I didn’t think he really was. He knew this wasn’t my scene, and I just wanted to go to sleep and pretend my life wasn’t in chaos.

“Yeah. I don’t like breaking all these ladies’ hearts.” I faked a smile and he laughed raucously, despite my joke not being funny. “I’ll catch you Monday. Tell Nick he missed out.”

“See ya, man.” I hadn’t even gone and Jiles was absorbed in his drink and the flirty glances of a few more women.

I’d never understand men who did that behind their wives’ backs, but I wasn’t judging him. I knew his heart and he’d never cheat on his wife; he just liked the extra attention. I, however, wanted the attention of only one woman, Madison Springer. And I had destroyed my chance with her.

Driving home in silence wasn’t really the comfort I needed. I would have much rather been on a hands-free call with her. Or expecting a call with her when I got home. My mind wandered to what she might be doing tonight, but I quickly quashed that line of thought because of how much anxiety it gave me thinking what she’d do with him now that they weren’t in a hospital.

I pulled into the gated community and down the long lane to my house. Everything was dark, except my house. I didn’t want to come home to a dark home. The lights on made me feel like someone was waiting, even though I knew no one was waiting. But no matter how many times I tried to build the illusion; it all came crashing down around me every time I lay in bed alone.

I parked my car, but couldn't bear to get out, so I sat there, staring at my phone screen and the last selfie Madison and I took together. It was going to be a hard climb out of this pit, and I was going to have to tell my mother she was right.

MAD II

Sitting around that table felt like home—Drew to my right, his mom to my left, Dad across the table. Alice had made a simple meal of spaghetti and meatballs, but she had also made homemade bread as well. Everything was delicious but I picked at my food, unable to force myself to eat. I managed to eat enough to convince Alice I was taking care of myself, with the excuse that I had a snack before I came because I thought dinner would be later.

Drew didn't seem to notice. After eating hospital food for a few months, he seemed happy enough to pig out on the homemade meal, even taking my plate and finishing it off when there was nothing left for a third helping for him.

Henry and Alice seemed to stare nervously at us and each other while eating. I wasn't much for conversation anyway, but the lull in anything audible—except the sound of silverware on plates—was excruciating. I tried to think of something to say that would spark at least a surface level conversation, but my brain didn't want to cooperate with me. So, I pushed my food back and forth with my fork, hoping they would think I was eating.

“Oh gosh, it's so good to see you two around our table again.” Alice beamed. She sat with her elbows propped on the table holding her glass of red wine. Happiness was a good look on her. The smiles I had seen from her daily in the hospital had all been put on—forced, because hope was the only thing she had and offering hope in the form of a smile was her method of coping. But this smile wrenched my heart.

This smile told me she wanted her family back, the one that was supposed to continue to grow as Drew and I started our family. It made me nauseous. A few years ago, I would have told her that was the only thing I dreamed of too. But she had insisted I move on, and I had.

“Yes, well remember how much fun Lake Okeechobee was. The four of us boating and going to the parks? We hiked so many trails that week I thought Madii’s legs were going to fall off.” Henry put his fork down and wiped his mouth, and Alice chuckled.

“Oh, I remember that day. Drew got a sunburn, and I had to use that aloe all over his back. Remember that honey?” Alice sipped her wine and turned to Drew. “Your skin was sticking to the sheets that night and you kept waking Madii up.”

“Yeah, that was miserable. Taught me to wear sunblock. But my favorite part of that trip was actually the crab legs we got at that little diner. They were so sweet, remember that Madii?” Drew wiped his mouth with his napkin. I wasn’t sure how to respond. Of course, I remembered that day. We had been so happy and in love. I just wasn’t feeling that same connection now.

“Yeah, I remember.” I remembered every moment with him. They had been painfully seared into my brain and I’d been reliving them for months on end. Now with Drew awake the fond memories had turned to torment. Every moment I had spent with him felt like a lie now. My heart wanted Gavin, no matter how much I tried to make it want Drew.

“Ah, and remember the time we went to that botanical garden?” Henry’s words stabbed my heart.

“Dad, that was the day I proposed.” Drew reached over and took my hand, cold and clammy as it was. He smiled at me. “You remember that day, babe?”

I wanted to forget that day, to forget my past, to let my heart just have what it wanted, but every time I closed my eyes I saw Drew’s face under that water, graying and lifeless. I nodded at him, but I felt like running away. The fact that I had been spending so much time with Drew because I felt guilty,

and *not* because I felt in love with him, had never been more real to me.

“Can you all excuse me for a second?” Feeling tears welling up inside, I stood and smiled, gracefully exiting the room. I made a beeline to the bathroom and locked myself in before the tears started, thankfully. I didn’t even notice if any of them had reacted, but I felt it was a good time to make my exit. Everyone was done eating the main course, and we would retire to the patio to have dessert, if it was anything like it used to be.

For now, I needed the privacy because something was burning in my gut that I needed to say. I closed the lid of the toilet and sat down, pulling my phone out of my pocket. I opened my messaging app and found the thread I had going with Gavin and started typing.

Madii 6:17PM: Gavin, I know you’re probably busy right now and I wouldn’t blame you if you didn’t want to talk to me ever again. I just needed to say this to you before I lost my nerve. You are the most amazing man I’ve ever met. I have been such an idiot. I know you told me so many times that Drew’s accident wasn’t my fault and I think I just needed to come to it on my own. I know that now. I’m sorry for putting you through all of this. I’ve been helping him because I felt guilty, not because I loved him. I don’t want him, Gavin, I want you. Please say you’ll forgive me. Please say you will take me back.

My finger hovered over the send button, shaking. I read and reread the entire message at least three times to ensure it said exactly what I wanted it to. I tweaked a few words for grammar, made sure the spelling was all correct, and then promptly deleted everything.

Tears dripped onto my phone screen just as it went black from not being used. What I had to say could not be said in a measly text message. Gavin deserved better than that. He had been nothing but patient and understanding with me for so long, and I had left his house that night without even trying to understand his point of view. I was selfish. I let my own guilt needle away at me until it was the only thing I thought about.

Drew became my project. If I could fix him, I wouldn't feel guilty anymore.

The problem was, it didn't work that way because now I just felt guilty about cheating on him, and I still blamed myself for everything that had happened. My body, wracked with sobs, ached from the stress I'd been under for so long. I wanted to curl up into a ball and sleep. If only all of this were just a bad dream.

I looked at myself in the mirror—red puffy eyes and nose, tear-stained cheeks. Drew and Henry may be oblivious to a bit of makeup touch-up, but Alice would see right through me. If I could sneak out the back and tell them I went home feeling sick I would, but in order to get to my car I had to pass right through the dining room where they all were. There was no way around that.

So, I stood and splashed water on my face. I tried as best as I could to fix my makeup with the little bit of Alice's makeup, I found in the medicine cabinet. After I tossed my hair to see if that would help, I gave up. There was no point in hiding anything. If I had to come clean tonight, I would. I just prayed I would have another day or two to put my thoughts together before all hell broke loose in my life and I was alone.

Once Drew found out I had been cheating on him he would leave. And I was pretty certain things with Gavin were over, even if I tried to repair them.

I unlocked the bathroom door and slipped out, tiptoeing toward the dining room to see if I could hear the tone of the conversation. If they were questioning why I had left so abruptly I would tell them I was feeling off, but that would only go so far if they detected I had been crying. So, I took a deep breath, pasted a happy face on, and rounded the corner.

Alice was seated alone at the table, hands folded in front of herself. She had a stern look on her face—a motherly look. She licked her lips and jerked her head to the side, indicating I should come in. Pointing at the chair, she said, "Sit."

I had never heard Alice be firm with me like this. I'd seen her give Drew lectures before; she was his mother after all, but

never me. She was never anything other than kind, funny, supportive, and encouraging. Like a puppy being scolded, I sat in the chair and dropped my chin. I was ready for whatever tongue lashing she would give me.

We sat in silence for a moment, and I heard Drew and Henry out the back shouting about something. It sounded like more fun and games, so I knew their mood was light. But the mood in the dining room was anything but light. Alice hadn't said another word, and I was beginning to feel like the end was near. When she finally did speak, my eyes jerked up to meet hers. They were full of tears.

"You need to tell him."

"Tell who, what?" Playing dumb probably wasn't my best move, but I had created this entire façade of bravery and strength, it seemed stupid to just toss it away at that moment. Or maybe it was more denial on my part.

"Tell Drew it's over."

I blanched.

I didn't know what to say, so I sat there with my mouth hanging open, waiting for Alice to continue. The tears in her eyes spilled over as she reached for my hand to comfort me. "You're miserable, Madii. I can see it; Henry can see it. Soon, Drew will be able to see it also. You can't keep pretending that nothing is wrong, that nothing changed. You love Dr. Carpenter now. You are so happy with him. Drew will understand. What he won't understand is if you keep leading him on like this and then leave him anyway. You've done enough. Our boy has come home. It's time to let him heal the rest of the way."

"But he will break." My lip quivered as I blinked the tears away rapidly. My furious batting eyelashes couldn't keep up, and the tears sluiced down my cheeks once again. Only this time, I didn't try to stop them or hide them.

"You will break," Alice whispered as she squeezed my hand. "Honey, you're breaking now. You can't go on like this. You've not been eating. I wonder if you're sleeping. I spoke

with your mother; she said you and your sister are arguing all the time now. Madison, you aren't happy. You've done all you can do now, and now you have to take care of yourself."

"I did this..." The words came out as a wretched moan of a sob. If the term "ugly cry" was the way of saying you're hysterical, then I was "vomit crying." No one deserved to see this, which is why I'd been hiding it for so long, but I'd been doing this every night in my shower for weeks.

"You did not do this." Her strict tone stung my heart. "Drew is a grown man, and he made his decisions. There were risks involved, and he signed that waiver just like you. He decided that loving you was worth the risk."

I ground my napkin into my eyes to dry them, then blew my nose loudly. "I decided that he was worth giving up everything I thought I wanted for him, twice now. When he wanted to marry, I wasn't sure, but I chose him. And now that he's back, I'll give up everything just to make sure he is okay."

"No, you won't. I won't let you." She pursed her lips and squeezed my hand harder. "I will tell him for you if you can't, but he deserves to know. So, for the love of God, please just tell him. You will be happier, and so will he."

My heart hurt as I nodded. When Alice made a promise like that, she meant to keep it. "Give me a few days." I stood, picking up my purse and wiping my face one more time. "Tell him I feel like I got food poisoning or something. I just have to go now."

Without waiting for a response, I walked right out the front door and got in my car. I didn't know whether to feel completely relieved or terrified that the worst was yet to come. I drove straight to Gavin's house, but he wasn't home. I thought about waiting for him, but it was getting later, and I was exhausted. All that would happen would be a huge argument anyway, so I headed home to shower.

With any luck, I would get through a few more days and have the courage and find the best time to tell Drew the truth—before Alice decided to pull the trigger. I didn't know where

the courage would come from, but I'd mustered it before. I could do it again.

GAVIN

Traffic was a nightmare on the interstate. An accident had held up all three lanes, and the road may as well have been a parking lot. Typically, I did well in traffic. I had the philosophy that there was no use getting upset about something I couldn't control, and I'd turn on a podcast or the radio and just enjoy the time where I didn't have to work or listen to complaints of my patients or the nurses on the floor.

This traffic jam, however, was more challenging than average. I sat staring at the license plate of the big rig stopped in front of me, with no way to see around it to know how long I'd be sitting there. Mom sat in the seat next to me yammering on about Delores and her grandchildren. It was only a matter of time before the inevitable happened and she started talking about Madison. I'd been lucky so far by talking about Dad's return from overseas and focusing her on being happy.

We inched forward and I noticed the stick-figure family on the back of the black SUV ahead of me to the left. It showed a man, a woman, a baby, and two dogs. I'd have probably selected cats, not dogs, but the human component saddened me. I hadn't heard from Madii for two weeks. And unlike when Drew first woke up, this silence was deafening.

The first separation of two weeks had been at my own choice, to give her space to handle the shock. I knew pushing her back then would have broken her, perhaps us. But this time, I had given her a clear ultimatum. Choose me or I'm done. And I couldn't take it back no matter how much I wanted to. I couldn't sit back and watch her fawn over another man for any

amount of time, and if she hadn't come to her senses to call or text me, well she had made her choice.

"What's wrong, sugar pie?" Mom seemed to notice me grow quiet as I stared at the stick-figure family and patted my knee. "Traffic doesn't get you down. What's happening?"

I shrugged. There was no way in hell I was telling my mother about Madison, not after I knew how she felt already. But that didn't stop her from discerning what was going on. She sighed with frustration. I could see the steam spewing from her nostrils and ears like one of those cartoon characters whose faces turn bright red in rage.

"That girl!"

I started at how she spat out the words with a raised voice. I also knew better than to interrupt her or try to keep her from her soapbox. So, clenching my jaw, I set my gaze on the bumper of the semi ahead of me and told myself to remain calm as she let her rant loose.

"I have told you time and again, she was no good for you. And now she's gone and broken your heart, just like those other floozies you had hanging around. It's about time you find someone that is respectable. Gavin, your father would simply snap if he knew how you were being treated."

She talked in an animated fashion, gesturing with her hands and emoting with vivid facial expressions. I swore the lady in the car next to us rolled her eyes at how ridiculous Mom was being. She probably thought Mom was going off about the traffic or something. What was happening was way worse. Any person on this highway would feel frustrated or angry about the traffic. Not everyone would side with my mother.

"And there's another thing... Madison kept the ring, didn't she? I bet you she did. She's a shady gold digger if I ever saw one. Fuck's sake, Gavin, I tried to warn you."

I didn't have the heart to argue with her this time. I'd stood up for Madison on so many occasions and it had made no difference in this particular situation with Mom. And now, with everything that was happening, even if I did stand up for

Madii, it would seem like I was falling on my own sword. In a way I was, I had given the ultimatum despite my better judgment looking back at the situation.

Madison deserved a second chance even if she came back now, but I didn't hold out any hope that she would come back. In fact, I had already resolved myself to believe she wasn't coming back. She had returned to her first love, a stronger bond than I could provide her, given the fact that she had withdrawn from me so greatly.

"Here! Here!" Mom shouted, pointing at the exit lane. Traffic had gotten up to about 10 miles per hour and before I knew it I was at the exit I needed for the airport. Mom was pointing frantically and waving her hands. "Gavin, you're going to miss it!"

"No, I'm not." Remaining calm, I turned on my blinker and slowed down, waiting patiently for someone to let me over. A kind older woman in a gray minivan backed off so I could merge, and we made the exit at the last minute. "See."

Things were a bit quieter until we got parked. Mom kept her complaints to people's driving or the horrible parking jobs perpetrated by other airport-goers. Her frustration seemed to intensify about the time we entered the terminal, when a comfort companion got a little too close to her. She commented very loudly, and very rudely, "Cats are not comfort animals." I had to steer her away from the crazy cat lady who was very offended by her remark.

I distracted her by pointing out the flight board, so we could see if Dad's flight was on time and where his baggage would be directed to when they emptied the plane. We were quite close to the baggage claim B, which is where Dad would end up, so I placed my hand in the small of Mom's back and guided her toward a row of benches where we could sit and wait.

The very minute we sat down, she started in again with her nagging. "I'm just sorry you didn't listen to me. If you had listened to me none of this would have happened and you wouldn't have a broken heart right now. Mother always knows

best.” She said that last line with her finger pointed, and her head cocked sideways.

Her insistence was annoying me, but I didn’t have the emotional energy to fight her, so I listened to her list off the names of the women she had wanted to set me up with and their current relational statuses. Most of them had found someone. Of course, Becky Kindall was still single, but I wasn’t interested in dating a podiatrist. In fact, I wasn’t interested in dating anyone. I wanted Madison. I wanted her enough to get my phone out right then and call her, but with Mom grilling me I didn’t dare.

“Oh, and I have all the rest of those packages returned, so you can thank me for that, not Madison. And another thing—”

“What on earth are you prattling on about?” Dad’s voice interrupted Mom’s rant with a ring of comfort. My eyes and Mom’s shot to the escalator where Dad descended with his trilby in hand, carrying a laptop bag. “Well don’t just sit there. Get up and hug me.”

Mom scurried over to him like a long-lost pet finding its owner after days of being apart, and I stood too. I’d done this dozens of times over the years, and I didn’t live with Mom and Dad anymore, so his absence didn’t affect me as much. We shook hands as Mom squeezed the life out of him, and he instantly noticed my sullen face.

“Your mom been hounding you again?” He scowled.

I nodded without saying a word. He knew what sort of trouble Mom always tried to rile up with me, and he always came to my aid in the fray.

“Margret, what have I told you? Gavin will marry whoever he wants to marry and whenever he wants. If and when he produces grandchildren, we will love them.” Dad let my hand go and patted Mom on the back. “Now, let’s go get my bag. You’ll like this.”

Mom backed away, eyeing me guiltily before following Dad. I trailed behind as he tugged a suitcase off the baggage return

belt. He set it on the ground and pulled out what looked like a remote control.

“What is it, dear?” Mom leaned in, acting curious.

I gave Dad some space as he pointed his remote at the luggage, then started walking. Strangely, the suitcase on wheels started following him. “It’s like a robot. No one has to carry it!”

Mom clapped her hands happily and grinned. “Fantastic!”

I rolled my eyes and kept pace with Dad as Mom watched the self-powered suitcase. I was glad for the moment that she was not making her harsh comments anymore. And I fell into step with Dad.

“So, things are rough?” Dad reached into his pocket and pulled out a cigar, ready to light up as soon as we exited the terminal.

“Yeah, a little.” If anyone could give me sound advice as to how to handle this Madii situation, it was Dad. Still, I doubted there was little anyone could do at this point. She wasn’t speaking to me, and it was my fault. I had pushed her into Drew’s arms.

“You know, Gavin, my mother hated your mother. When we were first dating, there was nothing your mom could do right. Grandma just hated her and had it in for her. But then you came along, and you were the best thing that ever happened. After that, your mom and your grandma became the best of friends.”

“I know, Mom told me.” I shrugged. That story hadn’t helped the first time, so I didn’t feel much comfort from hearing it again.

“Well, I bet what she didn’t tell you was that she almost gave up. We split for a while, and I had to go get her.”

I held the door open for Dad and his robot luggage. Mom skirted past me, still fascinated by the contraption, and then I hurried to catch up to Dad. He had already lit his cigar and was charging forward to a parking spot he had no knowledge of.

“Well, I told her she’d have to get along with my mother or she was done.”

“And I almost left him!” Mom chimed in.

“But I got what I wanted. I went over to her house and told her she didn’t get the choice. She had to make peace with my mother because she was going to be my wife, and when you love someone, you just don’t let petty things like this get in the way.”

“And she fell for that shit?” I chuckled as I pointed down a row of cars, directing dad to our spot.

“Oh, he is quite persuasive when he wants to be.” Mom waggled her eyebrows and I cringed.

“Yes, let’s just say I satisfied her desire, and we made up.” Dad grinned and puffed his cigar. I made a gagging noise and a cringing face and both Mom and Dad laughed.

“Alright, so you’re saying I need to just lay down the law? Tell her like it is?” I clicked the button on my key fob and unlocked my SUV. Dad opened the hatch and lifted his suitcase into the back.

“What I’m saying is you know her. You know what gets under her skin, what motivates her, encourages her, woos her heart. You walk right into her presence and be the water she is thirsty for, and then demand she drink. It’s that simple.”

Dad shut the hatch and climbed into the car. I stood for a moment thinking about what he had said and wondering if it had any merit. Drew seemed to be the water she was drinking lately, not anything I could offer. And how did I compare with that? Her lifelong best friend, back from the dead, was far more enticing than a new love that gave her a bit of excitement for a few months.

I slid behind the wheel and started the car. Mom and Dad were already engaged in a conversation about what they had in the refrigerator at home and what they’d have for supper. I was left to ponder in silence for the ride home. Traffic wasn’t as heavy, and I thought about dropping them off then heading to Madison’s house, but I thought better of it. I needed a plan.

It would do no good for me to storm into her house demanding she “drink.” I had to plan every detail of the encounter to make myself seem so appealing she’d have no choice but to thirst. And I had to do my best work ever. This would be the only chance I had left. If I didn’t nail it this time, I’d lose her forever. And I couldn’t do that.

MAD II

I still hadn't quite figured out how to tell Drew about me and Gavin, but I had assured Alice under no uncertain terms that I was going to tell him in my own way when the mood was right. So there I was pushing his wheelchair through the hospital almost a week later on the way to yet another therapy appointment. He was strong enough to walk around his parents' house in short bursts, but long walks still tired him too much. And he needed me, so I offered to continue toing with him, despite the effect it was now having on my photography business.

"Here," Drew said, pointing. I recognized the turn in the hallway, but my mind had been distracted with thoughts of how to tell him and what to say, so I'd missed my turn.

"Sorry, lost in thought." I pushed his chair through the door into the large room full of machines and equipment used for therapy. It looked more like a training gym than a hospital. Treadmills lined one wall, weight machines another. A set of stainless-steel parallel bars set in the center of the room, with large gym mats lining the floor beneath it.

Drew's therapist, Adam, was waiting by the parallel bars, looking down at his cell phone. He looked up as we approached and offered a broad smile. I didn't smile, however, because Ms. Emily Gutierrez, Ten News, just happened to be sitting in a black plastic chair nearby, also consumed with her phone screen. She, too, looked up as we stopped there, and she gestured like she was calling someone.

Suddenly a camera crew of three men wearing Ten News polo shirts and carrying tripods, cameras, and a boom mic appeared. They had been leaning against a wall where I hadn't seen them. I hadn't thought for a second that we would be having an intimate discussion about me and Gavin during Drew's therapy, but the presence of the news crew cemented that fact.

"Emily! So glad you made it." Drew reached out toward her, scooting forward on the wheelchair seat.

"So glad you invited me. I think getting some therapy shots in action with you on your feet will be awesome for the piece." She had spiked her fiery hair and all I could think was how easy it would be to poke someone's eye out on those sharp points. She turned her attention to me after shaking Drew's hand and raised an eyebrow. "Ms. Springer, you always join him for therapy?"

"Yes, I do." My voice was flat and cold, and I didn't try to mask my distaste for the woman.

Adam offered a questioning look, and I avoided his eye contact. I busied myself with locking the wheels on the chair in place, so it didn't move as Drew tried to stand up. We stood and talked with Adam for a while, Emily and her crew hovering over us, and Adam gave us the rundown of what we'd be doing. It was pretty straightforward.

"So go ahead and do your chair stretches first. We'll get you limbered up and then we'll get you standing." Adam stepped back and watched as Drew started doing the simple stretches he could do on his own. He rolled his ankles and flexed his feet to stretch his calves, but when it came to the more difficult ones, Adam asked me to help.

I knelt in front of Drew, holding his legs for him as she leaned forward to stretch his hips. I could see how doing this on the floor would have been much easier but getting Drew off the ground would have been a logistical nightmare. And God knows he wouldn't want that on video. So I helped him.

"That's it, Madii. You should encourage him the entire time he's doing these exercises too. It will help him push himself

harder to improve faster.” Adam coached from over my shoulder, but I felt stuck inside my head. I didn’t have any encouragement to give him.

Until I thought of the first time, I went rock climbing with Drew. We were at a climbing gym, and I had never done anything like that. He had talked me through every step of the climb, then helped me rappel safely to the ground again. Drawing inspiration, I started what I thought was great coaching.

“Okay, yeah, try to lean into the stretch a bit more. I got you.” I held his feet firmly, but as he leaned forward more, the chair started to move a bit, and he rolled away from me. I could have sworn I had locked the wheels, so instantly I felt embarrassed. Luckily, he didn’t fall from his seat or anything.

Emily took a few steps forward and locked the wheels, patting Drew on the shoulder. “I got it. No worries.” She smirked at me, her thick mauve lipstick clinging to her teeth. Inwardly I chuckled at how stupid she looked. She wouldn’t be smirking like that if she knew her lipstick had smudged on her crooked grin.

“Okay, well let’s just get you up and at it then. I’ll teach you an easy way to get down to the floor and back up later, after our workout.” Adam pushed into the circle and offered Drew a hand.

I’d seen him stand up and walk about three steps, but nothing farther. So, it was still a shock when he stood under his own power using Adam’s hand for balance. It warmed my heart to know he was back. I thought of all the adventures we’d been on, the mountains we’d climbed, the trails we’d hiked. We had a plan to hike the Appalachian Trail from Georgia where it started all the way to Maine where it ended. It would take us around six months, so it meant we’d have to really rely on my photography of the scenery and such to sell and support us financially. But that had been our dream.

Now my dream was just to wake up not feeling the pangs of guilt that made my stomach want to empty itself. I’d felt so sick at times I thought I was pregnant, but pregnancy tests had

proven that wasn't the case. It was just nerves and the lack of eating.

"Good, now place your hands here." Adam patted the bars.

I stood and strolled over closer, my hand hovering over my mouth. Drew positioned himself next to the bars and gripped them. I watched as he walked back and forth, from one end of the bars to the other. His hands slid along the shining metal. Emily's camera man followed along, recording video of Drew walking, each struggling step.

"Now, you're going to stand really still while I lower the bars." Adam gestured at me. "Madii, stand behind him for support as I lower these."

I followed his orders, standing behind Drew with my arms around his waist. He patted my arm and smiled over his shoulder. He was all grins, and I could imagine why. It must have felt amazing to be back on his feet again. The bars slowly lowered and all I could think was how incredible it would feel to stand on top of Pikes Peak with my arms around him like this.

"You just keep working hard and imagine the mountains you'll climb again!" I squeezed a little, smiling and pressing my forehead to the back of his shoulder.

"Nah, I'm done with those risk-seeking days." The bars stopped in a lower position, and I felt confused.

Drew had been just as much of an adrenaline junkie as I was. Even more so at times. So, I was baffled why he'd just give up our dreams.

"What do you mean?" I asked, backing away. Drew braced himself on the bars as Adam walked up.

"Now, each long stride you take, do a deep knee bend. Use the bars for support. This is really a whole-body strength exercise. You're testing your core here, your leg muscles, and putting those arms to work when the legs feel tired. Give it a try." Adam gestured for Drew to start walking and the camera man zoomed in on him as he took his first step. Drew didn't answer me, so I asked again.

“What do you mean, you’ve just given up our plans?” I took tiny steps next to him as he went. I didn’t understand what he was saying.

“Yeah, I mean. I almost died, Madii. So, we’ll just settle down and get a good job. You know, have a family.” Drew took another step, grimacing as his knee almost buckled.

“Arms, arms!” Adam coached, and I saw the concentration on Drew’s face as he forced himself to stand up. Drew slowly rose and stood, taking a few deep breaths.

“Drew, we have plans to hike the Appalachian Trail. We’re going to climb Everest, swim the Barrier Reef. What about our future?” My heart sank at his expression, and it unnerved me that the cameras were zeroing in on my face now. I must have seemed harsh, or maybe it was the drama effect. They wanted to watch me unravel. I didn’t care. I felt offended he didn’t even talk to me about this. He just announced it to me while we were doing therapy, while the news cameras were in my face.

“Yeah, well when you almost die, you change.” Drew took another step, focusing his eyes on where his foot was going. As his knee bent and his torso lowered, he faltered, landing on that knee. “Fuck!”

“Oh, God.” I backed away, letting Adam come in and swoop behind the bars to get Drew back to standing.

“Arms, okay? You use your arms when your legs feel weak.” Adam stood there for a moment with his arms wrapped around Drew. “Madii, the chair.”

I scurried over to the wheelchair and tried pushing it, only to be rudely reminded it was still locked. After unlocking the brakes, I got it positioned behind Adam in between the bars, and locked the wheels again.

“I’m sorry, Drew. I just...” I glanced at the cameras; the boom mic was right in my face. Emily Gutierrez was grinning with a nefarious hint in the way her lips curled to one side. “Maybe now isn’t the time.”

“Now is definitely not the time.” Adam let Drew go and ducked under the bars as Drew sat down in the chair. “I think you should go have a walk and cool off for a bit. We discussed having only positive energy around when Drew is doing his therapy because it helps him recover faster.”

I nodded, and looked to Drew, who didn't make eye contact with me. How could he just give up everything he loved, just like that? It didn't make sense. Alice and Henry had never been huge fans of his risky behavior, but these days even the most dangerous adventure seeking was safe. I wondered if they had tried to talk him out of it. Regardless, it was clear to me that he wasn't going to change his mind easily, and I wasn't even sure if I fit into his future anyway.

The only thing that interaction did was make me want to call Gavin. I had run to him for comfort for everything from a papercut to a horrible client, and even for difficult things with my mother or Violet for months now. But right now, my safe space was missing. I could reach for him, but he wouldn't be there. I had walked out that night and let him believe I was choosing Drew.

I hadn't done that purposely, but now, weeks later, he likely assumed I had made my choice. Tears burned in my eyes, and another glance at the camera revealed it focused on my face.

“Drew?” I asked, hoping he would help me.

“We should talk later.” His voice was as cold and flat when directed at me as mine had been when directed at Emily in the beginning of our appointment.

“You mean when these cameras aren't invading our privacy?” I snapped, glaring at the news lady, who looked away. I could see the smirk on her face still. “I'll have your mother come pick you up.”

Before he could respond, I walked out. I was furious. I let my own self anger get the better of me and I unleashed it on him, but it felt good. I felt justified. And now I wanted to think clearly. Maybe a drive past the bay would do me good. Anything outside of a fucking hospital.

GAVIN

Jiles wasn't around for Nick's typical high-five greeting, so he smacked me on the shoulder as I walked into the locker room to stow my gym bag away. The last time I had been here I had nearly laid Jiles out flat on the canvas with my rage. I promised myself I wouldn't do that to Nick today. In fact, I felt a lot better after my conversation with Dad about Madison. He'd encouraged me to go get what I wanted, and I sort of had a plan for that.

"Man, this wedding planning shit is for the birds. How on earth did you do it all?" Nick wrapped the athletic tape around his wrists for extra support. We were planning to do a heavy lift today, and it was his routine after nearly breaking his wrist last summer.

"Eh, I just point and smile," I joked, though inside I felt that soul crushing weight that came with the reminder that I was supposed to be a few months into wedded bliss at this point.

I shoved my bag into the locker then took my jacket off and put it away too. Nick put his things away and we headed for the weight benches. Free weights had always been superior in my opinion, to the weight machines. I found I got more out of my workouts and felt more tired when I was done. And it was a good thing for us that I had that mentality, because the weight machines were always occupied, while the benches and free weights were rarely used.

"Here." I gestured to Nick, indicating he should lie down on the bench. I loaded it up with 250 lbs. as he lay down and did a few stretches, prepping for his first set.

“So, I was thinking that all this wedding shit, I’m going to need a best man. And Jiles has been through this stuff, but it’s been a while. Maybe you want to be my best man?” Nick clapped his hands, adding some powder to them from the small bottle on the floor beneath the bench, they gripped the bar.

Be his best man? Of course, I wanted to do it. Nick was a close friend and I wanted to support his move toward settling down and growing up. But I had no desire to go through the motions of wedding events feeling the way I felt.

“Have you set a date yet?” I placed my hands beneath the bar, between his grips, palms up. Always cautious as a spotter, I followed his every movement as he did ten reps of the bar easily. His max weight was 300 plus, so 250 was a cakewalk for him and he finished before responding.

Sitting up he said, “Yeah. So, We are thinking of a Christmas thing. I told her it’s stupid because no one has time around the holidays for *yet another* event, but she insists.” He slapped his thighs and powder created a cloud around him as he stood.

We swapped places, me sitting on the bench and powdering my palms so sweat didn’t make lifting dangerous. I realized as the power caked in my hands that I was sweating a lot—nerves because of the conversation I supposed. I didn’t let Nick see, quickly rubbing my hands together to let the powder crumble and fall to the floor. Then I put more powder on them and lay down for my own round of reps.

Nick grabbed the bar to spot me, and I took my position. The lifting went just as smoothly for me, despite me being a little lower on my max weight. When I sat up, Nick shrugged and cocked his head sideways. “So, what do you think?”

“Yeah, man. I’ll be your best man. Guess that means I have to walk some hot woman down the aisle?” I joked again, trying to hide my discomfort with the fact that the next time I had a woman on my arm it would likely be a stranger who would hit on me. That didn’t sit well in my gut.

“Nah, it will be her sister. Her name is Penny, and she’s going to be about seven months pregnant. So, no hot chicks. In fact,

all of the women in the bridal party are married, so no hope for you to score.” Nick winked at me and nudged me off the bench. I stood and circled around, taking my place to spot him again. That was a relief. At least I didn’t have to think about a woman trying to get into my bed or being distracted by any of that nonsense during planning stages.

“Ah, good.” When Nick was ready, I spotted him, noticing he struggled on the last two reps. “You’re getting weak old man.”

“Nah, I just hurt my shoulder. I think from riding my bike to work so much.” Nick sat up and raised and lowered his shoulder in a circular motion a few times. “She’s going to make me sell it after we’re married. Just wait and see. Women like men with a motorcycle until they are married. Then it poses the risk of other women seeing me as a bad boy and being attracted.”

It sounded to me like Nick had been speaking to Jiles about wedded life. Madison would never make me do that. Then again, I’d never had a motorcycle anyway, so that wouldn’t be a problem for me. Just thinking of Madii made me scowl. The only thing worse than bridesmaids hitting on you during wedding festivities was going to a wedding alone.

I lay down on the bench to take my turn, but I didn’t have it in me to grip the bar. Nick stared down at me, sweat beading on his forehead. “What’s up, man?”

“Fuck, dude. This wedding stuff is just overwhelming. You know? Like you’re happy and running toward your future, and I’m over here burying another lover in the cemetery of my heart or something.” I laced my fingers together behind my head and stared at the ceiling.

Nick started laughing at me, the sort of laugh that happens when someone thinks you’re ridiculous. He laughed so hard other people in the gym started staring at us and he was doubled over, covering his mouth with a hand. I sat up and scowled at him, and before long I was laughing too.

“Cemetery of your heart?” he blurted out. “What the fuck is that shit? Did you go back to college and join the English fairies in poetry class?”

“Shut the fuck up,” I told him, chuckling still.

He had laughed so hard he began crying and wiped his eyes. “That was hilarious.”

I scooted over on the bench, and he sat down next to me. We sat there for a moment enjoying the joke, but I sighed. All the laughing in the world didn’t erase how I felt deep down.

“So, you don’t have a plus one, no big deal. You know at the actual event there will be dozens of women.” Nick leaned his shoulder into mine, jostling me.

“Yeah, well I tried that with Jiles last week. Or was it the week before?” I thought for a second and shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. Anyway, we went to a bar, and I had all the ladies hitting on me. But none of them are my Madii. I can’t just go to your wedding and pick up a new woman. I’m not ready for that.”

Honestly, I didn’t know if I’d ever be ready for that.

“So did you tell her what I told you to tell her?” Nick’s tone changed. I knew better than to talk to him about such things but here I was venting again. It was either talk about what I was feeling or end up punching someone’s lights out the way I almost had done to Jiles.

“No, Nick. I didn’t, and I’m not going to. Madison is not going to respond to me bossing her around.” I stared down at my powder-caked hands and sighed again. “I am going to ask her to come to dinner with me for her birthday. It’s coming up.”

“And you think she’s actually going to come? Have you even spoken with her?” Nick stood and picked up a 30-pound dumbbell. He did arm curls as we talked.

“No, I haven’t, but I did talk to her sister. When I did that, I realized that Madison is really selfless. It is a strength in a relationship because it means she’s really going to think of me and love me. But it’s a weakness because it makes her feel obligated to people too.”

Nick nodded like he was following along, and switched the weight to the other hand to continue his reps.

“So, I want to make her feel obligated to me. I’m going to tell Violet I want my ring back, which will make Madii feel like she needs to come to dinner to return it, to keep me happy.” It wasn’t a plan I was proud of, because I didn’t like to think of myself as someone who would manipulate another human like this, but I didn’t know what else to do.

“Well, I guess if you want to risk her feeling used...” Nick’s words stung. Of all people he would be the one to make a comment like that. He might not have used women or manipulated them, but he didn’t treat them the way they deserved either. I just couldn’t push away the shame I felt anyway.

Dad would be frustrated with me for even thinking that plan up, and Mom—well, she had words to say to me no matter what I did so it didn’t matter. I sat with my head hanging, trying to think of another way to convince Madison I had to see her. I knew if we just connected somehow, that she would come back to me.

“Why not just ask her?” Nick dropped the dumbbell and drew the back of his arm across his forehead. I looked up at him and shook my head.

“No, really, man. Just ask her. I mean, Jiles is always telling you that you need to communicate well. So do it. Tell her you’re a fucking idiot, that you messed up, and you want another chance. Tell her you love her. Let her choose. At least you’ll know the answer and be able to move on and heal or get back with her. Right?”

Nick was right. The only thing I could do was be honest and let her know my heart. I should never have let my anger about the situation affect the way I made my decisions or treated her. None of this would have happened had I just been patient. I stood to my feet and headed to the locker room.

“Where are you going?” Nick called, but I was determined to follow through with my plan.

In the locker room, I opened my locker and pulled out my phone, opening the web browser. I looked up the closest flower shop and saw they were open, so I dialed the number.

“Flowers Unlimited.” The woman’s voice was cheery, a stark contrast to how I felt.

“Yeah, do you guys deliver?” I sat on the small wooden bench that stretched along the front of the lockers and bounced my leg.

“Yes, sir. We deliver anywhere in the city, and to the northeastern suburbs.” I heard some typing in the background. “What can I do for you?”

“I need something that says, ‘I love you and I want you back.’ And I need it like yesterday.” I had to trust the florist to decide because I had no clue. I’d sent my mother some orange lilies once and she never let me live it down. Apparently, lilies meant you wanted someone dead, and orange meant hatred—at least in her world.

“Sure, I have some pink roses in a lovely arrangement of greenery with a card. It comes with a teddy bear and chocolates.”

“Sounds perfect.” I reached into my gym bag and pulled out my wallet so I could pay for the delivery. “How soon can you deliver? And can you put a message on a card? How many times a week can I order?”

I had a new plan. I was going to lavish gifts on her until she called me. She had to know I still loved her. There was no denying that. I couldn’t just turn that off like a switch. When I saw her at the hospital, I always avoided her, so she didn’t see the pain in my eyes when I looked at her, or the rage on my face when I saw Drew. Lately, I’d just avoided anything to do with areas I knew Drew would have to be.

“Sir, that will be \$89.50, and I can put any message on the card you want.” I heard more clicking in the background like typing on a keyboard.

Dad was right. I had to go after what I wanted and even though I didn’t know if this was the best way, I knew it was my last shot. I would give every single ounce of love and affection I could to Madison, even from a distance, until it killed me.

MAD II

“All I’m saying is that you’ve changed.” Drew tossed the remote onto his parents’ coffee table after shutting the movie off. We had been trying to watch one of the latest superhero movies when a scene in the film depicted someone jumping from an airplane. I made the mistake of suggesting that we go skydiving as soon as Drew felt better.

Unfortunately, ever since the therapy appointment where we got into a bickering match because I told him he could get back to his regular life soon, we had done nothing but argue. This argument was just a continuation of the same bickering match we’d had for weeks.

“I’ve changed?” I scowled at him. I didn’t believe that I had changed at all, other than being a little more independent because I had been forced to live alone for almost two full years. Besides that, I was the same person I had always been. I loved adventure; I loved the outdoors. And I loved the thrill of the rush of adrenaline when I took a huge risk. Drew used to love these things too.

“Yes, you’ve changed. You’ve changed a lot.” Drew turned to face me, pulling his knee up on the couch as he faced me. “I remember a time when you couldn’t ever even sleep alone.”

“It’s kind of hard to have those insecurities and fears when you don’t have anyone living with you. I got over it.” My head dropped. He was right about that, but that type of change was a good change, wasn’t it? It meant I was growing as a human being. Didn’t it? And why would he be upset with me for

growing and becoming more independent? “If you ask me, it’s you who has changed.”

He scoffed, shaking his head. I shouldn’t have said that. Of course, he had changed. He had been through a near-death experience and survived it. Every person alive who has had something like that happen has changed in some way—some for the better, some not so much. I had tried hard to respect that.

Part of me was beginning to wonder if Alice had gone ahead and told Drew about Gavin and my other relationship. But I knew Drew. If he knew about Gavin, he would have grilled me about it by now. Still, the very thought of Gavin in that moment—or Alice for that matter—set my heart racing. I had to tell Drew.

For the last two weeks my home had been filled with fresh flowers, chocolates, teddy bears, and cards from Gavin every single day. He had to have spent \$1000 or more on all those gifts. He hadn’t called me once, and I hadn’t reached out to him either. I didn’t know what to say. The way we had left things open-ended like that, I thought it was over.

But now sitting here arguing with Drew, and the way we had done nothing but argue for weeks? I knew that I was happier with Gavin. Lexi’s advice to me had always been to be honest with everyone involved about what I was feeling. And Violet had hounded me week after week to just confess so that everyone could be open and honest about what was actually happening.

“Of course, I’ve changed. I almost died at the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico. I don’t want to take risks like that anymore. Is that too much to ask?” Drew’s voice suddenly shifted from the enraged jerk he had been to a softer tone. He almost sounded hurt, as if I had insulted his ego or something.

I instantly felt gutted. Without thinking I reached my hand to his. My compassionate heart hated that he was hurting, for any reason. Even if I would be happier with Gavin, and I knew that I was going to leave Drew, I was still human. I still had a heart. And even now, with the gesture of love that Gavin was

showing me, encouraging me that he was still there, still wanting me, I knew in my heart I had to make sure Drew was okay.

“Hey, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be hurtful.” I scooted closer, turning to face him too. We’d had several tender moments like this since he woke up. I had a hard time trying to imagine what it was like to wake up and two years of your life were just gone, but I knew it couldn’t have been easy for him.

“Madii, do you still love me?”

As he said the words, his eyes stayed locked on our twined fingers. My heart stopped beating for a full thirty seconds as I tried to formulate the words. With him going soft on me, I knew it wasn’t the best time to tell him about Gavin, but how could I tell him I did love him, but not in the same way? I licked my lips about to respond when he continued.

“Because... I feel really disconnected from you and I’d like to fix that.” His thumb traced over the tip of my fingernail, back and forth. “And I’d like to make love to you, the way we used to.”

“No... we can’t...” I protested as he scooted closer, resting his other hand on my inner thigh.

“It’s okay. My parents aren’t home, and they won’t be home for hours yet. We have this entire place to ourselves. We won’t be interrupted. Please, babe, I want to feel close to you. I haven’t meant to push you away by my moodiness or argue with you. We will find a new life that suits both of us. You know? It will give you the adventure you crave, and the safety I need.”

Drew leaned in as if he were going to kiss me, his hand sliding up my thigh dangerously close. I pulled away then stood. I had to move, to get away. I began pacing, covering my mouth with my hand as tears formed in my eyes. I couldn’t even look at him. When I stopped in front of the fireplace staring into the large mirror hung above the mantle, I saw him approaching. He was walking slowly, now with a cane for support. He wrapped his arms around my waist and kissed the top of my shoulder.

“I’m sorry if I’m pushy, but I need you.” He kissed my shoulder again, and I ducked out of his embrace. I couldn’t do it anymore. I had to tell him.

“I’m in love with someone else.”

The minute the words came out, the room changed. I took a few steps away from him, facing away, and dropped my head, waiting for his reaction. It was silent for a moment, as Drew let the words sink in.

“You’re what?” he asked, but I could tell by the tone of his voice that he didn’t need me to repeat it. He was hurt; I knew he would be.

“It happened so fast, Drew.” I spun around to see the rage painted on his face. “You were gone. We all thought you were dying. He was just a friend, and he was helping me understand your condition better. I had been sitting by your side day after day for months, and I was tired.”

“And this guy just comes along and sweeps you off your feet, right away from my hospital bed? Was that a fucking lie? You didn’t really sit there waiting for me? You just ran off with someone else the first chance you got?” I saw the muscles in his cheek protrude and knew he had clenched his jaw.

“It wasn’t like that, Drew. I really did sit and wait for you. But it had been like 16 months or something. The doctors were giving me no hope.” Tears streamed down my face; my hands shook. This was destroying him, just like I knew it would. But what he was asking me, to have sex with him, was never going to happen. My heart belonged to Gavin now.

“Get out.” He pointed at the front door.

“What? Drew, we need to talk about this.” Frantic, I walked closer to him and he turned his head away.

“Get out. Now.”

Distraught, I picked up my jacket, purse, and keys and left. My hands trembled as I started my car. Tears almost blinded me, and it wasn’t safe to drive, but I did it anyway. My brain went on autopilot, and I drove straight to Lexi’s house. I didn’t even

know if she would be home, but I was a wreck and I needed a friend. The minute she opened the door she knew.

“Oh, fuck. I’ll get the ice cream.” Lexi let me in and hugged me for a moment. When I was a bit calmer, we settled on her couch with a half-gallon of Rocky Road and two spoons. Lexi had been my best friend for long enough that she knew how to handle my meltdowns, and that was comforting in this moment.

I was sobbing so hard tears mingled with my ice cream as I ate, giving it a salty-sweet flavor. I tried telling Lexi what happened, but every time I went to speak, I cried harder. This was the last thing I had wanted, to hurt Drew this badly. Alice had assured me he would be fine, but Alice hadn’t been there to smooth things over when I told him. And even though Gavin had been sending me flowers and candies, I knew I couldn’t take this particular pain to him. He didn’t deserve that.

“Okay, so now that you’ve eaten almost a half of a gallon of ice cream, can you tell me what happened?” Lexi pried the spoon out of my hand and replaced it with a tissue.

“I told him about Gavin, and he freaked. He kicked me out. He’s hurting so badly, and this is all my fault.” I blew my nose loudly, folding the tissue over and blowing it again for good measure.

“Babe, this isn’t your fault. Okay? Life happens. You had no idea Drew was going to wake up. If he had woken up two hours later, you’d be happily married right now and then what? You’d divorce Gavin just to make Drew happier? Hell no. I guarantee that Alice and Henry would have just told him, and he’d be over it.” Lexi took my soiled tissue and gave me a few clean ones, so I wiped my face.

“Why do I feel awful then?”

“You feel awful because you care. And probably because you never truly mourned him.” Lexi ate a bit of the melting ice cream and sighed. “That’s a big deal, you know.”

“Mourn who? He’s not dead.” My eyes hurt from drying them. My nose felt chapped and sore. I didn’t want to mourn anyone. I wanted to be happy.

“Someone doesn’t have to die for you to mourn. Grieving things that are taken from you, relationships, or jobs, or even pets, it comes in a lot of forms. You just never let yourself do that because you refused to believe he was gone. And don’t get me wrong, that’s an amazing thing, because you were the only one who truly believed that, and he is here now. But you have to let go. You will destroy Gavin if you don’t.”

Lexi’s words rang true in my heart. The way Gavin and I had made love was amazing, but immediately after that, the hurt I’d seen in his eyes the last time I looked into them was devastating. I was destroying him because I hadn’t moved on. More tears came, burning my eyes and streaking down my face. I collapsed onto Lexi’s lap, and she set the ice cream aside to hold me.

For whatever reason, my heart was so fucked up I couldn’t let go. I didn’t know how. It was like fate itself was tearing out the bits of Drew that didn’t belong in my heart. One by one the memories came to mind and washed out with my tears. I cried for a long time—I couldn’t tell you how long; I never looked at my phone. And when I was done, my eyes were so heavy, I was falling asleep.

Lexi put a pillow under my head and covered me with a throw like a little child after a severe tantrum. I drifted off to sleep on her couch. I dreamt of Gavin taking me to a park and proposing. Then I dreamt of Drew.

We were beneath the water, diving off the coast just like the day of his accident. We watched the schools of colorful fish swim by, and the boats overhead. We were with a group of people, but suddenly the people were gone. It was just Drew and me. In the dream I felt afraid, like there were sharks or other sea creatures there ready to attack us, but Drew seemed happy enough.

He turned his back to me, and I panicked, swimming toward him. I had to save him. I had to get to him before it was too

late. My heart raced, and the harder I kicked the more frantic I became because it seemed like I couldn't move.

But when I got to him and took him by the shoulders to turn him around, his eyes were open, and he was smiling. I looked into his eyes and felt calmer. Drew was communicating something with me, but I couldn't tell what. All I knew was that I was not afraid anymore. Then I thought of Gavin and thought how wonderful it would be to surface because I knew he'd be in the boat and I wanted to tell him about all the amazing fish I'd seen. And when I looked back at Drew, he was smiling. He nodded at me, and then I woke up.

I sat up, heart racing, and found a note telling me to be at our favorite club at 7 p.m. A quick glance at my phone told me I was already 20 minutes late.

GAVIN

The music in the club was so loud Nick and Jiles had to shout over it to have a conversation. I had been feeling a bit better, despite Madison's lack of acknowledgement of my gifts. The night was an impromptu bachelor party for Nick because the real party would have had strippers and his fiancé wasn't very happy about that.

At least a dozen of Nick's friends had come for the bash, and a night full of dancing, drinking, and dames ensued. Most of the guys had a woman or two hanging from their arms all night. I had entertained the girlfriend of one of the groomsmen for a short time while he hit the dance floor, but outside that, I'd avoided the ladies. Several of them were beautiful, but my heart was in a different place.

The turmoil and anger that had plagued me for weeks had been replaced by a calmness lately. Maybe it was because I was actively doing something to reach out to Madison, or maybe it was because my heart had finally decided to let go. Either way, I was feeling good enough to hang out with these guys. They even got me on the floor to do a few line dances with them, which I was far too old to do, but I had a good time.

I had just ordered a third drink when my phone started vibrating in my pocket. I slid the \$20 bill across the bar to the bartender and reached for my phone to see who it was. I wasn't on call, but I never ignored my phone, just in case. To my utter surprise, I saw Madii's face on my screen, her caller ID lit up. I swiped right to answer but I missed her, and the call was dead.

Staring at my phone for a few minutes, I wondered if I should call her back, or if I should wait and see if she called me. Regardless, it was far too loud inside the club to actually take a call, so I pocketed my phone and waited for my drink. The bartender brought me my glass of whiskey, and I weaved back through the crowd to my spot along the wall, past a raucous group of men dancing in a circle around a scantily clad woman.

As I sat down, sipping my drink, I began to wonder why Madii would call me so late at night—nearly midnight—and what she wanted. The fact that she had even called me was encouraging, given the silence between us for weeks. So I felt a little better because of that, but something in my gut told me she needed me. The longer I sat there, the more restless I became. I tried to spot Nick and Jiles to let them know I was going to step outside, but I couldn't see them anywhere.

The dance floor was a mass of gyrating bodies in dark clothing shrouded in a mist of fog, with lights flashing overhead. I saw a glimpse of one of the men in the wedding party but did not see Nick or Jiles with him. Even he disappeared into the crowd after just a glimpse. I took a long swig of my whiskey, avoiding eye contact with a woman to my right who had been eyeing me all night. Thinking of Madison made me even more conscious of the fact that other women took interest in me.

My phone rang again, and again it was Madison. This time I was able to swipe to answer quickly enough to get the line to connect, but the music was so loud, I'm sure all she heard was the background noise and not my shouting. I heard nothing at all, and when I looked at the phone to see if we were still connected, the screen was black. If she was calling me more than once, this late, after a separation, she needed something.

Shoulders tense with worry, I pushed through the crowd toward the door. The night air was crisp, sending a chill down my spine. Summer was giving way to Fall, and I had not dressed appropriately. Shivering, I dialed Madison's number, but she didn't pick up, which only proved to deepen my concern. I paced the sidewalk, and about the time I was going

to give up and drive home, my phone rang again. I answered immediately.

“Madii, what’s wrong? Are you okay?” She couldn’t answer me fast enough.

“I’m fiiine,” she said, her words slurred. “Gavin, I need to talk to you...”

Just those simple sentences and I knew she was wasted. I didn’t even have to see her or smell her breath. I’d never seen her drunk—at least not “drunk dial” drunk—and I didn’t know if this was a cry for help, or if she really wanted me. I tried to be patient, but after freaking out that she was hurt and needing me, I was irritated.

“Are you drunk?” I ran a hand through my hair and stopped under a streetlight to talk to her.

“Yes... yes, I am. And my heart is broken. And can you come over?” She sniffled, and I could tell she’d been crying. Then she hiccupped, followed by a moan of complaint. There was another voice, some rustling and then Lexi came on the line.

“Sorry, Gavin. I will make her go to bed now. I didn’t mean for her to ruin your plans or anything.” Lexi’s apology tempered my frustration and disappointment, but only enough for me to act maturely toward her, not to feel any consolation after being drunk dialed by the woman who was supposed to be my wife.

“It’s okay. Do you know if she wanted something in particular?”

“Uh, well things here have changed a lot. That’s all I can say, because Madii really needs to tell you the rest herself. Unfortunately, we went to a club tonight to blow off steam and she got wasted—as you can tell. So, what I suggest is waiting a few days for her to get over this emotional hump, then you two need to talk.” I heard Lexi scold Madison in the background, telling her not to drink anymore.

The breeze blew, making me shiver, and I rolled my eyes at the idea of going back into the club to join the party. “Changed

how?" I rubbed my arm hoping friction might produce warmth.

"I can't really get into details, okay? Just call her in a few days. I gotta go; she's going to puke." Lexi hung up, and I stood there wondering what the hell just happened. And what had changed?

Pocketing my phone, I felt my car keys and pulled them out. My night was ruined. I didn't want to hear another note of a song or drink another drink. I wanted my bed. I wanted Madison *in* my bed, but not like this. She was acting so immature and irresponsible. Or maybe she was just hurting that bad and I hadn't taken time to notice, but how could I notice when she wasn't even talking to me?

Sinking behind the wheel of my car, I let my shoulders release their tension. At least she was thinking of me, so that was a good thing. I shut the door and pulled out my phone, shooting Nick and Jiles a text in our group chat that I was headed home. They would understand if they saw it, but something told me they were having too much fun to even notice I wasn't there anymore.

* * *

At home I kicked off my shoes by the front door and headed to my kitchen for a drink, selecting a bottle of bourbon instead of a beer like normal. Then I walked down the hall to my bedroom, peeling off my clothes as I went. I didn't even bother getting a glass to drink out of. I'd just take the cap off and drown myself.

The bedroom was dark, but the TV screen illuminated everything I needed to see the second I turned it on. I tossed my dirty jeans, t-shirt, and socks into the hamper, then turned down the bed. There was a late-night run of some old western, so I settled in with my bottle and my remote and tried to focus on the television but all I could think about was Madison—the way she smiled, the way her hair smelled. The fact that she

had been so distant, frustrating, and emotionally unavailable to me for weeks.

I took a swig of the alcohol and heard my phone vibrating. The noise was coming from the laundry hamper, where my phone was in the pocket of my dirty jeans. I looked in that direction for a few minutes until the vibration stopped. The alcohol of the night was making me sleepy; I didn't have energy to move anymore.

When the vibration stopped, I focused back on the western. The cowboys were having a shootout, so it captured my attention for a while. The whiskey went down smoother with every sip, and sips turned to gulps until my eyes were heavy and the bottle was almost empty. The western concluded, and the late show came on, but still I was not sleeping.

After taking the final swig, I decided to lie down. I knew I'd toss and turn for a while, likely having bad dreams where Madison left me for him. But I was exhausted. As I drifted off to sleep, I thought I heard my phone vibrating again.

Or maybe it was the lawnmower in my dream...

MAD II

My head was pounding. The night of drinking and crying myself to sleep was catching up with me. Even almost 48-hours later I was still dehydrated, and my eyes were still sore from wiping them. I took the last few shots of the sweet family from Alabama, here in New Orleans on holiday, and checked to make sure they were decent shots.

After saving everything on my SD card, I shook hands with the couple and said goodbye to the kids and headed to my car. Fall shots were always one of my favorites to take because the trees were always so colorful. This year, however, it appeared most of the trees wanted to switch from green, straight to brown and dead. It felt like my heart had died right along with them.

I hadn't gotten a gift from Gavin in the past two days, which was a disappointment. I blamed myself really. Lexi told me how I had drunk dialed him and what had happened. When I looked at my phone log, I saw that I had actually drunk dialed him several times. To my shame, he had not returned my calls. I was totally confused by that because of the gifts he had sent me. But maybe he was so turned off by my drunk desperation that he changed his mind entirely.

I wouldn't blame him if he did.

I waved goodbye to the family across the park one last time and climbed into my car, stowing my camera in the passenger seat. I had no plans the rest of the day, but I knew I couldn't hang out with Lexi every day just to cure my boredom. Violet had gone home for a few weeks, but with classes coming up

quickly for fall quarter, she was planning to visit, so I decided to go home and clean up a bit.

I had been so out of it that I hadn't taken care of my house again. Laundry and dishes were piled up. The floor needed to be swept, the bed made. And just like my house in disarray, I felt like my heart was the same. I needed some time to put my pieces in the proper place and just move on.

As I shifted into reverse, my phone rang, so I put my car back in park and pulled it out of my jacket pocket. It was Drew. We also hadn't spoken in a few days, and the last time I'd seen him he was very angry with me, so I wasn't sure what to expect, but I answered the call.

"Hello?"

"Madii, do you have a second?" He didn't sound angry, so that was a plus.

"Sure." My eyes scanned the horizon, watching kids on the playground laugh and play. I didn't know what else there was to be said between Drew and I, but if he felt it was important enough to have a conversation, I'd be patient enough to listen.

"I need you to come over. We need to talk about some things."

My heart dropped. I didn't want to go over to his parents' house again. I couldn't go through that heartache again. And I knew nothing between Drew, and I would ever be the same again. What more could be said or done to fix what had happened? I wasn't in love with him anymore. I didn't want him back. What I wanted would never happen. It was obvious I had destroyed both men I ever cared about.

"I don't know..."

"Please, Madii," he begged, "this is really important to me."

I could never say no to him. It was one of my weaknesses. So, I relented, promising to come over straight away, and hung up. The drive to his parent's house was difficult. Not only was traffic horrible, but I was a ball of nerves. I had no clue if I was walking into a shark tank to be devoured, or if he was going to get down on one knee and propose again. But I was tired, and I just wanted my emotions to be calm for a while.

When I pulled up in front of the house and saw Alice's SUV parked in the driveway, garage door open, revealing Henry's truck, I felt a lot better. If both of them were home, he would not pressure me into anything. Alice would have my back and be there to smooth out any disagreements, and if I needed to leave, I knew I could just walk out the door.

On the outside, everything looked normal. No one would ever know by just driving past the house the amount of chaos that had ensued for years. The lawn was manicured, the bushes trimmed. Alice even had planters with colorful flowers situated around the porch—more flowers like them growing in the flower beds.

I walked across the grass, dreading every step of the way of the conversation I had to have. My stomach felt like I'd swallowed rocks. When I pushed the doorbell, Alice appeared, smiling. She welcomed me in with a hug and an encouraging hand squeeze.

"He's here waiting for you in the living room."

I followed her lead, turning the corner into the living room and seeing Drew seated on the couch with his feet propped up. He instantly straightened, dropping his feet to the carpet and gesturing for me to sit next to him.

"I'll leave you two alone." Alice walked away, my only line of hope beneath this dark cloud, and felt my heart flip flop in my chest.

"Now, before you say anything, I need you to know I spoke to Mom. She explained everything." Drew still looked sad, but the anger in his eyes that was there the last time I saw him was no longer there. It had been replaced by deeper sadness and what looked like compassion.

"She did?" I swallowed hard, knotting my fingers together.

"She did." Drew held my hand, but respectfully kept his distance. "She told me what you did for me, how you waited. She told me about the doctor and how she told you to move on. She told me how your wedding day, you canceled everything to come be by my side."

“I was never trying to hurt you, you know? In fact, the opposite is true. I loved you so much, Drew. All I ever wanted to do was love you and take care of you. I wanted to make you the happiest man alive. And I’m really sorry that I failed; I tried so hard, but no matter what I did, no matter what I tried, my heart was torn. I could never be what you wanted me to be, not after falling in love with Gavin.”

I sobbed. I didn’t expect him to understand or to care, so I was surprised when he pulled me into his arms. He smoothed my hair down the back of my head and across my shoulders. The embrace he held me in was different than I’d ever felt from him. It was like he understood I wasn’t his anymore, that he had to touch me differently, comfort me differently.

“I know, Madii. I’m sorry for reacting the way I did. Mom was 100% right. I would never have wanted you to suffer the way you did. You did exactly what I would have wanted. I just didn’t realize that when I woke up.”

“I wasn’t trying to lead you on, ever.” I cried into his chest, soaking his shirt. He held me tighter. I heard Alice walk in; I knew it was her because I could see her shoes. When I looked up there was a box of tissues situated on the coffee table where one had not been before. Drew reached for one and handed it to me, so I dried my tender eyes and wiped my nose clean.

“I know you didn’t. I know you just wanted me to be okay. You have no idea how much that means to me. Really.” Drew used his thumb to brush away a stray tear on my cheek and I sat up to face him again. “You thought I was gone. I was, for all intents and purposes, dead. You had every right to move on, Madii. I’m sorry I reacted the way I did. You can imagine how hurt I was—am.”

It only made the tears worse to hear that, but I had to let them out. I had carried this weight for so long now. And hearing Drew say it was okay was like medicine to my soul. I didn’t want a nasty breakup with arguing and disputing over who got what items from the house. I just wanted to talk like rational adults and settle it, so I could move on. It wasn’t pleasant for anyone.

“So what do we do now?” I sniffled and wiped my face again. We had so much history together, it would feel too traumatic to just cut and run. But I wasn’t sure if he wanted to stay friends.

“Well for starters, you don’t have to cry anymore. I’m going to be okay. I have my life back, Madii. You’re the only one who never gave up hope of that. That alone shows me how loved I’ve been. And second, you are going to have to introduce me to this doctor. If I don’t approve of him, there is going to be a war for your heart, because you are the most amazing and wonderful woman I’ve ever known. And even if I had to jump out of a plane to prove it, I need you to know how much I love you.”

I shifted uncomfortably. I knew Drew loved me. I had known that for a long time. He had nothing to prove to me.

“You already know him. It’s Dr. Gavin Carpenter. He was the neurosurgeon who was on your case. You met him when you first woke up.”

Slowly, realization dawned across Drew’s face. He took a deep breath and looked down, pursed his lips then brought his gaze back up to meet mine. I could see how the trace of hope that had been in his eyes had disappeared and the sadness returned.

“I see.” He waited a second and then, like his mother always did, he patted my hand. “Well, I wish you all the happiness in the world.”

“I don’t really know what to say.” I shrugged and clenched a tissue in my hands.

“Just say we will still be friends, no matter what. That’s all I could hope for at this point.”

I wasn’t sure I could handle that, but I nodded. I also wasn’t sure if Gavin would even have me anymore. Things had been so strained, or nonexistent, for so long now, that all I could do was just go to him and try to make things right.

I had a slice of apple pie and chatted with Alice a bit before leaving, but the moment I left, I made a beeline for the hospital. I didn’t care if Gavin wanted to hear from me or not.

If I didn't face the situation head on, I was going to go crazy. Drew had been forthright enough to invite me in and give me closure. The least I could do was be straight with Gavin. No more of this playing around shit.

GAVIN

Even with three pairs of gloves on, I still washed my hands like I was scouring a frying pan after making eggs. Dr. Gary Rutger stood to my left scrubbing out too. We shared a recap of the surgery and how we felt things went. It was pretty routine, nothing to note, so we both felt the patient would be well on their way to recovery.

“You know it’s the marvel of modern medicine that we can do this tiny little surgery and help a patient not have seizures anymore.” Gary grabbed a towel and dried his hands before taking off his blue paper gown. He tossed the towel in the hamper and the gown in the bin before pulling off his mask and cap. “This kid doesn’t realize how lucky he was to have been born in this era.”

I chuckled. “Well, his luck changed since birth that’s for sure.” The patient, a boy of 15 years, had a surgery to help ease the effects of epilepsy. I’d performed it a dozen times at least, but this was Gary’s first time doing the surgery, and he seemed amazed by the techniques.

“Well, being born with epilepsy in the early 1900s resulted in a far different outcome than being born with it now. That’s all I’m saying.” He winked at me as he headed out the door.

I finished washing my hands and grabbed a towel to dry them. I had the same routine of disrobing from the surgical attire, but I left my cap on because I had another surgery soon. When I was leaving the washroom, I heard my name over the PA.

“Dr. Carpenter, you have a visitor at the nurses’ station, floor 5, sector B.”

Curious, I headed that direction. I had a few stops to make along the way. I checked in on a little girl, for whom I had removed a brain tumor only last week. Then I checked on a stroke patient we were monitoring in case he needed surgery. He was in his 70s and full of spit and vinegar, but I liked him. He reminded me of my mother somehow. Finally, I rounded the corner of the hall and headed toward the nurses’ station. I saw her before she saw me. Madison was standing with her back to me. She wore a long, dark navy trench coat, and her black hair fell in waves down her back. Part of me wanted to walk away, to hide from her. To hide from the inevitable confrontation that we would have. But part of me wanted to speak to her. After the drunk dialing a few nights ago, I was curious about what was going on.

I had stopped giving her gifts or sending her flowers. After no response in two weeks, I figured I was wasting my money and time. But my heart had settled a bit. I felt a little more at ease with the fact that perhaps we weren’t made for each other period, maybe she really was made for Drew. So I was surprised as anyone to see her standing there, waiting for me.

As I approached, she turned and took me in. Her eyes were red from crying and fresh tears streamed down her cheeks. She ran to me, colliding into my chest and wrapping her arms around my torso. I didn’t even have to think about it for a second. I held her, pushing her hair back and letting her cry into my scrubs, not caring about what sort of mess she made or how she’d look. She was there—in my arms. That was all that mattered.

“Hey now, shhh, what’s wrong?” I kissed the top of her head and breathed in the scent of her shampoo. The smell was so faint, I could barely detect it, or maybe I had just imagined it because I’d smelled her hair so many times, I had her memorized. Every line of her body, each curve. The way one side of her mouth lifted slightly more than the other when she smiled. The way she had a few silver strands of hair near her right temple, and the little almond shaped birthmark on her

back, just above her right hip. Everything about her was so intoxicating, so magnetic. I couldn't help but memorize her.

"I'm so sorry. I'm so very, very sorry," she sobbed, clenching my shirt. "Gavin, I fucked up so bad. Please say you still want me. Please say you love me."

"Oh, baby, I will always love you. You did not fuck up too bad. What's going on? What happened?"

One of the nurses at the station stared at us unabashedly, to which I replied with a glower, but she did not turn away, so I pulled Madison to the side. There was an empty room two doors down, so I led her there, closing us in and shutting the blinds so we'd have privacy. Guided her to the bed where she sat, then offered her a tissue from the box mounted on the wall.

"Now, take a few deep breaths and explain to me what happened." I crouched in front of her, waiting patiently for her to catch her breath. I could tell her tears had been pretty frequent for a long time. She had that puffy-eyed look that only happened when someone was mourning. I'd seen it a hundred times in my profession with parents who are grieving over a tragedy while their child lay in a bed after surgery or in a coma.

Madison shrugged and wiped her face, then said, "I told him. I told Drew about us. It was awful. He literally kicked me out of the house. All I tried to do was comfort him and help him recover. I was only trying to help him adjust. And—" Her hysterical sobs cut off her words, so I pushed a few tears off her cheeks and encouraged her to keep going. I could tell she was trying to compose herself, but it was difficult. Each time she tried to continue; her body shook with disrupted, choppy breaths.

"I'm listening." I was too. Intently tuned in to how things may have gone. I had played the long game, being patient and listening, waiting. Until Nick got under my skin. Then I had played the fool, thinking an ultimatum would solve our issues. But it hadn't; it had only made things worse. So, I tried again, the romance, the candies, the flowers. All for this moment.

“So, I left. Then I went to Lexi’s house, and she tried to help, but all that happened was we went to a club and I got wasted and then drunk dialed you.” She sniffed and blew her nose.

So that was what had happened. She had the worst day of her life and she had called me for comfort while being totally drunk. I was an asshole. I had ignored her and thought she was just being dramatic or something. I felt like a complete moron.

“God, I’m so sorry, Madii. I thought...”

“It’s okay. I was a wreck. You didn’t want to talk to me then anyway.” She waved her hand in the air. I could tell she was perking up a bit. “So, I went to talk to Drew just now.”

Anger rekindled in my stomach. I thought that bastard had broken her heart and she was coming to me for comfort. But she had gone back to visit him again? I wanted to walk out. I knew what was coming. She was there to tell me they made up and they’re back together and I was out. She was crying so hard because she was breaking it off with me.

She pulled a ring out of her pocket and turned it around in her hand, laying it on her palm. She extended it to me and sighed. “Here.”

I stood, my heart cold as ice. “Why are you doing this?” I couldn’t believe what was happening. I had tried so hard, done everything in my power, and she was walking away. “What did I do wrong?”

“No, Gavin. You don’t understand.”

Madison stood and grabbed my wrist, turning my hand up and placing the ring in my palm. She draped her arms around my neck and rose up on her tiptoes to place a soft kiss on my cheek.

“I love you. But this ring was taken from me in a very vulnerable moment of my life. So, if you want to give it back to me, I would like it to be done properly.” As she lowered back to flat feet, it dawned on me what she was saying.

“So...” I offered a confused expression. “I don’t understand.”

Her arms lingered around my neck, and I hooked one around her waist. The way she tilted her head up to meet my gaze, I could easily have devoured her lips, taken her there on that bed, but more than anything I wanted her heart.

“Alice talked to him and explained everything. Gavin, Drew tried to initiate sex with me.” I stiffened as she spoke, but she squeezed me and reassured me. “When he put his hand on my thigh, I was uncomfortable. When he leaned in to kiss me, I freaked out. I knew in that instant, that I was not in love with him anymore. I was in love with you. And I knew the only reason I was there taking care of him was because I felt obligated to do it.”

It was exactly like Violet said. Madison did things because she felt a duty or responsibility to do them. I would have been completely trash of a human being to use that sense of duty against her, to manipulate her. I felt comforted that I Nick had told me what a jerk I’d have been if I’d have done that to her.

“So, it’s over?” I asked, half expecting her to say she still needed to care for him in some way.

“It’s over, bud. It’s totally, 100% over. Though I would still like to remain friends with Drew and his family. But what I know now is, my heart belongs to you. There is no one else on this entire planet that could make me feel the way you make me feel. No one could love me like you. And my heart will beat no other name but yours from now on.”

Before she finished the last words, I captured her lips in mine. Pulling her tightly against my body, I quenched my thirst. I had waited long enough to hear her say those words, and they were as amazing as I thought they would be. She returned my kiss with the same eagerness and passion, her fingers locking into my hair with a firm grip.

My groin stirred to life, pulsing as her body melded into mine. I had never experienced a connection so deep with anyone before. Madison really was the woman for me. I wanted nothing more than to lay her on that bed and take her right there, but I had another surgery to perform. So, in spite of the desire throbbing in my pants, I pulled away.

“Fuck, I miss you,” I growled against her forehead before placing a kiss there.”

“Dinner tomorrow?” she whispered against my lips as I stole another kiss.

“Tonight, I can’t wait. My place at 7. I have a surgery to get to now.” She bit my neck, and I felt her hands searching up under the back of my shirt.

“Violet is at my house. The earliest I’d be able to get to your place is 9 tonight.”

Her heavy breathing was making it very difficult to pull away from her. And the growing bulge in my pants would make it embarrassing to leave this room.

“It takes 45 minutes to get across town...” I was thinking out loud as my hand slipped beneath her trench coat, resting on the side of her ribcage so my thumb could press into her nipple through her shirt.

“Then you come to my place...” She pulled my head back down to meet hers and we kissed again, this time more slowly, with more affection. “And we can connect.”

I didn’t want to leave her there, but I had to go. This moment reminded me of a time not too long ago when we were deep into foreplay, Madii naked on my couch, and I got called in to work. I smiled just thinking how amazing it would be to have her there when I got home. Those moments every man longs for—someone to come home to.

“Go be the hero now. Save someone’s life.” She winked at me and stepped back. Her lipstick was smudged, and her hair was a wreck, but she was beautiful. And she was mine.

As I turned to go, she smacked my ass like one of the guys would have. I glanced over my shoulder at her smirk, then stood by the door for a second with my hand on the knob, hoping my dick would stop throbbing and deflate.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, walking up behind me. She wrapped her arms around my waist and hugged me from behind, and I slid her hand down lower until it rested on my dick. “Ah, I see.”

She laughed and backed up.

“Look what you did to me?” I grinned as I turned around and she looked at the tentpole in my trousers.

“Um, let me help. Close your eyes and think ‘naked fat lady on a hot summer day.’ ”

Just the thought of it made me cringe. I laughed and pulled her in for another kiss. “I love you, Madii. I’ll see you tonight.”

I walked out of that room feeling like a king again. Everything in the world was right now.

MADII

“**A**nd he’s coming over now then?” Violet’s saucer eyes stared back at me with intrigue. After explaining what had happened with Drew, she demanded to know about Gavin and if I’d worked things out. She sat on the edge of the kitchen chair staring at me as I put a few more beers in the fridge for my evening with Gavin.

She was set to leave soon, but as always, she was procrastinating. I chalked it up to her being a bit nosy, but maybe she really did care about me and wanted to ensure I was okay.

“Yes, he’ll be here soon. He wanted me to go to his house, but I told him you were here, so he’s coming here. It will give us more time together.” I shut the fridge but kept a beer out for myself and used the bottle opener that clung to my fridge to crack it open.

“God, Madii, that sounds like magic. It’s so romantic! I hope I have a love story like this.”

I chuckled at the absurdity of the notion that my love story was something anyone would desire. I had spent a year and a half of my life pining away over the man I was supposed to marry as he lay in a hospital bed. Then had the weirdest love triangle when he woke up and thought I’d lost both men. If I had it to do over again, I would definitely do it differently.

“Well, Gavin is romantic, but I wouldn’t agree with you that you should have a story like mine. Just stick to normal dating and no risk taking and you’ll be fine.”

Violet shared a toothy grin and stood. “I am going to head home now. Mom wants me to spend the last few nights with her before I head back to school on Saturday.”

I rose to give her a goodbye hug. I was proud of her for sticking to her guns and finishing school. It must have been difficult for her being away from family so much. I knew firsthand how hard it was being independent like that, and I hadn’t chosen it; it had been thrust upon me.

“Drive safe, okay?” I squeezed her and then backed off so she could pick up her things. She headed for the door and let herself out with a tiny wave. And I relaxed back into my seat at the table to wait for Gavin.

It was only a few minutes when I heard a knock on the door and went to answer. I bent over quickly and fluffed my hair, then stood and checked my reflection in the mirror hung on the wall there. When I opened it, I expected to see Gavin’s smile, but it was Violet.

“Forget something?” I stepped aside as she walked in.

“Yeah, my toothbrush!” She vanished down the hallway and I stood with the door open watching her. It was just like her to be forgetful like that. As she came back out of the bathroom, I felt a hand on my arm.

Startled, I jerked and turned abruptly to see Gavin standing there holding a dozen, long-stem, white roses. He smelled like honey and cigars, and the five o’clock shadow on his face drew me to him instantly.

“Hey,” I said, accepting a kiss as he leaned in.

“Hey...” His kiss deepened, intoxicating me and making me swoon.

“Hey! Get a room,” Violet chimed in, making gagging sounds.

I laughed and Gavin joined me. “Get a house, this one’s taken!” I told her as she passed by me into the hallway. It was what my parents used to say to us when we were grossed out by their public displays of affection.

She rolled her eyes at me and stopped in the hallway, turning back to say, “Gavin, you take good care of her. She’s my big sister, and I will hurt any man who hurts her. You know how the old song goes... God help the mister that comes between me and my sister.” She sang the tune of the lyrics and batted her eyelashes, and I followed up with the next line.

“Lord help the sister, who comes between me and my man!”

Gavin laughed at our banter. “I loved that movie when I was a kid. I watched it with my grandma Verona every Christmas.” He held me to his side. “No worries, Violet. I will take great care of her. And by the way, thank you so much for that chat we had over breakfast.”

I offered a confused expression to Gavin then Violet.

“No problem. What did I tell you? The way to Madii’s heart...” She winked and headed down the steps. Once she was in her car and headed away, I shut the door.

“What was that about?” I asked, tucking into his chest for a hug.

“Well, remember the night I slept over, and you woke up late for an appointment?”

I noticed how Gavin tactfully did not mention the fact that it was an appointment for Drew. “Uh, huh.”

“Well, I made all that breakfast, and Violet came home from after a run and was famished. She ate your breakfast and gave me some sisterly advice.”

After another kiss, I took his hand and led him deeper into the house, then pointed toward the couch. “Sit, I’ll get us some drinks.” He listened, settling in on the couch as I grabbed another few beers from the fridge and mine off the table. When I set them down on the coffee table in front of him, he reached for one and used his keychain bottle opener to pop the cap off.

“Listen, I—”

“Not another word,” he told me, taking hold of my wrist and pulling me onto his lap.

It felt awkward straddling him like that; it had been so long. But it felt comfortable, and familiar too, like finding your favorite pair of jeans you lost at one point, and they still fit.

“But—”

“No,” he said firmly. “The past is in the past, and right now the only thing we need to worry about is the future. So, if you have something to say about the future, have at it.” He took a swig of beer and waited; his eyes trained on my face. I wanted to apologize again, tell him how sorry I was for what had happened. I wanted to get some sort of absolution of my guilt, or a punishment. Though I felt like my life itself had been punishment enough.

“Nothing about the future?” His eyebrows rose in a question, but I shrugged. “Well, I know something about the future that I want to say.”

“You do?” I smiled and slurped my beer. The playful way he said the words made me curious what he was talking about. I half expected him to propose to me right then again, but part of me wanted that particular moment to be a wee bit more special.

“I do... I want to tell you how much I want to make love to you right now, and that today at the hospital my dick stayed hard for like 20 minutes because I wanted you so badly. I got some strange looks.”

I burst out laughing and leaned to the side, spilling my beer down his shirt. He gasped and straightened, almost tossing me off his lap. “Oh God, I’m so sorry.” I tried to get up but he wouldn’t let me. He pinned my hips to his lap and shook his head.

“No, just set the beer down, and we’ll fix this problem.”

“Okay?” I did as told, setting my beer on the table, and as I did he put his beer on the end table and then pulled his shirt off. Before I knew it his hands were working up my sides, tugging at my shirt too, so I raised my arms and let him remove it.

I could feel the bulge in his pants already and knew how badly he wanted me. He threw our shirts across the room, and his

hands cupped my breasts, squeezing gently before finding the hook and undoing it. I slipped out of it, and he tossed it aside too.

“Fuck, you’re gorgeous,” he whisper-growled, pushing my breasts together and smothering them in kisses, and soft nips with his teeth.

I smirked, getting an idea. He was entertained and a bit distracted, so he never saw me pick up his beer. As I slowly poured it over my breasts, he smiled and indulged himself. And when I stopped, he looked up at me.

“It’s only fair. I spilled it on you too...” He took my left nipple into his mouth and sucked it, then eyed the beer, so I poured more out slowly, letting him lick and suck the foamy liquid off of me. He seemed to enjoy it, and I could feel my pussy burning, aching to feel him fill me. The way he squeezed my breasts and sucked them was driving me wild.

I reached to set the beer down, and he rose up quickly, making me drop it and spill the rest, but I didn’t care. He turned both of us over, laying me out on the couch and hovering over me. I couldn’t get his pants undone fast enough, though his swollen dick made it a bit difficult to use the zipper. He helped me with that, holding himself back as I pulled at the waistband of his pants.

I made a fool of myself, and Gavin graciously stood and helped me further, undressing in front of me. I started pulling my yoga pants off, but he beat me to it, yanking them and tipping me backward. As he turned to get rid of the rest of our clothes, I took his member in hand, stroking him. There was no doubt he wanted me.

“You want to fuck me?” I asked, slowly stroking him, staring up at his face.

He brushed a hair out of my eyes. “No, I want to make love to you, but if you want fucked, we can do that first, then we can make love later.”

The way his voice got gravelly when he was aroused made my insides turn to jelly. The ache in my groin was worsening by

the second.

“Oh, well, we have all night.” I grinned and glanced at the bottles on the table. “Maybe I’ll want the bottle again.” I winked at him.

“Or maybe I can try something new for you.”

Gavin took hold of his dick and lowered it at the same time as he took hold of my hair and pulled my head forward. “Fucking you it is then,” he said, forcing his dick into my mouth.

I gladly began sucking him, stroking and letting him thrust between my lips. He offered a guttural grunt and bent slightly, squeezing a breast as I took him deeper into my throat. Now with both hands on his ass cheeks, I let him sink all the way until he stretched my throat open, forcing his dick harder into me. He slowed his thrusts, and I felt his balls, noticing how they drew up in preparation for release. He was so excited he was already going to cum.

Pushing away, I made him stop. “You said you wanted to try something new?” I batted my eyelashes at him.

“Yeah, lie down.” He gestured with one hand as he stroked his cock with the other. I lay down obediently, spreading my legs for his viewing pleasure. He dropped to his knees, and pushed my legs farther apart, diving in for dessert. He sucked and licked at my pussy, drinking my arousal in. Like a wolf with its prey, he devoured me, bringing me close to the brink, then backing off.

In a steady rhythm, he slid fingers into me, and began to work my pussy, feeling for my tender spots and stimulating them. I moaned, and gripped his hair, begging him to eat me. His fingers felt amazing, and I wanted so much more.

It was like he read my mind. He pushed another finger into me as he sucked my clit, then another.

“Oh, fuck, Gavin... oh fuck,” I panted, right on the edge. “Fuck I’m going to cum.”

Suddenly, my pussy felt so full, so tight. He pushed his entire fist into me, and it was all I could take. My body spasmed, convulsing and clenching around his fist. He pressed his hand

down on my hips, but it was no use trying to stop me from jerking off the couch. The orgasm was so strong I couldn't lay still. And I didn't think I'd ever made that much noise before."

When my body calmed, Gavin pulled his hand away from me and licked his fingers. He looked down at me as he rose, stroking himself again.

"Someone has been needing this for a while, huh?" he asked, smirking.

"Holy shit, what was that?"

"I'm not done, okay?"

Gavin took my hand and forced me to stand, then bent me over the back of the couch. I complied willingly, looking back at him and waiting for him to slide inside of me. As he did, his heat made me shudder. I wanted to cum again.

"Just a minute... don't get too worked up again yet," he told me, thrusting into me. He took my hand again and guided it to my pussy. "Here... you massage yourself."

I started to swirl my fingers over my clit in the excessive moisture he'd created, and he pulled out. Just when I wanted to whine, he pushed into my ass. The burning and stretching made me yelp at first, gritting my teeth as my body adjusted, but when he grabbed my hips and started slamming into me, my fingers took over. My body needed him—I needed him.

He fucked me so hard the couch moved across the carpet, and my body devolved into another orgasm. I convulsed, gripping the back of the couch with one hand as I massaged myself with the other. And when he began to cum, his loud grunts and slowed actions let me know he was enjoying his release too. His dick felt amazing sliding in and out of me; I didn't want it to end.

When he pulled out and helped me stand, I felt like my knees would buckle. He steadied me, then took my hand and guided me to the bathroom. We showered in silence, Gavin washing me and continuing our lovemaking for the next 30 minutes. And when he had recovered, he made love to me again, this time on the bed.

I cried, laying there in his arms. I finally felt like I was home again.

GAVIN

Madison walked slowly, hesitantly, testing each step she took before she trusted in it. I had blindfolded her eyes, and I guided her through the parking lot. Her bare skin beneath my palms felt cool. The water off of Lake Pontchartrain was chilly. The strapless dress she wore didn't offer much in the form of warmth, but it was gorgeous, just like her.

Her hair had been pinned into a French twist with a sprig of lavender decorating it, and she'd gone all out with her makeup. I'd never seen her so intoxicating. It made me wonder how incredible she would look on our wedding day—if she accepted the proposal tonight.

The restaurant was packed, but I had reserved the three-level deck that overlooked the water. There were over thirty tables outside, but I'd had them all removed, except for one. I could see as we approached that the staff had followed my orders perfectly. The expansive deck had been cleared, lights strung from the light posts, reminiscent of homes across the city at Christmas time.

Our lone table sat near the railing where we could watch the wildlife as we ate. Silver flatware and a vase of roses—offset from the center so I could look into her eyes while we dined—drew my eyes. There was even a bottle of Riesling chilling. At more than a grand for the bottle, the 1964 Von Shubert had better be as delicious as they claimed.

“Can I take this thing off yet?” she asked, reaching in front of herself as we walked.

“Yes, okay.” I untied the knot in the blindfold and took it down. Madison blinked her eyes as they adjusted and looked around. A smile slowly grew across her face as she took in the sight. “Do you like it?”

She nodded, covering her mouth for a moment. When her hand dropped, she said, “It’s so beautiful. And look, it’s a heron.” She pointed out at the water where a bird swooped down and flew along the surface, its reflection racing it to the shore.

“You’re beautiful.” With a kiss, I guided her to the table and held her chair out for her to sit. I could see the goosebumps on her arms. The breeze was a bit stiffer than either of us thought. “Are you cold?”

Before she even responded I was sliding out of my suit coat and draping it around her shoulders. She accepted it gratefully, pulling the lapels closer together in the front. A strand of her hair fell, framing her face in, but she didn’t bother to fix it, and I didn’t mind. She was perfect.

“I took the liberty of ordering for us already. They should bring our meal out shortly.” Sitting down, I unfolded my napkin and draped it across my knee. “I picked seafood lasagna for you. I hope that’s okay.”

Madison smiled appreciatively. “I will try anything once; it’s sort of how I operate.” She sighed contentedly. “Thank you for putting this all together for my birthday. This is really special, Gavin.” Her eyes passed across the water then she turned to me. “I love you.”

“Nothing is special enough for you, Madii. You’re the most amazing woman I’ve ever met.” Unlike the first time I proposed, when I was so nervous my hands were sweating, this time I felt calm. I already knew her answer, and I had planned the perfect delivery for the ring and the question.

The waiters came and delivered our food. It wasn’t as delicious as I hoped it would be, but we ate it anyway. The wine, however, was fantastic—worth every cent I paid for it. I nervously checked my phone to see what time it was. I had told the wait staff to bring the cake at exactly 8:15 p.m.

“Why go to all this trouble for my birthday?” Madison wiped her mouth with the corner of her napkin and took a sip of her wine. “Do I have this too look forward to every year?”

“I would do this for you every year for the next 50 in a row if you let me.” Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed the wait staff assembling on the patio farthest from us. No less than ten waiters or waitresses stood ready for my cue. I raised my arm and gestured for them to come, and Madison looked in that direction.

“What’s all this?” Her smile faded to surprise, and I noticed her bottom lip quiver a bit with emotion. She watched as the entourage drew closer, keeping her eyes fixed on the flickering flames atop the cake one of the waiters carried. The candles on top of it seemed like a bonfire, their flames extraordinarily tall.

While she was distracted, I slipped off my seat and knelt on one knee in front of her. I could see tears brimming in her eyes as her hand fluttered to cover her mouth. I couldn’t wait to put that ring on her finger and walk her down the aisle to be my wife. She looked back to find me, and when we made eye contact, the look on her face was priceless. The tears came spilling over her lashes and I started my prepared speech.

“Madison, we haven’t had the most conventional romance. You were engaged when we met, and professionally, I felt obligated to keep my distance. But we became friends, and through that, I fell in love with you. I’ve made some mistakes over the past few months, which I regret not handling things better. But somehow, even though I feel like I messed things up royally, here you are today, with me.”

The wait staff stood behind me, flaming cake in hand and began singing happy birthday. I paused while they finished and cheered. Then the waiter carrying the cake, set it on the table. Madison looked down at the candles and nestled between them was the ring—not her old ring, a new one.

“Madison Springer, I have never found another human being on this planet that I would want to spend the rest of my life with until I met you. Please tell me you feel the same way. Be

my wife?" I didn't have to wait long for her response; it came immediately.

She nodded and cried harder, covering her mouth with both hands, then diving into my arms. I held her as she shook with sobs and mouthed "thank you" to the waiters. They slipped away silently, but the sound of footsteps surrounded us anyway as one by one Madii's friends and family, and even my parents joined us.

She was still crying on my shoulder when another round of happy birthday rang out. When she pushed away to dry her eyes, she started laughing. Her father carried a bouquet of flowers, Lexi had a small gift. Even Violet had made it—one last get together before heading back to college. Madii stood and I joined her. Her attention went to the crowd amassing in her honor, but my attention went to the cake where the ring was. I plucked it from the icing and wiped it clean with a napkin, then joined Madii and her parents.

"There has to be 20 people here. How did you pull this off?" She wrapped an arm around me and accepted the flowers from her father, who kissed her on the cheek.

"I helped," Violet volunteered. She held her hand up for a high-five. After Madison had come back to me, I had called her parents to see if they would mind helping me put together the surprise for Madison. Violet had been more than willing to help.

"Thank you, Vi." Madii gave her sister a hug, and when she returned to me, I took her hand and slid the ring on her finger. She held it up and studied it. "It's different." Her smile never wavered so I knew I had done well with the new choice.

"Yes, the old one seemed... off. I don't think it fit what I wanted to say." The old ring had been a spur of the moment purchase, and even though Madii loved it, I hadn't put as much thought into it. This one was different—better. A simple silver band with inlaid sapphire and diamonds, no fancy setting to catch on her clothing or be damaged while she was adventuring.

“It’s perfect, once again.” We kissed, and Madii’s parents excused themselves to have a slice of cake; they wanted Madii to be able to greet all her guests.

I walked her around the deck saying hello to everyone there. Crystal, another of Madii’s best friends, came on the arm of her new fiancé, whom Madison had yet to meet. They talked for a long while, until Alice and Henry arrived. Madison paled, looking at me for reassurance. I excused us from the conversation with Crystal and escorted her toward the Heintz’s.

“Alice, thank you so much for coming.” I shook Henry’s hand and offered Alice a kiss on the back of hers. “I’m so glad you could come celebrate Madii’s birthday with us.”

“Oh, Gavin, think nothing of it.” Alice gestured with her hand, then took Madii in for a hug. “Thank you for inviting us. Happy birthday Madison.”

Madii still looked like she was in shock, and when she spoke it was with quivering words. “Is Drew here?” She reached for my hand, and I held her tightly.

“Oh, dear. He wanted to come,” Henry told her, “but he just isn’t ready quite yet. Okay? He did make it very clear that he wants a wedding invitation and if he doesn’t get one, he’s going to crash it.” Henry chuckled as he spoke, so I joined them with a smile. Madii laughed, as if she knew Drew would really do such a thing.

It made me very uncomfortable inviting the Heintz’s, but Violet insisted it was the proper thing, and that Madii would want it. When she heard that Drew was not there, I saw her relax and let the tension out of her shoulders. Her genuine smile returned. Perhaps she wasn’t ready either.

“Well tell him he was missed. Thank you so much for coming. You should get a slice of cake.” Madison offered Henry a hug too, then watched with me as they made their way to the cake table. We stood holding hands and surveying the crowd as they mingled, laughed, and ate birthday cake.

“What made you want to do all this?” She gestured a sweeping motion with her hand.

“Oh, I just knew this pretty special girl who stole my heart and I wanted to make sure she was really happy on her birthday.” I winked and leaned down to kiss her, and she rose up on her tiptoes to meet my advance.

“Thank you, Gavin. This is really special. I will never forget this night.” She looked a little melancholy, her eyes holding a sadness I couldn’t place.

“Are you okay?” I asked, and she drew my jacket tighter around her shoulders.

She nodded, looking out toward where Lexi was making jokes with Crystal. They seemed to be having a good time and I couldn’t help but look forward to our wedding night when we would do this over again, in celebration of our vows.

“Are you sure you’re, okay? You look sad.” I hooked an arm around her waist and pulled her against me, only just then realizing how bad she was shivering.

“I’m a little sad Drew didn’t come.” Her chin dropped. “And don’t get me wrong, he is truly only a friend, but I had hoped that our breakup wouldn’t affect him so badly.” She shrugged and my jacket fell from one shoulder. I fixed it, then wrapped both of my arms around her from behind to offer some added warmth and a wind block from the breeze off the water.

“Well, maybe he is doing just fine, and maybe he is just giving you some personal space. You know, this is your birthday-slash-engagement party.” I kissed her cheek, feeling the coolness of her skin. “He probably just wanted you to enjoy the whole thing and not feel obligated to ensure he was okay.”

“You’re probably right.” With a grin, she pulled away from me, taking my hand and tugging me after her. “Now, let’s go eat cake!”

The rest of the evening went off without a hitch, except for when Madii’s father went for a second slice of cake and spilled it down his front, smearing red and blue icing on his white button-down. The laughter at his expense was well-received as

Madison gave him a friendly rebuke about his blood sugars and how it served him right trying to eat too much sugar.

We celebrated until everyone was too cold to stay any longer, then Madison and I retired back to her place for the night. As we made love that night, I couldn't help but feel overwhelmed by the amount of love I had for this woman. We fell asleep talking about our wedding date and decided we wouldn't wait. We still had deposits on everything, except the venue which had booked up. So all we had to do was book a new location, and I knew just the place as long as it was available.

EPILOGUE

MADII

I stood perfectly still as Mom pinned the brooch into my hair. In only a few short minutes I would walk down the aisle to become Mrs. Gavin Carpenter, and this time I wasn't about to let anything stop the wedding from happening. Violet had joked that the park would catch on fire or something, but I threatened to disinvite her, and we all laughed about it. In honesty, I wasn't even worried.

Gavin decided the park where he originally proposed to me was the perfect venue for our mid-fall wedding, and I had to agree with the new location. The grove where we sat on that bench, and he asked me to be his wife was filled with gorgeous colors as the leaves began to change. And our guest list was small enough that everyone could assemble comfortably for both the wedding and the reception, so we booked a large tent with sides, and planned a chili dinner.

After my birthday party where I froze all night, we ended up going shopping for a new wedding gown—this time with sleeves—and the rest of the plans fell into place.

I watched my face in the mirror as Mom worked on my hair. Gavin's mother had promised to stop in and help us prepare, but I hadn't seen her yet. Part of me hoped she forgot, given the fact that the last several times we interacted, she was less than pleased to see me. But I had promised to honor Gavin and become his wife, and that meant I would be her daughter-in-law. I'd rather attempt a good relationship with her than to make her seem like an outlaw.

“Thank you, Mom, for helping me get ready.”

Mom smiled at me in the mirror and patted my shoulder. “You’re welcome, dear.”

The door creaked open and Gavin’s Mom, Margret Bloom-Carpenter, strolled in. Her perfume came in a thick cloud, drawing a few coughs from the other ladies in the room, and Violet giggled quietly.

“Hi, Margret. Thanks for popping in.” I turned to greet her with a hug and was given a stiff kiss to each cheek. Awkwardly, I stepped back and waited for her to say something.

“Well, it appears Gavin has chosen a beautiful woman to be his wife.” She held my veil away from my face and then let it drop. “At least he got something right.”

I wasn’t sure if I should take that as a compliment or an insult, but I chose the former. “Thank you.”

Violet’s smirk and giggles were contagious, passing on to Lexi, who at least had the decency to cover her mouth.

Mom reached out her hand. “Hi, Margret.” Mom’s fakest smile ever stretched across her face, and I had to look away to hide my amusement. “So good to see you again. It was nice meeting you at Madii’s birthday party.”

“Oh, yes. Gavin did an amazing job with that. Didn’t he?” She sat down, resting her oversized purse in her lap. “It’s funny watching your child growing up. Gavin has had so many terrible girlfriends over the years. I would have liked to remember all their names, but they weren’t notable. I always tried to pick a nice girl for Gavin, but it seems I’m unable to do that. Mother does not always know best it seems.”

“That’s what I am thinking right now.” Her voice took on a nostalgic tone and she smiled as her eyes focused on something on the floor. “Mother does not always know best. I remember my mother. She grew up in times when women didn’t have many rights, and it was important for us to have the house always tidy with a cooked meal on the table for our men to come home too.”

“Mother set the house routine, the places and people whom I could see. She would say things like, ‘Margret, you shouldn’t be seeing that boy.’ In fact, it was because of the things she said that I met Allen, Gavin’s father. I think of all the nights that I would run off to his house. It was like one of those scenes from a movie where the girl would sneak out of the house and spend the night at the boy’s house.”

“They were magical times, even if we had moments where my daddy would end up at the front door with a shotgun. I thank you Becky for not letting things get to the point of that. Dave seems like a reasonable man, really. But there could have been some interesting conversations.”

“I guess what I am trying to say is, Maddi, I have judged you in ways that I shouldn’t have, because you are my Gavin’s girl. It’s so clear he loves you. I always pictured my son’s girl being someone in the professional space, like another doctor or a nurse or something in the hospital. I guess it wasn’t working for him finding love in the hospital. This just isn’t how I would have planned things. But that’s okay, because you have something you are passionate about.”

“I love the photos you take, as much as I have avoided admitting it. I think you have some real talent and spunk there kiddo. I look forward to all the lovely artistic drawings I will get from all my grandbabies they inherited from their mother, because it definitely won’t be from their father. Have you seen his handwriting?”

Everyone burst out laughing. I hadn’t realized that Margret had such a sense of humor. The few times we talked she was so negative; I hadn’t even gotten a chance to know her at all. I had a feeling if I learned how to tolerate her nagging and helicopter parenting, we would get along just fine. When our laughing calmed, Margret spoke again.

“We *are* having grand babies, right? I hope so because you’re part of the family now.”

I knew instantly why Gavin told me to be patient with her. I wanted kids someday, but I had a feeling Margret wanted

grandkids yesterday. I smiled politely, unsure how to answer, when my own mother chimed in.

“Oh yes, dear. We want lots of grandbabies.” Mom’s smile and agreement with Margret wasn’t the worst thing in the world, but I knew what sort of pressure I’d be under as soon as the honeymoon was over.

I watched Violet shrink away, apparently not wanting to hear the lecture about her finding a good man to settle down with too.

“Well, we need to finish getting ready here.” I straightened my dress and looked into the mirror again. In the reflection I watched Margret stand.

“It’s okay. I need to go do the mother of the groom things now.” Margret winked at me and wiggled her fingers in a goodbye gesture. “I’ll see you later.”

As soon as she left, the room took a collective sigh. “She doesn’t seem so bad,” Lexi said, and Violet laughed again.

I rolled my eyes and adjusted my necklace. I was a bundle of nerves, simply because I was so excited for the future that I couldn’t contain it.

A knock came at the door, and Mom answered, grinning and tearing up as soon as she opened it. Dad walked in, decked in a tuxedo with a purple cummerbund and bowtie. He looked very dapper in his suit.

“It’s time, baby girl.” He held out his elbow to me and I navigated the room, careful to keep my train from tangling on anything. Lexi helped, picking it up and carrying it for me as I hooked my arm around Dad’s. The photographer snuck in and snapped a few pictures, and Dad led me out of the room in the small event building about a hundred yards from where we had planned the ceremony and across the lawn. Large curtains had been erected on metal frames to shield the guests and Gavin from view, so my reveal would be magical for them.

We did exactly what we had practiced doing last night. From my vantage point behind the curtain, I could see Gavin chatting with his friends Nick and Jiles—members of his

wedding party. He looked stunning in his tux. It was perfect for him. And he'd gotten a haircut, though I didn't know when he would have found time to do so.

I saw Nick's new wife seated near the back with Jiles's wife. I had met them both at our bachelor/bachelorette party before the chaos ensued, though back then Nick wasn't married. I noticed Margret and Allen seated in the front row on the right, and Mom was being escorted down the aisle by one of Gavin's younger cousins whom we asked to be an usher.

The music started, and Violet started her walk down the aisle. We had timed it perfectly to the song, so both she and Lexi would be able to be in place before they started the bridal march. When both of them were lined up, I watched Gavin's eyes turn my direction. I was still out of sight, but he was searching for me.

The song changed, and Dad led me forward. "You know, sweetheart, I am really happy for you. This one feels like a dream come true."

I didn't want to respond. If I did, I would end up crying and smearing my makeup. So instead, I focused on the faces of our guests who rose to turn and watch me walk down the aisle. Friends and loved ones beamed with pride and admiration as I passed, but when I got to the row where Drew was standing, my heart felt a little bittersweet. He was there, but there was no smile on his face. Where others showed their happiness for me, Drew shed a tear.

I looked away and toward Gavin, who also had a tear on his cheek, but his smile was one I would never forget. Dad stopped me just before the officiant's podium.

"Who gives this woman to be lawfully wedded?" The officiant looked at us expectantly.

"Her mother and I," Dad said, kissing me on the cheek through my veil." He took my hand and Gavin's and joined them, then took his seat next to Mom in the front row.

The next twenty minutes were a blur. The officiant had us light the unity candle and offered an oratory on marriage and its

meaning. He read a poem, then asked us to exchange our vows. I went first, reciting what I had memorized earlier that week.

“Gavin, we met under crazy circumstances. We have already fought through our first war together. And as long as you promise to love me the same way you have since the day we met; I promise to do everything in my power to make you the happiest man alive. ’Til death do us part.”

Gavin wasn’t quite as prepared as me, and it drew a chuckle from the crowd as he pulled a paper out of his suit coat pocket and unfolded it, dropping it and then retrieving it.

“Madii...” His eyes welled up, and he stopped, then he crumpled the paper up and shoved it in his pocket and started over. “I don’t need a rehearsed speech to tell you what I vow for the rest of our lives. I will love you. I will cherish you in ways you’ve never experienced. I will fight for you, for us. I will never break your heart on purpose, and I will be faithful. And there is nothing you can do about it.”

I couldn’t stop the tears from flowing this time, and I didn’t want too either. Gavin was the love of my life, and in a mere few seconds my life would be forever sealed to his. The way he stared into my eyes made it seem as if the world had disappeared. The officiant continued his rambling, but I was lost in Gavin’s gaze.

When we heard, “You may now kiss the bride,” Gavin lifted my veil, folding it behind my head, and leaned in for what I thought was going to be a polite peck. What it turned into was such passion, he had to hold me up because my knees almost buckled.

The crowd cheered, and the recessional played, but Gavin didn’t let up. I didn’t even want him too. When Lexi pulled me away from him, everyone laughed, and Gavin waggled his eyebrows at me before offering his arm. I gladly hooked mine around his and let him lead me back up the aisle.

As we passed where Drew had been sitting, I noticed he was gone. My heart felt sad for a moment, but I let it go. I was now Mrs. Gavin Carpenter. I was starting a new life. I never

believed in fairy tales until I met him. I would have said I still didn't believe in fairy tales, but the truth was, that's what he was to me. All wrapped up in human flesh, hand delivered by whatever God or fates had determined, and perfect for me. Saying I was happy was an understatement.

Happily ever after might never mean perfect relationships with no problems, and a life that never had sad days. But to me it meant everything. Gavin was everything I needed.

EXCERPT: VALENTINE'S DAY PROPOSAL



The last thing he deserved after breaking my heart was an agreement.

An agreement to call me his wife.

Building a business was easier than fixing my damaged heart after Charles dumped me out of nowhere.

That was way back in college.

I never thought I'd have to endure seeing his face again.

But the jerk just couldn't stay out of my life for good.

Running for the US Senate seat meant looking like a family man.

Something that his team thought I could help him with.

That was my chance to get something out of him.

Capital to take my business to another level.

Saying yes was the easy part.

But saying no to him kissing me was *hard*.

Every single time.

The arrangement made it clear that he wasn't just keeping secrets from the public.

He was also hiding things from me.

But I wasn't any better.

I had the biggest secret of them all... one that would reveal itself in nine months.

Charles

I laid my head back on the back of the chair, closing my eyes against the stress I was under. Peter, my campaign manager and semi-close friend, droned on about my ranking in the polls. Everyone else in the room— campaign volunteers, donors, supports, and even my parents— probably sat listening attentively to his speech, but I just wanted to eat. My stomach growled loudly, and I heard Nina snicker. I didn't care.

“So, the best thing we can do is follow our research.” Peter had some sort of power-point presentation up on the whiteboard, the lights dimmed but not off all the way. He knew what he was doing, which is why I hired him. He put the last three Maryland governors into office, and with his help I was a shoo-in for the Maryland US senate seat that was up for vote next fall.

My father was a judge, probably the most honest and fair man I knew. From the time I was very young, I wanted to be like him. He'd built his career on integrity and faithfulness, married to my mother now for 45 years as proof that the institution of marriage was still intact. I'd be lucky to make it that far. At 32 I was still a bachelor, focused mostly on my career, not the passing fad of relationships where women ended up raking your heart over the coals anyway.

“So, the next steps are here...” Peter was probably irritated that I was not watching him. My eyes still shut to the boring details, I just wanted the race to be over and the result to be decided. Call it a momentary burnout, but the past 11 months had already been spent rubbing elbows with wealthy party representatives and donors. We hadn't even gotten to the campaign trail, and I wondered if I had made the wrong choice. Maybe being a judge would be easier than being a public representative. Sure, judges got voted in, but not based on their beliefs. This circus of choosing sides was for the birds. I would much rather have been selected based on my ethics and performance.

“Chuck...” I felt a hard poke to my ribs and my eyes snapped open, taking in Nina who stared at me. She nodded up at Peter and widened her eyes.

Annoyed, I rolled my eyes at her and looked toward Peter as he spoke. The list of things he was going through were items he believed would help me rank up in the polls. So far, my standings were down a bit, which was to be expected. Joseph Mathers, the liberal incumbent, stood a good chance at winning the seat for his fifth consecutive term. I came in on the conservative party ticket, still falling behind my competition in the primaries.

I read through the list: stronger conservative slant, smear campaign, more time on the road—marriage. That last one made me chuckle. Peter had a rich sense of humor which I loved about him. He was always able to lighten the mood in any tense situation with an appropriately placed joke, so I chalked item number four on his list up to helping me relax.

We'd hardly talked about my personal life, and he knew I wasn't dating anyone, so his joke was even funnier.

Until he got to that part of his speech.

"And for your consideration, number four here. I believe Charles will stand a much better chance at winning the seat if he is wed." A round of murmurs interrupted him as he continued to speak, and he had to hush the group just to be heard. "Please, stay quiet so I can explain."

"Lots of politicians have arranged marriages, or what we call a marriage of convenience in this world. They help the candidate appeal to a broader audience. It paints a picture of wholesomeness, maturity, seriousness, and adds that family value feeling that voters love—"

"Wait. You're serious?" I interrupted. I had to. There was no way he honestly thought I'd get married just to win a political race. I smirked. "I'm not even dating anyone."

"Charles... please. When the meeting is over?" He raised his eyebrows and clicked the remote to the whiteboard, turning off the presentation.

I pursed my lips and furrowed my brow, displaying my distaste for his campaign ideas. He told me before I hired him 11 months ago that there would be times when I just had to trust his judgment and experience. At 50, he had been in this game a lot longer than I had, and I'd watched his shark-like performance. He knew what he was doing, but that didn't mean he was right.

When the meeting drew to a close, he had the support of both of my parents, the lead volunteers for my campaign, and a smattering of donors on every single point, including the marriage idea. I sulked in the corner after seeing my parents out, not willing to back down and give in to his idea. To marry someone just for political games might have been a widespread practice, but to me it felt deceitful. The entire reason I got into this game was to bring equity and honesty to the field.

Peter showed the last of the volunteers out—Nina, who had been the first volunteer to offer her services as my political ally and wife. That wasn't happening. As soon as he shut the door behind her, I let loose.

“No. It's not happening. I'm not about to put on a fake face for the entire country just to win a political position. I'd rather just wait until I was older and had an actual relationship established. I'm a well-known lawyer and I have a good practice. I don't need to play games to get ahead.”

Peter pushed chairs aside, making room to move. The room had been so packed there was standing space only, the chairs cluttering much of the open floor. He made his way to the table where I sat, taking a seat diagonal to me. He had turned the lights back up, and I wished he hadn't. My foul mood fit the darker atmosphere much better.

“You want to win? Or you want to be the guy who gave up because he had to play by rules he didn't like?” Peter raised an eyebrow and leaned back in his chair. His loose tie and open top button spoke of a stressful day, much the same as my disheveled hair did. I could tell he wasn't backing down and that I was in for a fight.

“I'm not even dating.”

“You have two perfectly decent campaign volunteers we could vet and get set up. It doesn't have to be difficult. Besides, you can think of it like a job you're doing. Just another part of the job. Plus, if you use a volunteer, you can have a contract, prenup, and it will never cost you a dime.”

I huffed out a sigh. “It's not happening, Peter.”

“Alright, then you have to take the hard road. You're morally too aligned with a moderate position. If you begin leaning your platform toward strict conservatism, you'll—”

“No way!” I shot out of my seat. We'd been over this one a dozen times too. To be too far to one side or the other meant compromising my beliefs. “You know I'm not doing that.” I leaned over the table menacingly, pressing my palms into the scratched surface of the wood.

“Well then, marriage it is. You can select the person you’d be favorable with, or I can make a list of potential candidates.” Peter stood and grabbed his suit coat and briefcase. “Either way, this is your best option. Otherwise, you may as well kiss your chances at that seat goodbye. You don’t make the seat; you don’t make president either. We’ll talk more later, but this has to happen. Even your parents think so. The primaries are in four months, Charles. We don’t have time for games.”

He walked out the door, and I slumped into my chair, scraping a hand across my five o’clock shadow. There had only ever been one woman I’d even consider marrying, and given what happened, I knew she’d never talk to me again. Willow Rain Suthers... I’d almost had everything with her. Until I fucked it up.

I’d kept up with her in the news, though I had entirely lost touch. We hadn’t spoken, except once at a business luncheon put on by a mutual friend. We’d said a cordial greeting and nothing more. Not that I hadn’t wanted to, but she was on the arm of a prestigious doctor, and I hadn’t been in the mood to bicker.

I resumed my posture of reclining in the chair with my head back. Willow was the best thing that ever happened to me, and I had been an idiot for fucking it up. By now her accounting firm had likely grown, making her a confident, independent business owner. There was no way she’d come back to me, even if I went groveling and crawling on hands and knees to beg her.

Peter was wrong if he thought marriage was going to work. There was no way I could sell it. I had no interest in relationships anymore. I’d all but pledged myself to staying single for life, just to have time to focus on my career. An arrangement may boost me in the polls if I was a good enough actor, but no amount of theater would cover the fact that my heart still belonged to someone else.

[Read the complete story here!](#)

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