



THE

Wrong

DIFFICULT
CHOICES

CHOICE

AVA GRAY

THE WRONG CHOICE

DIFFICULT CHOICES

AVA GRAY

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CONTENTS

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Blurb

1. Prologue
2. Madii
3. Gavin
4. Madii
5. Gavin
6. Madii
7. Gavin
8. Madii
9. Gavin
10. Madii
11. Gavin
12. Madii
13. Gavin
14. Madii
15. Gavin
16. Madii
17. Gavin
18. Madii
19. Gavin
20. Madii
21. Gavin
22. Madii
23. Gavin
24. Madii
25. Gavin
26. Madii
27. Gavin
28. Madii
29. Gavin
30. Excerpt: Valentine's Day Proposal

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BLURB

The guilt I feel when I find myself unable to stop staring at this hot neurosurgeon is unreal...

He quickly went from Dr. Carpenter to just... Gavin.

The man is absolutely irresistible *and* the wrong choice for me.

Gavin is responsible for bringing my fiancé out of coma.

He's *not* supposed to be a shoulder to cry on.

Or one to share meals with.

But the rules don't stop him from stealing glances at me.

At first, he seemed like a gorgeous distraction from my nightmare.

But Gavin is quickly becoming my world.

The world I should not be living in.

A decade-long gap between us hasn't been able to stop this obsession.

But it's only a matter of time before my past wakes up and reality hits us both.

Are we ready to pay the consequences of what we've done?

PROLOGUE

MADII

I took hold of Drew's hand, pulling him deeper into the small reef. Vibrantly colored fish fluttered away from us as we dived. Drew had lagged behind a bit, and the rest of the scuba group was at least twenty meters away. It was everything I dreamed of and more. Drew and I had planned this trip for our bachelor/bachelorette party months ago—though he initially protested. Water wasn't his thing; he much preferred rock climbing. But I thought the exotic coastal vibe would be good.

I remembered the conversation about how mountain climbing would be a much better event for the wedding party to do together, but I had insisted on diving. Being in the water was freeing, no gravity to weigh you down, the colorful world of sea life to entertain you. I wanted to enjoy that with the man I loved more than anything.

Drew's hand slipped out of mine, but I paid no attention. Watching the anemones retreat into themselves as we swam by was fascinating. Fish scattered around me, the shadow of the boat overhead startling me for a moment. We had been warned that we could encounter sharks, though they hadn't said any had been spotted recently. It had always been a dream of mine to swim with sharks, but it had been difficult enough to convince Drew to do the scuba diving.

My hair floated around me in unruly black strands, a mermaid's aura around my thin frame. I often joked with Drew that I was a mermaid, born for the sea and the waves. But he was more of a mountain man, hiking, fishing, rock climbing.

Whatever the adventure, we were in it together, and I couldn't have been happier. Drew was my world. Just thinking of him made me turn to see where he was. I wanted to show him the bright pink anemone.

But when 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.

Turning back to face him, I realized something was drastically wrong. I did the only thing I could. I wrapped my arms around him and swam upward, kicking my legs as hard as I could. We were so far from the surface, it felt hopeless. My mind raced as tears filled my eyes, fogging my mask. I screamed out in fear sending bubbles shooting upward.

The moment we broke the surface, my legs burning, I waved an arm frantically at the boat driver. My mask was so fogged, I could hardly see, but I felt the water churn as the boat approached. My chest heaved with exertion, and I could hardly breathe, mucus clogging my sinuses from crying so hard. I felt

Drew's body being lifted out of the water away from mine and let my body relax, immediately tearing off my mask.

“What happened!” the driver yelled at me.

I shook my head, watching Drew disappear into the boat, one of his flippers falling back into the water. I snagged it and swam for the back of the boat where the ladder was. Another man, who had helped us suit up before our dive, held his hand out to me as I tried climbing aboard the boat on wobbling legs.

Everything seemed to go so fast I couldn't keep up, but in slow motion at the same time. I sat trying to catch my breath as the men tore Drew's scuba gear off of him and laid him out on the deck of the boat. One by one the other divers surfaced, climbing on board and seeing the chaos. Lexi and Crystal rushed right to my side, their masks and tanks shed at my feet.

“Oh fuck, what happened?” Crystal crouched next to me, holding my hand but staring at the men now giving Drew chest compressions. Everything was a blur; I felt numb. I couldn't respond. I only got snippets of the conversations going on around me because all I could hear was the thrumming in my ears of my own heartbeat.

“...regulator broken...”

“Oh shit, this is bad...”

“Call the coast guard....”

The voices melded into one cacophony, deafening but silent to me at the same time. I stared at Drew's pale face, his body jolting with each compression of his chest. Lexi's hand covered her mouth as sobs wracked her body. Part of me wanted to comfort her, but most of me felt dead inside. My fiancé lay sprawled on the deck of the boat I'd wanted to go on, his lifeless expression so terrifying I couldn't look away.

* * *

The rhythmic beep of the heart monitor kept me company. I'd pushed everyone else out of the room. I didn't need their pity or their condolences. The wires and hoses hooked up to

Drew's body from every angle prevented me from lying down next to him, but I sat on the edge of the bed at least. My hand laced in his, I sat stoic. All the tears I had to cry were dried up.

My eyes hurt; my nose bled from a few spots thanks to dry, papery hospital tissues. Nurse after nurse offered me water, snacks, and a place to rest. I didn't move, didn't blink. My entire world lay on the bed in front of me, silent, entombed inside himself. My heart ached. I wanted someone to make it stop, to silence the terror inside of my brain and put my world back together.

“Oh!”

The voice of Alice Heintz, Drew's mother, startled me. I turned to see her puffy eyes and hair worn from sleep and travel. Henry stood behind her, hand in the small of her back. As if Drew had the plague, they kept their distance until I stood, motioning them over.

“What happened? The doctors only gave us such tiny details.” Henry approached me as Alice rushed for Drew's side. She sat in the spot I vacated and leaned across her son, sobbing.

“I don't know what happened. He was diving with me. We were having a good time. I turned to look at some coral... I mean, he'd been slowing, not keeping up with us. So, I held his hand.” Suddenly the tears came fresh again, stinging my raw skin. “And I saw a cool sea anemone. I wanted him to see. I reached for him and—” Sobs choked out my words. Henry pulled me to his chest, kissing the top of my head. His grip was tight; I could hardly breathe.

I stayed in his embrace for several long minutes, listening to the sound of Alice wailing. Drew had not woken up. They'd placed him on a heart-lung machine. It's tick and beep still keeping time. No one had anything to say. Nothing we said would bring Drew back. There were only questions.

Only moments later, the door swished open. A fresh wave of the pungent smell of hospital disinfectant washed over me. I felt like I'd never free myself from the stench of it when this was all over with. I looked up to see a tall, slender man

dressed in a white lab coat enter. He had a clipboard in hand and a grim look on his face.

“Mr. and Mrs. Heintz, my name is Doctor Carpenter. I’m the head neurosurgeon here at Mercy General.” The man’s voice was kind, compassionate. Everything a doctor should be when their patient is in dire straits and family is hovering for news. “I need to discuss a few things with you.” He turned to me specifically. “Do you mind giving us some privacy?”

“I...uh...” I clung to Henry. There was no way in hell I was leaving Drew’s side.

“It’s okay, Doctor. This is Drew’s fiancé, Madison. She needs to stay.” Henry hugged me tighter. The way he stood up for me was reassuring. The amount of guilt I carried was suffocating. I felt like if Henry and Alice knew scuba diving had been my choice, they may not feel the same about me.

“Right.” The doctor grimaced, displaying more pain on his face. “Let’s sit, shall we?” He gestured at the small sofa across the room and Henry led me there. Alice remained firmly planted across Drew’s body. I didn’t think wild horses could drag her away.

We sat, and as we did, my heart sank further. The way Dr. Carpenter approached the subject gave me little reason to hope that he had good news. Even his posture was grim.

“What is it? When will he wake up? What are all those tubes for?” Henry had more questions than me. He hadn’t been there when they walked me through everything. Lexi and Crystal had tried to come with me, but the nurses refused. I had only been let in because I had a ring on my finger, and even then, in the ICU they were fairly strict that I shouldn’t be there.

“Well, let’s start at the first things. Drew suffered a major loss of oxygen. We don’t know how long he went without it. His brain scans are not good. His body is on a heart-lung machine to regulate his pulse and ensure he gets proper oxygen.” Dr. Carpenter frowned and glanced at Drew. “His chances of pulling out of this are almost zero. I need you to understand that we did everything we could for him. The ride from the diving area to shore was just too long.”

Henry sputtered out a few sobs and buried his head in his hands, and I crumpled. The doctor continued talking but I couldn't understand him. All I heard was "unplug" and "hope for the best." My world spun. Nearly 100 miles from home on what was supposed to be one of the best trips of my life, and all I could think about was how much I wanted my best friend back.

I sat in a daze, watching nurses shuffle in and out. Henry was forced to sign consent forms. Alice refused. No one even asked me. I had no rights; I wasn't married to him yet. I was helpless to stop the process. They would unhook the machines and watch him die.

Drew was an organ donor. He'd boasted about that on a number of occasions. Deep down I knew he would be honored to give life to others. So, was I selfish for hating those people who would take my best friend—the love of my life—and benefit from my devastation?

Hours had to have passed, but I hadn't moved. No to eat, not to drink. I sat and stared at him, Alice still clinging to him desperately. This couldn't be happening. I had to wake up from the horrible nightmare.

When the time came, Henry had to pry Alice off Drew's chest. She screamed at him, swinging her fists and making contact a few times. There wasn't a dry eye in the place. Even the nurses sobbed, though it felt soiled. Their sympathy—empathy if you will—contaminated what was really happening. My world was ending. The very fabric of my future was being torn apart thread by thread. No IVs or fluids, medications, monitors would save him now. Death reached up and choked me, stealing the sobs from my throat. I nearly vomited as the doctor walked toward the machines.

No one said a word to me as Dr. Carpenter shut down the machines one by one. They left the monitor on him, though, the beeping fluttered for a moment. Doctor Carpenter assured us that the electric pulses would stop shortly, and afterward they would call the time.

The transplant crew was on standby to rush Drew off to surgery to harvest his organs. They stood in the hallway, prepped and ready. Henry had taken Alice away. I knew it would be too difficult for her to watch, but here I sat, paralyzed. My eyes would not move from his pale face. His lips were blue, like he was cold. But he lay there naked, exposed to the world. Why hadn't anyone covered him up? Why hadn't anyone taken care of him? Why didn't they save him? Why didn't they do something?

We waited a few minutes. The doctor checked his watch. The nurses started murmuring, and one of them pulled out a stethoscope. She pressed it to Drew's chest and looked up at Dr. Carpenter with wide eyes.

"His heart is beating."

MADII

“**A**nd you will never believe this, but the toddler literally threw up on my shoes. It was the single worst photo shoot I’ve ever done.” I held Drew’s hand the way I had every day for the past 16 months. The medical team had placed him in his own room after a month in ICU, and they’d been gracious enough to give him a double bed, though I never slept there. I couldn’t bring myself to resign to the fact that this was Drew’s life now.

I refused to give up hope.

Every time I sat next to him and told him about my day, I fully expected him to wake and respond, maybe rub his eyes and yawn. But I’d yet to even see his eyes flutter. Week after week was the same thing. Alice had told me to stay home, so had Henry, Drew’s parents. But I came and visited anyway. I had a decent conversation with the doctors too, learning more about his condition and what it would mean when he woke up.

“Ah, there you are Miss Madii. I thought I’d miss you today. I’m about to leave and Cecil will be in to do his shift then. I brought you some water.” Pam, Drew’s charge nurse, set a small plastic cup of water on the tray table and patted my shoulder. “Nothing new today, as you probably suspected. Doc will be in shortly with rounds. You want me to bring you something from the cafeteria before I go?”

Pam’s black hair had been braided down to her head, a few gold and red pins adorning it. The decoration on the pins reminded me of the floral arrangements Drew and I had

selected for our wedding. Anymore, it seemed like everything reminded me of what I'd lost.

I pushed the thought away. I didn't want to be negative. That wouldn't help Drew recover. And neither would my tears. I swiped at my cheek, dousing the emotion, and smiled at Pam.

"Thanks, but I will eat when I go home later."

"Are you sure, girl? You're losing weight. You can't lose much more, or a stiff wind will blow you away."

I chuckled. "Yeah, I'm sure. And don't worry. I eat plenty at home. Just staying trim so when my man wakes up, he thinks I've still got it." I winked at her, forcing my face to stay positive despite the heartache in my chest. Part of me knew he would never wake up. But it was a part of me I shoved away every time it showed its ugly face.

"Suit yourself. I'll see you tomorrow?" Pam hovered by the door. She had the kindness of a mother, but the sternness of a Catholic nun.

"Yeah, sure. You know I can't go a day without him." I was so sick of hiding my emotions from people. The only person I felt comfortable being real with was Dr. Carpenter, and only because he had forced me to open up over lunches with him. I supposed he had appointed himself my therapist. Or maybe he wanted to be my friend. Either way, he was the only release I got from the rage and depression welling inside of me constantly.

I turned my attention back to Drew, pulling my hand away from his long enough to find a tissue and blow my nose. Alice had brought in some respectable tissues finally. We both did enough crying in this awful room to warrant it. Besides, hospital tissues were like 15 bucks a box, and any way we could cut costs helped.

I'd just finished cleaning my face when the door swooshed back open. Alice bustled in, a fresh vase of flowers in hand, followed by Dr. Carpenter—now known as Gavin. We'd spent enough time together to be on a first-name basis, what with my daily visits and his rounds. As the lead neurosurgeon, he

had taken a special interest in Drew's case right from the beginning. Drew should not have continued living once the machine was unhooked, but here we were.

"Madison, how are you today?" Gavin smiled warmly. He had gotten a new haircut, which I had to admit made him more attractive. He was the exact sort of guy I would have gone for, if he weren't easily 10 or 15 years older than me—assuming I was normal and not engaged to a man in a coma.

I offered my typical polite smile. "As long as I have breath... right?" It was a phrase we were used to saying. As long as Drew had breath there was hope. "Have they found a miracle cure yet?" The question was rhetorical; I knew I wasn't that lucky. I'd read the reports and knew some statistics. Drew wasn't likely to ever wake up. I had no clue how long I'd be waiting.

Gavin chuckled. "Not yet." He thumbed through the chart that hung from the foot of Drew's bed. "Pam's off now, huh? You'll be in for a treat with Cecil tonight. It appears he's been in a baking mood, and he brought home-baked banana bread for everyone."

Gavin's grin was infectious, drawing one from both me and Alice. She situated the flowers next to Drew's remote on the side table and took the sponge out of the small cup of water that sat there. As she swabbed Drew's mouth to keep it moist and clean, she hummed a tune I recognized as his favorite lullaby.

"You are so dedicated here, Madison. I feel like Drew is honored to have such a strong and caring woman by his side. Most other patients spend their days mostly alone as time stretches on, but you keep coming back." Gavin folded his arms over his broad chest.

"I can't leave him." I watched as Alice continued caring for Drew, her actions now almost robotic. She'd missed days coming to see him, though I hadn't missed one. I couldn't very well sit in this room all day every day. Bills had to be paid, which meant work needed to be done. As Alice moved away, I took Drew's hand in mine again. The lifeless weight still felt

wrong, like I was holding a ghost. At least his touch was still warm.

“You’re a beautiful woman. You should be out enjoying life and building your career, but you remain so steadfast here.” He positioned himself at the foot of the bed, but I kept my back to him. The compliment was kind, but Drew was my fiancé. I had no interest in pursuing other options or “building my career” unless Drew was in it.

“No updates then?” Alice cut in, her hand resting on my shoulder comfortingly.

“Nothing new. But sometimes no news is good news, right?” I heard rustling of papers. “I’ll be back in tomorrow.” The door whooshed, and I glanced over to see him disappear out the door. His dark wavy hair coiffed perfectly even in back. Dr. Carpenter was a classy man, and I valued his friendship, but sometimes it was nice to just be alone with my grief. Even if at times I wanted to escape from it.

With a sigh of relief, I focused my attention back on Drew, but Alice’s hand never left my shoulder. We remained in silence for a moment hovering over him there. He looked helpless.

“You know, Drew wouldn’t want you just sitting here wasting away. He’d want you to do like Dr. Gavin said, go out there and live your life.” Alice fidgeted with my hair, running her fingers through it. I felt her working a braid, so I sat still and enjoyed how she mothered me.

From the beginning Alice and I never got along. She didn’t hate me, but it felt like she was jealous of the way Drew loved me. Like she was losing a son instead of gaining a daughter. By the time the wedding approached, she and I got along well, though we had awkward times where I felt out of place.

Since Drew’s accident, she and I had been inseparable. It was like I had replaced Drew in her heart entirely. She mourned losing him, and there I was, a surrogate for her affection and attention. She doted on me, encouraged me, and talked to me more than my own mother. It was nice. But it didn’t replace Drew. That empty longing still ached in my gut every time I saw him there in that bed.

“I’m sure for any other woman, that sounds like a reasonable thing. But for me, I can’t fathom leaving him like this.” I rubbed my thumb over the vein on the back of his hand. “Besides, he’s my life partner. How would I find anyone as perfectly matched as me? You know what a difficult choice that is to make?”

Alice sighed, letting my hair fall on my back. She pulled up a chair and sat down, resting a hand on my knee. Soft gray hairs framed her face in a short bob, little wispy curls around her temples. The vigor in her blue eyes had faded away for a while, but somewhere along the line it had returned, though I felt mine never had. She looked at me with concern and compassion.

“Drew loved you with his entire heart, Madii. I don’t know how many times he and I had discussions about you where he told me of plans you both had for your future—things you were going to do together, places you’d go. He would want you to go do those things. Even if you only take pictures... Look there on the wall. You could hang pictures of your trips and when he wakes up, you can show him.”

Alice cupped my cheek, a glint of moisture in her eye. She gave me a pat, then folded her hands in her lap and looked down at Drew.

I wanted to protest, to tell her she was wrong. I wanted to fight and shout and raise hell until someone made Drew wake up, but it was futile. No amount of anger in the world would wake him up. And Alice was right. I’d known it for a long time. Drew was about as much of an adventure junkie as I was. He would demand I get off my ass and go jump out of an airplane, not sit there and mope. Still, I don’t think I could bring myself to leave him.

Twisting the ring on my finger I said, “You’re right. Drew would want that. But it doesn’t mean my heart has to move on yet. Does it?” I couldn’t imagine ever moving on. How could you just move on from someone you planned to spend the rest of your life with?

“Oh, dear no. Even if you find someone else to love, you will always have him in your heart. My first husband died only six years into our marriage. I still love him to this day. Married 28 years to Henry and all. Drew was our little matchmaker.” Alice smiled and blushed. “He’s been the glue that held us together all this time. And he still is. Every part of him.”

I only prayed that I would find a love like Alice and Henry. I only prayed it would be Drew. Given the doctor’s assessments, it didn’t seem likely, but when hope is the only thing, you can hold on to, you never let go. That was a hard lesson I’d had to learn over the past 16 months. When his extended family left, I stayed. When his friends left, I was still there. When my family gave up on me and called me crazy for hanging on, I still stayed.

Drew was the only thing that mattered to me now. If I had to stare at that face for ten more years, eyes closed, pale complexion—I would. I didn’t have a choice. I put him here. I owed it to him to stay.

GAVIN

Traffic was a nightmare; the parking lots were all full. Of all the days of the week to do shopping, my mother just had to choose a Sunday at 1 p.m. The after-church crowd always packed out every parking lot like it was their religious duty to patronize every store at once. Mom prattled on about her dog's grooming appointment and how we'd be late, while I scanned every row for any available spot. Twice I passed up an open spot in the back row because she didn't want to walk that far.

"Oh, there." She pointed to the right at a car with backing lights on. "Looks like they're leaving." Mom cradled Mittens in her hand, his scruffy tail wagging furiously. The way his tongue lolled out of his mouth on one side made him look adorable, but from a purely medical standpoint, the dog had issues. He probably should have been put down months ago, but Mom insisted he was her baby.

I waited patiently for the mid-size SUV to back out of the space, then swooped my sedan into its spot before it could be taken by someone else in this zoo of a parking lot. Mom scoffed at how close the other drivers had parked to the yellow lines painted on the pavement, turning her nose up as she squeezed out the door.

"It's ridiculous. They should make these lines farther apart, don't you think?" She had to set Mittens down on the seat to make it out the door, so she reached back in and picked him up. She struggled with him as he wriggled, feistily fighting her

grip. He must have hated the groomer as much as I hated driving Mom around. That dog and I had a lot in common.

“This is normal parking for this part of town, Mom.” I rolled my eyes at her and waited for her to shut the door, then pushed the button on my key fob to lock the car. It wasn’t fancy, but in New Orleans you didn’t just leave your car unlocked. “And if we had done this on Tuesday like I suggested, we would have had our pick of spots.”

Mom shuffled around the back end of the car. “Well, I’ll just say, for once your choice of that boring Honda has paid off. If you’d have bought the Lexus, I picked out for you, you wouldn’t have a parking spot anywhere on this side of town.” She clicked her tongue. “You’d have to have a chauffeur drive you for fear of some maniac damaging your car.”

Placing my hand in the small of her back, I walked alongside her toward the stores. She continued to complain about the number of cars, and I continued to tune her out. This job of running errands with my mother was supposed to be my father’s, but he had business meetings out of town, a more regular thing these days. So as an only child, I was left with the duty of shuttling Mom around to do all the things she could be doing by herself but refused to, because “A proper lady should be escorted.”

The pet groomer reeked of wet dog, the stench so pungent it had me gagging for a moment, but Mom strutted through the place without flinching. I could tell she’d done this too many times. Tables lined either side of the long narrow room, the check-in counter stretched across the back wall. I found it a very odd setup, considering every customer entering the place would have to parade their pet past the grooming tables where dogs and cats were leashed and being cared for.

Mom’s heels clicked on the tile floor. I told her to wear sensible shoes because we’d be walking a lot, but she insisted that a skirt and heels were proper attire for a lady. Being raised in a wealthy family had had its perks growing up, but sometimes as an adult it felt very put-on. I enjoyed having what I needed to survive, but I would much rather have a simple life than the pretension that wealth can exude. I just

wanted to be down to earth, to live a quiet peaceful life. Mom, on the other hand, loved the attention.

She checked Mittens in as I watched a couple interact. There to pick up their dog, they acted more like happy parents picking up a kindergartener from school than a puppy from a groomer. They fawned over the pup—a Labrador retriever—praising it and giving it treats. When they both stood, the man held the leash, and the woman rose up on her tiptoes and pecked him on the nose with her lips. I looked away, not wanting them to catch me observing their cute moment.

“Now, that’s what you need.” Mom hooked her arm around mine and forcefully turned me toward the exit. We headed that way, off to see the stylist or whatever ridiculous errand she had next.

“What, a puppy?” I chuckled, knowing she was about to go off on one of her tangents about how “Laura Hochner down the street already has two grandchildren.” When this lecture happened, I always tried to keep it light and hopeful, but Mom mother was a very strict and severe woman at times. She’d had this idea of exactly how her life should go, and regardless of how I saw my life going, she would not be happy until hers was picture perfect.

“A woman, silly.” The bell chimed as we exited the store, a hint of something delicious in the air. It was a welcome respite from the wet-dog scent. “Oh, God. Fried food. How awful. Who would put that in their body?”

I patted the hand hooked around my arm like a talon as she guided me along the sidewalk headed who knew where. Since Dad had gotten a high cholesterol diagnosis, she’d finally started listening to me about healthy eating choices. Unfortunately, she began to demonize anything she deemed unhealthy, then proceeded to label everyone who made a choice that didn’t agree with her as “a horrible person.”

“Well, there are plenty of people who eat that food. Otherwise, they wouldn’t sell it.” Happy the conversation had taken such a sharp turn, I breathed a sigh of relief and nodded at a petite blonde woman who sashayed by with a tiny dog in her arms.

She wore bright pink activewear and her face was slathered in makeup. I did a double take because the way her nose turned up, she almost resembled her dog. Mom, however, thought my double take was due to the way her ass jiggled when she walked.

“It’s not polite to stare, Gavin. But at least you’re beginning to notice the opposite sex again. I’ll tell you; Tiffany sure did a number on your confidence.” Mom yanked me along, my gut sinking at the mention of my ex.

“Tiffany did nothing to my confidence. She just wasn’t a good fit for me.” I should have known I wouldn’t get out of the lecture that easy.

“Well, you haven’t dated anyone in almost six months. How do you expect to give me grandbabies if you’re not even dating? You know Laura Hochner down the street is expecting again.”

I laughed at the thought of a 62-year-old woman being pregnant, but Mom didn’t find it funny. She scowled at me, that sort of scowl that puts you in your place. I was surprised she didn’t use my middle name. My mother had never been anything but severe, so it was no surprise that in her older age she still hung on to her bitter edge.

“What?”

“It’s not funny. Her son and his wife are going to have grandbaby number three and I don’t have a single one!” Her voice turned to a whine, wearing on my patience. “Tiffany was perfect; you dumped her. Melody—she was stunning. What perfect little babies you’d have made. And Amber, wow Gavin you really messed that one up.”

“Can’ we not do this in public?” I kept the smile plastered on my face as Mom opened the door to the salon. “Really, it’s a private conversation. And we can discuss it when we’re back in the car.”

Mom clicked over to the salon check-in counter, resting her elbow across it and plopping her oversized purse down. The woman behind the counter looked up at her with wide eyes,

tiny wrinkles around them matching the ones near her mouth as she smiled. They betrayed her age.

“Margret! Here for a cut and color?” The woman focused on her computer screen, pecking away at her keyboard. She was the type of woman who fought aging very obviously. I could tell an attempt was made to cover silver streaks in her hair by adding blonde highlights, but the silver peeked through anyway. Her attire looked like that of someone half her age, and her makeup was more suited to a fashion magazine than a later-middle-aged woman who ran a beauty salon. For once I was thankful that my mother did not have an age complex like that.

“Oh, no, Sally. Just a blow-out.” Mom clicked her fingers on the counter, a pensive look on her face. “How many grandchildren do you have now?”

I gritted my teeth in silent defiance of the humiliation that fought to creep into my cheeks. Mom had a way of bullying me without letting on to the world that it was happening. The passive-aggressive manipulation worked on my father, only because he was forced to live with and take care of her. But I’d moved on. My life was my own now and I had tried to make that very clear to her on many occasions.

“Oh, I have six now. Arthur and Val have three little ones. Tommy and Stace have two, and Bexley just told me they’re expecting too.” Sally gleamed with pride. “Want to see pictures?” She got her phone out and opened the photo app, scrolling through as Mom continued her interrogation aimed at dismantling my self-control.

“Oh, definitely!” Mom eyed me as she took the phone. “And how old is your youngest child? It’s Bexley, right? She’s got to be nearing 40 by now.”

Sally snickered. “Do I look that old?” Her hand swiping at the air in feigned humility, she added, “Bexley is 29. She’s been married for three years now, so it’s about time they had a baby for me to swaddle.”

“Oh, Sally, you don’t say. You don’t look a day over 40.” Mom handed the phone back with a pointed glare in my

direction. “Gavin here is 38 now.”

Sally turned her attention to me with raised eyebrows and a huge grin. “And how many kids do you have?”

Mom had a way of pushing every last button to light my fuse. I cleared my throat before speaking, buying me a few more seconds to temper my response. “None... Miss Sally, I have focused on my career as a successful neurosurgeon.”

Even Sally clicked her tongue. It was as if the entire gaggle of women in that salon turned on me in a split second. Hushed whispers began rising up, replacing the din blow dryers. Mom stared at me with a justified expression, and Sally rose from her spot.

“Follow me, Margret. I’ll have you with Xinda today.” As Sally led my mother away, she glanced back over her shoulder with a look of incredulity. Her eyes told me she’d have liked to lecture me, but she had more tact than my mother.

I found a spot to sit down and rest and picked up a copy of Cosmo, flipping through the pages to find nothing of interest. For the past ten years, Mom had done nothing but badger me about finding a “perfect girl” to settle down with. Tiffany was A+ according to her, but Mom didn’t know Tiffany had a major problem with amphetamines, picked up in college when she had a doctor friend prescribe them for her so she could stay awake studying.

Mom also didn’t know that Amber had a child with another man, whom she still wanted to be in the picture. I could have handled the single-mom type, if she hadn’t also wanted to be involved with the baby daddy. And Melody, well she was the one that got away. My high-school sweetheart. It was probably meant to be, but I was only 25 and in med-school. Melody wanted to start a family, but with residency and all the courses, I didn’t have time for her. She waited. We did as much as we could together, but eventually she told me I had to do things differently or she had to move on. Of course, with my career on the line, I had to let her down. I had no choice. I hoped she’d have waited for me, but by the end of that year, she was dating someone else—a high-school chemistry teacher.

Yeah, that one hurt.

My mind wandered to Madison Springer. For months I'd been intrigued by her, but she seemed so hung up on a man who would likely never come out of a coma. That alone made it likely that she was not my mother's idea of a "perfect woman" but it didn't rule her out. I'd resolved to get to know her better months ago, but she was a tough cookie to crack. But if I was going to even have a chance with her, I'd have to bide my time.

If only when I was 25 years old, Melody had been there, waiting, planning on our future. I would be in a different place. And what if I did to Madison what Melody did to me? Just give up on what could be because of a temporary truth. Sure, Melody and I had been involved, and Madison and I barely knew each other, but if you don't try you never know.

The magazine in my lap had lost my interest. Now all I could think about was the beautiful smile of Madison Springer. I had to find a way to pull her out of herself.

MAD II

My stomach grumbled. I hadn't eaten breakfast or lunch, and it was coming up on three in the afternoon. I hated leaving Drew alone there in that bed, but it had gotten easier as the months passed. I no longer feared he would spontaneously wake up without me there, calling for me. I wasn't sure if that was a good thing, or if it meant I'd given up on hope.

For months, I'd lived my life paralyzed by guilt. That boat was my choice, scuba diving for our combined bachelor/bachelorette party. He'd wanted other things, but I insisted I'd never been diving. I begged him. That weight sat heavy in my gut, though thankfully the nightmares had finally gone away a few months ago.

Offering Drew a kiss on the back of the hand, I let myself out of his room. No one seemed to notice me as I ambled down the hallways. This part of the hospital was all but empty normally, reserved for long-term care patients who couldn't be placed in nursing homes. I recognized a few faces, but mostly I felt like a ghost wandering a home they didn't belong in.

The cafeteria bustled with activity, the loud hollow echoes straining my ears after having heard only silence for hours. I read to Drew, but other than the clicking of his machines, I lived in mostly silence anymore. Something smelled off, but then it was a hospital cafeteria, not a gourmet restaurant. There was no line. I wasn't sure if that was an indicator of how bad the food was, or just that it wasn't lunch time at the moment.

I grabbed a tray and slid it across the metal bars that lined the front of the glass windows separating customers from staff. Food displayed behind the glass had small cards set beside each dish with labels of what they were. I selected lasagna and garlic bread, and the younger man behind the counter placed some on a plate and pushed it toward me across the counter. I smiled politely, but it was all I could muster.

After paying, I found a place at a table way in the back of the room away from anyone else. Other than my best friends Crystal and Lexi, an occasional visit with my parents, or my sister Violet, I lived in isolation. Sure, I took photos of lots of people, but those interactions were fake, forced smiles for propriety and professionalism. Grief was too heavy to carry out to nightclubs or parties. And no one understood why I held on so tightly. Drew was my everything. How was I supposed to let go?

“This seat taken?” I looked up to see the handsome face of Dr. Gavin Carpenter. He stood holding a tray of food, blue scrubs covering his other clothing, and a blue elastic cap holding his hair up off his face.

“Uh, no... Sure, you can sit here.” I shifted nervously, not knowing how to react. It wasn’t odd to see him there. We’d had lunch together many times in the past several months, but today for whatever reason, I was just feeling particularly off.

Gavin sat, placing his tray on the table before setting down. I took a deep breath to force my depression back down into the dark hole it belonged in. With a few blinks, I plastered my professional “I’m a photographer, so if I don’t smile you won’t smile” look on my face and stuffed my fork into my lasagna. I didn’t know what to say, so I filled my mouth with food, hoping he’d either eat in silence—as we had on some occasions—or have his own topics to discuss. Unfortunately, it was the latter.

“Why do you do that?” Gavin picked up his wax-paper-wrapped sandwich and peeled the sticker off, folding back the paper carefully to expose the food.

“Do what?” I asked, after swallowing a hefty bite of average lasagna. My mom was not such a great cook, but even her lasagna was better than this.

“Pretend you’re not hurting when I am around. You know I work with this sort of stuff all the time, and I see a lot of people who grieve for a loved one who hasn’t yet passed.” He took a bite of his sandwich and chewed carefully, watching my face.

I shrugged, attempting to bypass the question, but he was right. He knew me too well to hide my emotion. He’d seen me weeping over the side of Drew’s bed too many times to hide the fact that I was struggling. And while he wasn’t a counselor, I knew he probably understood better than just about anyone.

“I don’t know.” I didn’t let it all hang out, because I was still in public. There were eyes all over this cafeteria watching. I didn’t want to be that woman who sat and had a mental breakdown in public. “Seems like the right thing to do.”

“You don’t have to shelter me from your grief, Madison. I understand.”

For a moment we ate without speaking. I lost my appetite, but I forced the food into my mouth anyway. Alice had warned me that I needed to continue eating to keep my strength up. She always framed it with “if Drew wakes up,” but I knew she had given up that hope a long time ago. Around the three-month mark, when Gavin had told us that most coma patients die within three days of entering coma, I saw the light fade from her eyes. When he told us the longest-living coma patient to ever wake up was in his forties, that’s when Henry gave up.

Me? I was too stupid to give up. So, I sat by his side, holding his hand daily, watching his body atrophy. Even his body was giving up. But denial had sunk its claws into me like a symbiote claiming a victim. I was helpless to give in. Drew had to wake. It had to be okay now.

“Hey, don’t cry.” Gavin took his napkin and dabbed at my cheeks. I couldn’t contain the emotion any longer. Days without your best friend are difficult. Weeks, they seem like

torture, but spending 16 months without Drew by my side had altered my life, my personality, permanently.

“I’m so sorry.” I pushed away his hand and wiped at the tears. “I’m so, so sorry. I didn’t mean to spoil your lunch, blubbing on like this.” I used my napkin to dry my eyes, then turned my back to him as I blew my nose. I couldn’t eat another bite, but that didn’t mean I had to gross him out, so he’d lose his appetite too.

“Nonsense.” Gavin was quiet until I turned around. “Madii, what you’re going through is traumatic. It’s been almost a year and a half, and you’re just mourning.”

Confused, I frowned at him, blinking away more tears. “Mourning? Drew is still alive.” Bitterness rose up in my chest, a burning indignation for anything that stood between me and the shred of hope I clung to. Who was he to tell me I was mourning?

I watched his face clear. He pushed his tray aside as if he were finished, and he reached out and took my hand.

“You can mourn the loss of someone even if they’re not dead. You lived your life together. You dreamt together, adventured together, even slept in the same bed together, right?”

I nodded, feeling the weight of his words smack my chest. Every kiss, every time he held me. Every soft whisper of his voice in my ear—gone. There were no phone calls, no late-night venting sessions, no arguments. I couldn’t complain about his horrible driving or laugh at his stupid dad jokes. I hadn’t been on a vacation or adventure seeking trip since his life was put on pause. And I hadn’t thought of the fact that all of this was grieving the loss of something.

More tears sluiced down my cheeks.

“Okay, so you’re mourning. You’re grieving for a life that you were supposed to have, that you do not have currently. It’s okay to have emotions about that.”

I clung to Gavin’s hand, his thumb rubbing lightly on my fingers. There was such strength in his grip, and I drew up on it, willing his confidence and assurance to become my own. I

had no words to offer him, so I cried. When I was calm again, I looked up, fearful that the entire room was staring at me. Then I realized the truth.

The entire world had continued on, as if I didn't exist. Like Drew lying there in that hospital bed, no one in the world seemed to notice my pain. Things kept on as normal, as if pain and death didn't alter our lives forever.

"How can they just go on?" I gestured around the room, removing my hands from Gavin's.

"Because they know one thing you're forgetting."

I peered up at his confident but sympathetic expression. I expected him to just say it, but he didn't. He made me draw it out of him.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, they understand that for everything, there is a time and a season. If you stay in a season that is passing, you will miss life. It will pass you by. But if you are sensitive to what is changing around you, and you are willing to let life guide you in the right direction, you will see that life finds a way. Every time. All things will work together for your good, Madii."

As corny as it sounded—almost like a religious message blasted over the television at 7 a.m. on a Sunday morning—he was right. I blinked back the last of my tears and took the napkin he offered me. There was something about his words that brought me comfort. I felt at home there with him, so I sat quietly as he finished his lunch. I still had no interest in eating what I had purchased, but I didn't have the will power to return to Drew's side and stare at his closed eyes. Maybe it was time to stop traumatizing myself daily by sitting by his bedside nonstop. Or maybe it was time for me to just move on, like Gavin said—like Alice said.

"Gavin?" He wiped the corner of his mouth with a finger and nodded at me. "Do you think he will wake up? I mean, really. Not the scientific doctor mumbo jumbo, but you personally."

Gavin took a deep breath and sorted the trash off his plate, stacking his dirty dishes and tray with mine, then positioning it

in front of himself.

“The medical side of me wants to tell you that as long as there is breath in his lungs, there is hope.”

“But?”

“But if you are asking me as a person, I’d have given up hope long ago. The odds, the statistics aren’t in his favor. Life is too short to sit around waiting on someone who may never wake up. You have your whole life ahead of you; don’t forget that. Life is bigger than your moment.”

Gavin stood, picking up the tray to leave. “And I need you to understand, I’m not saying these things because I think you’re attractive and I’d like to get to know you better. While those things are very true, I am a patient man, and I understand your heart is taken right now. I’m saying what I’m saying as a friend who understands things in a way you don’t.

“It might be time to move on, Madii. If you’re feeling this way, then it might just be the universe telling you to take a breath and reposition your sails. A fresh wind may be blowing for you to move on. Don’t miss it.”

Gavin walked away, his absence striking me hard. Suddenly, I wished he hadn’t left, that he’d have stayed to comfort me. I looked around, thinking if I followed him, maybe he’d walk me to Drew’s room, but he was gone. He had left a void of unsettled feelings, confusion, and longing. It got mixed with the grief and heartache of losing my best friend, and that cauldron of emotion overwhelmed me. I didn’t even want to return to Drew’s side that day. But I did.

I made my way back to his room, back to the beeping and clicking of machines. Back to the loneliness of isolation. Pam couldn’t bring me out of my misery, neither could Cecil, and Gavin never visited that day. My heart was lost without Drew. He had been my pillar of strength, the same strength I’d experienced when Gavin tried encouraging me at lunch. And now I just felt confused.

I didn’t want to move on. I didn’t want to let go of that hope, because to let go of hope that he would wake up and be with

me was terrifying. Like jumping from a plane knowing you have to pull your own ripcord for the first time. Only, I'd done that a dozen times, and knew the effect of pulling that cord meant the parachute opened and I got to enjoy the ride of my life.

This time, I couldn't find the ripcord. And I wasn't even sure there was one. And if there was, what did that ride look like? What did it look like to say goodbye to the person you loved and move on? Did I even want to find out?

GAVIN

The ball sailed through the air, dropping into the basket at the last second. Jiles high-fived Nick in celebration, and I shook my head. Two on one was hardly fair anyway, but they had to rub it in. With a chuckle, I jogged over and picked up the bouncing ball. Our weekly game of basketball always gave me something to look forward to; time with the guys, cutting loose a bit, relaxing.

“You can win a game any better than you can get a woman, Carpenter. You better drag your sorry ass off the court before you make a fool of yourself.” Jiles picked up his water bottle, breathing hard, and poured some over his head. The sun above beat down on us, making today’s game a bit uncomfortable, but we never canceled a game. We had a routine of hitting the court when any of us was upset about something, and then some pickup games between vent sessions.

“Yeah,” Nick chimed in, “and I think unless you turn this losing streak around, you’re going to end up like some lonely old miser who screams at kids to stay off his lawn.”

Both of them smacked hands again, getting a good laugh at my expense. I dribbled up to the hoop, did a lay-up and caught the ball beneath the basket, displaying my superior baller skills.

“At least I’m not whipped. Your lady has you on a chain, Nick.” I took a jab at Nick, and Jiles laughed, covering his mouth and pointing. We enjoyed palling around and picking fun at each other.

“Hey, now. That was a cheap shot.” Nick gave me a playful shove as I walked up to them to grab my own water. “No low blows here. You know if you had a lady, you’d be pussy whipped too. Admit it.”

“He has a point.” Jiles sprayed some water on Nick and laughed. It was good to be with the guys, giving each other a hard time like we always did. They were a rough bunch, but I knew they had my back no matter what. I was grateful they’d stuck with me so long. I’d known Nick since college, but Jiles had become a friend only in the past few years after moving here to New Orleans.

“So really though, you have got to stop working so hard and get to know some ladies, man. You don’t know what you’re missing out on.” Jiles took a huge drink of water and drew his arm across his face to wipe away the mixture of slobber and sweat.

“Yeah, yeah. My mom gives me a hard time all the time too. I might just have my eye on someone.” I chose the sophisticated thing of grabbing my sweat towel to wipe my face and neck clean. Then I sat down and drank, quenching my thirst. The small outdoor court was nestled between three apartment buildings in the complex where Nick lived. My driveway was basically a steep hill, not allowing for a hoop to be put up, and Jiles was married, so his wife called the shots. She said no hoop, so here we were at Nick’s place sharing the court with ten-year-old’s.

“For real? Who is she?” Jiles sat down next to me on the small courtside bench.

“Who says it’s a girl?” Nick offered a shove, and I wobbled on the bench before righting myself, only to hear them laugh hysterically again.

“Very funny.” I rolled my eyes and snickered at his dumb joke. “Actually, her name is Madison. She visits the hospital every day, and I’ve just grown fond of her. I’m waiting on.... Well, it’s complicated.”

“Complicated? How?” Nick sat on the other side of Jiles and sipped his water, the mood growing calmer as he realized I

was serious.

I didn't know whether to tell them or not. She wasn't exactly attached, but then she was. And I didn't consider her unavailable, but I felt like she probably considered herself unavailable. Jiles and Nick listened carefully as I told them how Drew had been in a coma for over 16 months, how Madison visited daily, how she confided in me and had lunch with me. When I was finished, Nick was shaking his head.

"Man, you're crazy. She is in love with someone else. You're just going to end up getting hurt. Or worse. The dude will wake up and kill you or something." He scoffed and crushed the plastic water bottle in his hand, shooting it at the trash can like it was a basketball.

"Nah, I don't think so." Jiles screwed the lid back on his water like a civilized human and held it in his hands as he leaned forward, elbows on knees. "You are a doctor. You know the odds here. Certainly, if he had shown signs of coming out of it, you'd have a harder decision, but if she's already amicable and willing to have lunch, talk, whatever... Well I think you should go for it."

"You guys are crazy," Nick blurted out, popping to his feet. He picked up the basketball and jogged across the court, dribbling. I watched him shoot a few hoops and sipped my water. I already felt torn by what to do, and seeing my best friends be divided didn't help.

A few kids walked onto the court, but Nick hogged the hoop, shooting and practicing lay-ups. Jiles didn't join him; instead, he sat by me in silence. It was too hot to run around anymore, the sun high overhead. I wanted a cold shower and a cold beer.

"I think I'm going to head out. It's too fucking hot."

"Language." Jiles pointed at the kids, and I winced.

"Yeah, always the dad, huh? Anyway, it's too hot and I'm sweating like a pig. I'm going to head home." I began collecting my things to head out and Jiles rose too.

"You know, Nick has a point, but you, my friend, have been lonely for too long. That last girl was just bad news. And

before her it was how long?”

As if being scolded by my mother, I felt the sting of that sentence. “Oh, you know. Three years.”

“Sheesh, yeah. You need to just move on, man. You should seriously give it a shot. If this girl is interested, she’ll show it. If not, you can’t do any worse than be friend zoned, right? I mean, you may as well try.”

Jiles shoved his water bottle in his bag and hoisted the strap onto his shoulder.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. Next week, same time?” I looked up at Nick, still showing off to the little kids.

“Yeah, well not next week. I have that birthday party for my sister’s kid. But maybe on Sunday instead.” Jiles headed off, shouting over his shoulder, “Take it easy, Nick.”

I waved as he let himself out of the court’s tall chain link fence, then headed to the opposite gate. Maybe Jiles had a point about Madii. If she was ready, she was ready, and if not, I could just wait. I just had to make my move.

If I remembered right, there was an online symposium about some new trials happening for coma patients. I had received an email to register to view the streamed event, or purchase tickets for the live event happening later that fall. The thought of inviting Madii to join me, even if just for the streamed event, gave me a bit of pep to my step.

After situating myself in my car and getting out into traffic, I used hands-free to call Madison. Her phone rang a few times then went to voicemail, and instead of leaving a message for her, I opted to try calling her back later on that day. So, I turned onto the highway toward home.

I was almost at the gate to the estate when my phone rang—Madison’s caller ID image showing on the screen. I smiled to myself as I punched in the gate code, then answered the call.

“Hello, Dr. Carpenter.”

“Gavin? Is it Drew? Is he awake? Did something happen?” Madison’s voice was frantic. She sounded out of breath. I

instantly felt guilt sink in. I hadn't realized that calling her personal cell phone number would do this to her. I usually made it a point to keep work numbers off my personal cell, but Madison had given me her number months ago with a request that if anything happened with Drew, she would be the first person I called.

"Oh, gosh. Madii, sorry. Nothing has happened with Drew. Last I checked he was still the same. Pam and Cecil haven't called me, so I think everything is as it was."

"Oh..."

The disappointment in her voice crushed me. It was difficult to hear her hurting. The way her emotions affected mine was proof to me that I had feelings for her. No one had ever affected me this way before. Not even my high-school sweetheart.

"I do have something I think you'd be interested in though. Something we could do together." I tried to lace my voice with as much hope and positivity as possible.

"Like what?" Madison sounded about as excited as a bear waking up from hibernation. But I didn't let it deter me.

"There is an online symposium next week about new therapies for coma patients. Some of them are trials, so Drew wouldn't qualify. But some of them may be helpful now. You could come to my place, and we could pop some popcorn and watch the streamed event. What do you think?"

Nearing my exit, I merged across traffic toward the outside lane. The line was quiet for a while, and I almost chimed in to offer more reasons why she should come and view the event. Just when I thought maybe she'd hung up, I heard her speak.

"Sure. I can do that. You say maybe it might help Drew?"

Of course, she latched on to the hope of helping Drew. It was the premise under which I was luring her to my home. But my ultimate goal was to help her see what everyone else in the world saw. Coma patients are mostly hopeless. She could let go, mourn, and move on. And I wanted to be the one to help her move on, the one she chose.

“Yeah, I mean. You’ll learn a lot more than just my ramblings. Plus, it will be good for you to be away from the hospital in a place that isn’t work or your mom’s house. And we get along pretty well. So, you know you’ll be comfortable. No pressure to be anything other than who you are. How does that sound?”

Madison thought it over for a moment and replied, “Yeah, okay. That sounds good. I don’t have a clue how to do any research to educate myself on this stuff. I’ve read every pamphlet the hospital has on it, but it’s confusing. I’m more of an auditory learner, so maybe hearing things helps.”

“Great, well I’m glad I invited you then.” I must have looked like a fool—driving around with a cheesy grin on my face. I passed a few neighbors out in their driveway talking. They waved at me, but I was on cloud nine and never waved back. They probably thought I was rude.

“Okay, well we don’t have to just have popcorn. Since you’re offering your place and allowing me to sit in on the symposium, maybe I’ll bring dinner. What is your favorite takeout?”

I heard some laughter in the background, likely one of Madison’s photography clients.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt you at work.”

“No problem. We were taking a break, so the kids didn’t get restless, and I noticed a missed call. So... dinner?”

I thought about it for a second. Something that was healthy but quick, and something wouldn’t make either of us embarrassed to eat in front of the other. “How about some grilled cheese from that new place, Melts?”

“Sounds perfect. I’ll order something for us both. You’ll just have to give me details about time and day. I’ll make it work.”

We chatted for a moment about the symposium, what she might encounter. She asked surprisingly relevant questions, which took my ego down a notch. If I was going to convince her to move on I would really have my work cut out for me.

MAD II

Home just didn't feel like home ever since I moved in with Drew. I'd visit for dinner or every once in a while, I'd sleep over—like on Christmas when Mom and I would stay up late hanging tinsel and wrapping presents. But for the most part, I'd really moved on from my parents' house being home. Now when I went for dinner, I even knocked on the door, which felt foreign to me too.

Since Drew went into a coma, I felt like an alien wandering around, trying to find my home. Tonight, was no different as I turned into the driveway and shut off the engine. Dad's Harley sat next to the pair of jet skis in their garage, door open as if he'd just been in his workshop. Lights shone out the windows of the house onto the front porch. Something smelled delicious, so I knew Mom had been cooking. Every once in a while, Mom invited me to dinner. I usually waited until Violet, my younger sister, was planning a visit home from college to accept the invites, because it made it a bit easier to cope with the fact that I had to make the drive alone. I'd moved to New Orleans from the small rural town more than a hundred miles north of the city to be with Drew.

Nostalgia hit me as I walked up the pathway toward the house. The heat of the deep south mixed with humid air blowing across the bayou and through the houses that were packed down the narrow street reminded me of childhood. Growing up, Violet and I would ride bikes down this street, chasing cars and roughhousing with all the boys in the neighborhood. It's where I got my love of adventure-seeking.

Once, we had taken bedsheets from our beds and climbed into the neighbor boy's club house. With nothing more than a tight grip on the four corners of the sheets, Violet and I leapt from the 20-foot drop. I tucked and rolled; Violet wasn't so lucky. A sprained wrist and a fractured femur landed her in bed for weeks and crutches for weeks after that. And it landed me on dish duty for a whole month.

I peered up at the old tree in the backyard of the home next to my parents' and sighed. Life was so simple back then. Back when the only worry we had was how much homework Mrs. Edwards was going to give us, or telling time meant watching for the streetlights to come on to warn us that curfew was near.

Anymore, life seemed so complicated and overwhelming. It seemed like when adulthood hit me, so did the reality that I had been so naïve as a child. I hadn't lived a sheltered life. In fact, I remember clearly when my Aunt Beverly died of breast cancer. I was so young I made her a get-well card, and my daddy took it to her because that's what good fathers do. I recall the pain in his eyes when I handed it to him, the way tears welled and rolled down his cheeks. I wasn't naïve of the pain, but I also hadn't understood it.

More than anything in life, I wish I could reverse time to a few moments—when all the understanding in the world could have made the difference. How gravity works, so Violet hadn't broken her leg. How cancer destroys and ruins things, so I could have given Daddy a hug instead of a card for his dead sister. How in a moment, life would be over. A single breath stolen was enough to stop every dream you have in life, derail your future, and remove every trace of hope.

“She's still up there.” The deep baritone voice of my father pulled me from my thoughts. I glanced over to see him standing next to me, staring up at that old tree house. He had a rag in his hands, wiping grease from his fingers. His hair was thinner than I remembered, his eyes had a few more wrinkles, but his smile was just as warm and compassionate.

“Daddy.” I threw my arms around him in a sideways hug, and he carefully embraced me, pressing his wrists to my back instead of his messy fingers.

“Welcome home, sweetheart. It’s been a while.” He stepped back and continued wiping his hands. “Momma is making fresh peach cobbler, just the way you like. She always goes out of her way when you visit like this. I think she misses you.”

“I miss you guys too. Just hasn’t felt the same lately.” Dad headed for the door, and I followed, head down staring at my sneakers. The cobbled path weaved between the hydrangea bushes and past the water feature Dad had installed at one point. The small headstone for our dog Brutus still lay at the foot of the lamppost next to the porch. Not much changed in small towns.

“Oh, well, it’s pretty much the same. I reckon it’s you that’s done some changing. Life has a way of doing that to us, doesn’t it? We all grow and change in different ways, even if we have to be forced to do it.”

Dad pulled the squeaky screen door open and hollered out, “Becky, Madii is home. Come say hello, dear.” He gestured to the tray on the living room table. Mom had set out a pitcher of lemonade and glasses. “Help yourself, sweetheart.”

Lemonade didn’t appeal to me, but I sat and poured a glass anyway. It was strange to feel like a stranger in your own home. Same couch, same table, same carpet—different me. Dad was right. Life had changed me a lot. Not only was I not a small-town girl anymore, but I wasn’t human. Or at least I didn’t feel like it. I felt more like a zombie.

“Oh, Madii!” Mom rushed into the room and sat down so close to me she nearly knocked me over. She squeezed me so tightly I couldn’t breathe, and I had to push her away just to catch my breath. “Oh, honey it’s so good to see you. I’m so glad you agreed to come back even if Violet couldn’t be here. I know it’s a long drive. I’m sorry you had to do that alone. You can sleep over tonight if you need to.”

“Mom, really. It’s fine. I’m okay. And it’s good to see you too. Something smells delicious.” Changing the subject, I scooted away and picked up my lemonade. I sipped it carefully, praying they didn’t ask how I was doing with things, or how

Drew was. It was a topic that came up no matter who I talked to. No one cared to visit him, but everyone needed to know how he was.

It didn't make sense to me. If they cared enough to ask how he was doing, why not visit? Why not show up at my house and do my dishes for me when I was so distraught? I went home to shower and eat, and nothing else—spending every waking hour by his side praying he'd wake up. Oh, people cared. Just enough to get the gossip, but not enough to help out.

“How is Alice?” Mom folded her hands in her lap like a proper Southern belle, and I couldn't help but notice how she'd aged. Her skin looked paper thin; her fingers knobby like my grandmother's had been before she died.

“Alice is good. She and Henry got a new dog. They remodeled their kitchen too. It's nice.” Small talk—with my own parents. So, this is what life had become.

“And Henry?” Dad sat down, draping the greasy towel over his knee. “Isn't he ready for retirement yet? Seems he talked about that a while back.” Dad rested his hands on his knees and leaned back in his recliner, rocking slightly as he always did.

“Henry is good. He decided to stick it out a few more years. Hospital bills and all.” As I said the words, I felt the air in the room change. Like I'd spoken about the elephant and the elephant didn't like it. Awkward silence prevailed as I sipped lemonade. Mom poured a glass for Dad, then for herself, the dishes clanking against the tray.

There was a reason I didn't come home much. This would have been that reason.

“So, what's for dinner?” I asked awkwardly, hoping they got the point that I was not wanting to talk about Drew.

Mom must have taken the hint, because she got up and motioned for me to follow her as she started talking. “I've made cornbread and lentils, your favorite. And of course, it wouldn't be complete without peach cobbler. I talked to Violet the other day and she sends her best. She's in the middle of

finals now so she won't be home for a few weeks. Then only for a few days because she is taking more classes."

Mom rambled on about Violet and a half a dozen relatives I didn't even remember. When she broached the topic of me attending the family reunion, I gritted my teeth. It was bad enough having to dodge conversations about Drew with my parents. There was no way I was going to that mass-casualty event. No thank you.

"Dear, give the girl a break," Dad said, pulling out my chair. I smiled at him, relieved he stepped up. Then I sat down and let him nestle my chair beneath the table. Mom served up heaping portions of food onto plates, and into bowls and handed them out. She did so in silence, though Dad asked a few questions about my photography. I talked to him about the new camera I had bought, and the lens I was really enamored with lately.

But as soon as Mom sat down and took a bite, she pointed her fork at me with a squinted eye. I knew that look. It was the look that said, my entire night was about to get really horrible really fast. Like when Paul Revere just rode through town screaming about the British, but you didn't listen, and now they're upon you.

"You know, Madii, that Thomas Davies from West Chester is single again. He dumped Loretta Miles last week. After his wife died, he just can't find love anywhere. He's the football coach for Graham, and let me tell you, he is handsome." She winked and grinned, like she was giving me the best heads-up a girlfriend could give you.

"Thanks, Mom, but I'm not interested." And suddenly I wasn't interested in my food either. I pushed some lentils around with my spoon, their savory flavor no longer appealing to me.

"What do you mean you're not interested? He's a perfectly eligible bachelor. He's only one year older than you. I know you have that thing, but really now... You have to move on sometime." She plunged her fork into her cobbler, and Dad offered me a wince of sympathy.

I sighed, not wanting to get into it, but not feeling like I had a way out. I wished Dad would say something, but I knew he

was ultimately a pushover when it came to Mom and her matchmaking. To avoid responding hastily, I crammed a spoonful of lentils into my mouth, chewing slowly. Dad opened his mouth, then closed it—his responses stifled by the tension in the room. I could see the look of compassion in his eyes.

“And really, Thomas is very handsome. He goes to that Baptist church over on South Street, the one where you and Katie Henderson went a few times. Remember?”

“Mom, I am engaged to Drew.” The moment I let the words out of my mouth, my mom scoffed. I knew what was coming. I braced myself.

“Madison Elaine, you can’t stay hung up on someone who is never going to take care of you. You’ve been waiting a year and a half and you’ve nothing to show for that time.”

“Nothing to show for this time?” I stood, dropping my spoon in my dish. I knew I should never have come home. “I’ve grown as a person. I’m more independent than I’ve ever been. I know how to do things and take care of myself in ways I would never have been forced to learn had Drew did not have this accident. And what would be so wrong with him needing me to take care of him the rest of his life?” Tears stung my eyes. “I’m sorry, Daddy.” I walked over to him and offered a peck on his cheek. “I’ll call you tomorrow. Goodbye, Mom. It’s time for me to leave.”

“But you’ve only been here a half hour.” She rose and offered a frown.

“I’ll call tomorrow.” I headed out the door, scooping my purse off the sofa as I went. My shoulders were heavy as I slumped into my seat. I knew better than to think this would have gone well. I needed comfort and reassurance, not a lecture. So, I called Gavin as I drove home. He understood my grief better than anyone—even Alice and Henry, who seemed to have moved on.

Gavin was quick to respond and offered me a sympathetic ear. We talked for most of the nearly two-hour drive. He was encouraging and offered more hope when we discussed the

symposium. Mostly, it was nice to not feel alone anymore, to have someone to talk to. I'd tried talking to Alice, but her only encouragement was to move on. With Gavin, he seemed to understand the heavy weight I couldn't seem to put down, and he helped me work around it. Like learning to dance in the rain.

I liked that about him. And I was slowly realizing that I really liked him as a person.

GAVIN

I had to admit, my plan to bring Madison around to understanding slowly, without feeling pressured by anyone personally was working. She sat on my couch, sunken in, with a concerned frown on her face for the first two sessions. I had rearranged my living room to focus everything on the television, the couch positioned opposite the TV, armchairs at the ends of the oblong room.

Her feet rested on the edge of the coffee table, knees bouncing, as the session shifted to the next speaker. We had eaten dinner already; the gourmet grilled cheese had hit the spot. The wrappers and empty drinks still lay scattered on the coffee table. Still despite how good the evening was going according to my plans; I couldn't help but feel sorry for Madison as her world unraveled one session at a time. She seemed to sink farther into the couch with each speaker.

“Need a tissue?” The tears rolling down her cheeks were an obvious indicator that she did, but I knew she was fiercely independent, so I waited. When she nodded, biting on her thumbnail, I hopped up and hurried to the bathroom to grab a roll of toilet paper. I was suddenly aware of how my apartment was less than welcoming to a woman. I didn't even have a box of tissues.

When I returned, Madison was sitting with her legs curled up to her chest, her face leaning on her knees. She had muted the television and the remote lay on the sofa cushion next to her. I sat down next to her gently, keeping an appropriate distance,

and cleared my throat. She looked up at me, took the tissues, and started sobbing.

My gut instinct was to draw her into my chest and hold her there until she was calm, but she wasn't mine yet. I had to be patient with her heart, or she would never trust me. So, I laid a hand on her back and spoke in soothing tones.

"It's okay, Madii. I'm here. I know it's heavy." She wiped her eyes then hugged her knees again, sobbing as she curled up. For about 15 minutes we sat while she let the damn burst. I wondered how long it had been since she cried like this. She shed a few tears here and there in the hospital room, but not like this. Not like the night we met, when I had told her and Drew's parents that he wasn't going to make it.

She looked frail sitting there on my couch in an oversized t-shirt and yoga pants. Her eyes red-rimmed from crying so much, her nose puffy from all the blowing, she looked up at me before wiping her face again.

"Is it true?" Her lip quivered as she spoke. She wanted me to tell her none of what she was hearing was true. I could see the desperation in her eyes; that alone broke my heart. "Is what they say true?"

"They are the leading experts in this field. I was invited to this symposium because it is meant to offer the latest in science and statistics for patients like Drew." Saying his name aloud when I knew how I felt about her left a bitter taste in my mouth. Guilt played at my heart, knowing I wanted her to be mine, but she still had not let go of the past yet.

"So, it is true?" she whimpered, crying more. The tears seem to never stop, sluicing down her cheeks and soaking into her shirt.

"Yes, it's true."

I was ready for the onslaught of emotion, the wailing, and the tears. What I hadn't been prepared for was how she would dive into my chest, wrap her arms around me, and cling to me. Her breathing was choppy and erratic as she sobbed, so I held her, relaxing against the back of the couch.

She smelled like vanilla and citrus, and her body fit snugly against mine. She grabbed handfuls of my t-shirt, almost as if she were pleading with me to make the truth not hurt so bad, to stop the pain. But the only thing I could do was be there for her, to listen or advise.

When she calmed and sat up, I offered her the roll of toilet paper with a grimace. “Sorry I was ill-prepared. I don’t really buy tissues. I think it’s a guy thing.”

She smiled through the tears, her puffy eyes offering a melancholy acceptance of my apology. “I should be the one apologizing. I came over here to prove a point, and all I did was end up wasting your time.”

“Prove a point? To whom? What point? Madison, this was not a waste of my time.” I straightened on the couch and turned to face her.

She dabbed at her eyes again, wincing when she touched the tender spot on her nose. I really should have gotten tissues. The toilet paper had made her nose raw from blowing.

“To my mom, to Alice, to myself. I don’t know.”

“What point are you trying to prove?” I could tell she was feeling awkward with a wad of tissues in her hand, so I held my hand out. She cringed but laid the used wadded-up toilet paper into my palm. I carried them to the trash can in the kitchen as I listened to her.

“You started this whole thing when you suggested I go do things, get out and live my life. Alice laid it on pretty thick that day. Then my mom... well Mom just always lays it on thick. She thinks I should have moved on and gotten married to someone else by now. She doesn’t understand—no one does.”

I sat down on the edge of the couch next to her and took her hand. “I do, Madii. I understand completely.”

She looked down at her fingers, but she didn’t pull her hand away. I wasn’t about to pressure her because whatever she felt was a mountain of emotions more than she could handle already. But God did I want to hold her again. Watching her

hurting wrenched my heart. It made me want to destroy everything that could possibly cause her pain.

“I know.” Timidly she looked up at me through damp lashes. “Thank you for being a good friend. You’ve been so understanding and even this—“she gestured at the TV which was still playing the next lecture “—was special. I know you have been saying these same things to me for weeks and I just haven’t been listening. Drew might not ever wake up. Even if he does, he may have brain damage. And Alice is right; he wouldn’t want me to delay my whole life just waiting for him. I just don’t know how to move on.”

The urge to pull her to my chest was nearly unbearable. I swallowed the lump forming in my throat and placed her tiny hand between mine, carefully rubbing the back of her hand with my thumb. I didn’t know what to say. If I opened my mouth, I knew I would make a fool of myself, but it was almost like I could taste it. She was mine; she just had to come to that realization on her own, and God did I want her to.

“Maybe I should go...” She rose to leave, and I followed suit, standing next to her. Her petite frame next to me made her seem all the more helpless. “Thank you for the invitation, but I can’t handle even one more lecture. I think I get the point now.”

Madison removed her hand from my grip and headed toward the door. I didn’t want her to leave, but I also resolved to not pressure her about anything. I didn’t want anyone to say I had manipulated her. It had to be her to decide that my friendship or companionship was what she wanted. So, I followed her to the door, opening it and leaning on it as she stood there in the open doorway.

The porch light shone down on her tired eyes, flecks of deep color—almost purple—visible in her black hair. The way she looked up at me, with a longing for something different, it tugged at my heart. I reached up to push a stray hair behind her ear and she caught my hand, holding it against her chest.

“He used to do that...”

“He was a good man, Madii.”

She closed her eyes and stood there with my hand pressed to her cheek. I could see her fighting back the tears, her bottom lip pinched between her teeth. When she opened her eyes, I saw something different there. Her eyes weren't the eyes of a grieving woman. They pleaded with me, but not to make him come back. They pleaded to me to make her heart stop aching.

She stepped closer to me, back into the threshold of the house. I could see her chest pounding, as if she wanted to say something but couldn't. So I backed up, giving her space to come back into the house. As I did, I moved my hand away from her face.

"Is everything okay?" I asked, unsure what she was thinking.

"Yeah. But Alice is right. I need to stop running away and hiding every time I feel something. My mom is right; I need to move on—I just don't know how. I don't know what it looks like. I don't know how you just move on when you love someone, and they just disappear on you. And I don't know what the hell I'm doing right now, except that I like you. A lot."

"You are one of the sweetest guys I've ever met. You haven't once tried to push me to be different, or to change me. I know you like me—you've made that clear. But even in all that, you've just been so amazing. Gavin, I..."

Before I knew what was happening, Madison locked her fingers behind my neck and stood on her tiptoes, pulling me to her height. Her lips touched mine lightly; they were soft and supple.

I hooked an arm around her waist and did what I'd been craving to do all evening. Her body pressed against mine like a hand in a glove. As her lips parted, I pushed my tongue against them, testing her to see what she was wanting. And when I felt her back away, her hands releasing my neck, I pulled away.

"Wow... I can't believe I just did that." If her face hadn't already been bright red from crying, I was certain it would be red from embarrassment.

“Don’t be,” I told her, pushing the same stray hair off her face again. “I’ve been waiting to do that all night, but I know you are going through something really horrible right now. I need you to understand I really care about you, and I won’t push you at all. If all you need is a friend, then let me be the best friend you’ve ever had. Okay?”

She smiled at me, a genuine warmth emanating from her face. “Okay, well then, I don’t want to go home yet. So, can I stay a bit longer? Maybe we can share a glass of wine? Or a beer? Not sure what you drink.”

“Beer it is.” Adrenaline surged through my body as I shut the door, turning the deadbolt. My groin pulsed with desire, but I tempered the feeling by heading straight to the fridge for our drinks. Madison settled back on the couch and when I returned, she had pulled her hair up, knotting it on top of her head. She was stunning. I couldn’t control the arousal in my body, but I tried.

I sat down next to her and handed her the beer, which she sipped carefully for a second. Then she took a deep breath and tipped it up, downing the contents in a few gulps. I chuckled at her. Either she was as nervous as I was, or she was preparing to let her inner vixen out. Either way, she was everything I wanted, and I hoped she felt the same about me.

MAD II

The beer took the edge off. Everything I'd heard over the past two hours sitting on Gavin's couch learning about coma patients had left me feeling distraught. Normally I would hide, run away and find a place to sort out my emotions alone. But I was sick of mourning alone. And I didn't want to go home and sulk by myself again.

"So..." Gavin was so sweet. I knew he would never push me to do anything with him. He'd made that much clear. That's why I kissed him. Because for weeks I'd done nothing but stew over whether it was time to move on. Because Alice had pounded it into my head that Gavin liked me. And even though I hated to admit it, Mom knew I wasn't happy alone like this.

"So..." I set the empty beer bottle on the coffee table next to the trash from dinner. I didn't know what came next, but I knew what I was feeling inside. The torrent of raw emotion left me mentally exhausted. I longed for the physical comfort I knew Gavin wanted to give me. I felt it when he kissed me; his body responded to me.

He didn't make a move. It wasn't necessarily a bad thing. I knew guys who were the strong silent type and given his stance on staying in the friendzone until I was ready, I knew if something was going to develop between us, it would have to be my move. I just hadn't made any moves on any guys in years, except the one man I'd never be with again.

It was awkward. Me sitting there watching Gavin try to hide the way his body wanted me. He may as well have been

tearing his hair out, the forced poker face was his tell. Thoughts of Drew pummeled my mind, but I pushed them away. He was gone now. I had to move on. And 20-year-old Madison would have made her move by now. So why was I frozen on that couch unable to lean forward and take what we both wanted so desperately?

My chest heaved; I licked my lips. My hands curled into fists which I shoved between my legs, hoping Gavin didn't notice my nerves. Then he surprised me, leaning forward and cupping both of my cheeks in his large hands. His strength surprised me as he kissed me deeply, stubble scratching at my chin and cheeks. I ran my hands up his sides and rested them on the backs of his shoulders.

"Is this, okay?" he asked me, giving me a moment to breathe. I only nodded. I didn't know if it was okay. Fuck, I didn't know what I even wanted in that moment, except for him to kiss me again, and he did.

He leaned in harder, rising up on his knees and towering over me on the couch as I lay back. He followed me down, pinning me to the cushions, and I kicked my shoes off as I positioned myself beneath him.

Feeling the weight of a man on top of me again made feelings stir to life inside of me that I hadn't felt in months. My groin ached to be touched. I clenched inside, moaning softly as his hand found my breast and squeezed it gently.

Gavin rose up, peering down at me. "Are you sure this is okay? We don't have to do this. You don't have to do this to make me happy."

"Just shut up and kiss me already."

The grin he gave me was all I needed. Goodbye depressed, stuck-inside-yourself Madison. Hello adventure-seeker.

Gavin lifted up a little, letting me get my legs situated, and I wrapped them around his waist. The only thing I could think about in that moment was getting him inside of me. It was the freest I felt since the moment I jumped into that water to go scuba diving. My mind was free from every negative emotion,

and I was there with Gavin, in the moment, feeling electrified by every touch.

My hands worked at his t-shirt, pulling it up, so he took a moment to yank it off. When he did, I pulled mine off too, unhooking my bra afterward.

Gavin's hands smoothed across my skin, a thumb flicking one of my nipples before his teeth found it and softly bit down. I arched my back upward, finding him pleased by the reaction. He grunted softly, sucking my nipple into his mouth as he squeezed my breast. The way he nestled himself between my legs revealed his hunger for me. His hard member pressing against my clit.

"Shit..." I hissed as he bit my other nipple. I laced my hands through his thick brown hair, tightening down to a fist. I guided his head lower, across my navel and below. Gavin kissed and nipped at my skin, finding the rise of my hip bone with his teeth. Then he tugged at my yoga pants, pulling them down. I raised my hips as he backed up, taking down my pants and panties at the same time.

As he pulled them off, I shivered. My breasts turned to instant peaks on my chest, the air conditioning chilling me to the bone. He rose up, taking his own pants off and tossing them. The last thing he did was peel my socks off one at a time. With my right ankle in hand, he kissed the inside of my right calf, raking his teeth upward toward my knee. His hands spread my legs as his lips kissed farther upward toward my moisture.

"Is this, okay?" he asked again, carefully watching my face.

"Yes... It's okay."

He kissed again, sliding a hand closer to the ache. "Are you sure this is okay?" His finger tickled my clit, teasing me, making my body shudder with want as he bit the inside of my thigh.

"Oh, my fucking God, it's okay..." I moaned, wishing he'd just do it.

"And you like this," he said, as his tongue traced up to the top of my mound, slipping down to flick my clit.

“God, just fuck me.”

“You want me to fuck you?”

“Please...” I grabbed his hair in my fists again and pulled his lips closer to my moisture.

Gavin obliged, sucking my clit, licking and drinking me in. The sensation of his tongue sinking into my pussy almost made me cum right there, but he stopped before I could. I whimpered as he pulled away, slowly crawling over me.

“What about protection? I don’t want you to have any surprises a few weeks from now.” His sincerity was touching.

“I’m on the pill.” I was growing impatient with him, but I grinned. “Would you please put your cock inside of me and fuck me?” I raised my eyebrows playfully, but his expression grew very serious.

“I don’t want to fuck you, Madison. I want you to feel good, but I want you to know that I care about you a lot, so I’m going to do this slowly. Alright?” The sincerity in his eyes told me he’d wanted to do this for a long time. And strangely, I felt like we were in sync.

I’d never looked at him this way until Alice put it in my head, and now I couldn’t see him as anything other than a man I really wanted to make love to. I nodded, biting my lip as I pulled his shoulders down.

He slid into me, sinking his dick to my back wall in one thrust. I gasped as he pushed in, the sensation so amazing I had to clench around him just to stop my body from shuddering again. His heat filled me as he let his weight sink onto me. I dug my fingers into his back, spreading my legs wider to invite him deeper.

As he began thrusting, I panted, and whimpered. “Fuck, it’s been so long. God, you feel so good.” I clawed at his back, suddenly frantic for him to go faster.

As if he read my mind, he sped up, pushing me to my limits. With a hand on one of my breasts and one looped beneath my back, grabbing a handful of my hair, he bit down on my neck, sucking and nibbling as he fucked me. The way his pelvis

rubbed over my clit was so perfect. I felt my body tensing for orgasm already. It really had been too long.

“Shit... Gavin...” I moaned, clawing at his back. “Fuck me.”

“God, you feel good. You are so amazing.” His words in my ear made me shudder. As he bit down on my neck again, my body gave way to the flood of hormones. I convulsed beneath him, clenching around his dick and sinking my nails into his back. I grabbed his ass, pulling him deeper inside of me, and he pounded me. The whole couch shook, the feet scooting across the tile floor.

“God... oh god...” I spasmed, feeling his girth slide in and out of me, and then I felt him tense too.

The way his body seemed to stiffen right as he released, felt amazing. His thrusts slowed a bit, becoming more purposeful. Our bodies twined on that couch, I felt him release inside of me, hot and sticky. It ran out between thrusts, but I didn't care. My body was so giddy from my own orgasm.

Gavin lay there on top of me panting for a minute, and I could do nothing but catch my breath. Time stood still. In that moment we were one, our heartbeats coming down together. Then he pulled out and rolled me to the side so he could lay behind me. I had the same strange feeling of relief that I used birth control as I always did when Drew and I had sex, which made reality come crashing like a breaker over me.

I was glad my back was to him, so he didn't see the look of horror that had to be on my face. Not only was he not Drew, but he was easily 10 years older than me. I lay there in his arms trying to calm my racing mind. I let my impulsivity lead me right into the jaws of this situation and now I was being digested alive.

“Are you okay?” he whispered in my ear. Then he kissed the side of my head as I nodded, unable to speak for fear of giving away my revulsion. Not that I was repulsed by him. It was actually quite the opposite. He was perfect, amazing, everything I imagined.

No, I was mortified that I had let my grief propel me to this point. To where I threw myself at him instead of just telling him how I had started to feel things for him.

“You don’t seem okay.” He held me tighter against his chest. “If you’re not okay, that’s alright. You don’t have to be.”

Tears burned my eyes, and I didn’t want to hold them back. “I’m so confused.”

“Yeah, I can imagine. That’s why I asked so many times if what I was doing was okay.” He kissed the side of my head again, and I turned to my back to look up at him.

“So, I made this choice. I stayed on purpose. I knew what I was doing. Why do I feel this?” I searched his eyes for answers but only found compassion.

“We do crazy things when we’re hurting. You’re not bad or wrong for feeling what you feel. You just have to sort it out until you understand what you’re feeling and what you want.”

I let the tears fall freely. I knew what I wanted. The only problem was it stood at odds with everything I’d told everyone for months—for more than a year. I wanted Gavin and I wanted him to want me back. I just didn’t know how to tell Alice that—or Henry. And I also had no clue what to do about Drew. It wasn’t like this decision had come lightly either.

When you sit next to a coma patient for months on end, wondering if they’re ever going to wake up, you start to question everything you know about life. I knew that my heart was moving on; I just couldn’t admit it until now. The guilt of telling his mother that I had started having feelings for someone else was too overwhelming to bear. And the fact that I had argued with everyone about this exact thing was a kick to the gut. My pride had never allowed me to admit that I might possibly be okay with letting go.

Gavin had only been a friend—Drew’s doctor—because I had never told him how sweet it was that he checked on me, or that he lingered around the room even though he had no obligation. I kept him at arm’s length during every discussion because I knew how dangerous he was. I liked him.

And now this.

“It’s okay, Madison. Whatever it is, we will get through it together. And I won’t leave your side, just the way I haven’t left your side yet. Okay?”

Gavin held me as I cried. There were too many swirling emotions going through my head and heart. I didn’t know which were right and which were wrong. I just knew I felt safe there with him.

GAVIN

A clap of thunder didn't deter us from our game of hoops. Jiles, Nick and I continued on despite the few sprinkles.

We'd looked at the radar and I decided the worst of the storm would go north of us, so we played on. I dribbled past Jiles, using my arm to shield his attempts to steal the ball, and tucked inside, planting my feet and performing a perfect layup. The ball sank through the net with a swoosh, and I cheered, fists pumping in the air.

"Cheater!" Jiles chuckled, jogging to chase the ball. He dribbled back to the baseline as the wind picked up a bit, pointing at Nick. I blocked the pass, stealing the ball and turning for a quick two-point basket.

"Wow, you're on fire today, Carpenter." Nick chased the ball this time and passed it to me.

"Yeah, just having a good game day." I shot again, sinking yet another basket. The game was hardly a game when I had a good day. My parents thought I could have managed college ball while doing my studies for med school, but I had opted to leave basketball as a hobby back then. Now it was a great source of relaxing and releasing stress. Today, however, I had no stress, so it was just a good time.

"You seem to be in a great mood today." Jiles swiped the ball off the ground where it was rolling away and bounced it a few times before taking a shot that ricocheted off the rim.

"Yeah, maybe I am." I caught the flying ball, offering a chest pass to Nick, who took another shot. He cheered as his shot

went in and Jiles claimed the ball for himself again.

“Somebody got laid.” Nick laughed, then covered his mouth and raised his eyebrows, as if his joke were a scandal.

“You guys are idiots.” Not wanting to divulge personal details about anything in my life, I strolled over to my bag and pulled out my water jug.

“So, it’s true?” Nick followed me across the court to the benches and sat down, reaching into his bag and grabbing his own water.

“Whatever it is, is none of your business. I don’t like to talk about my personal life too much, you know?” I chugged some water and slapped the cap back on. “Besides, we’re here for ball, not for chit chat. What are we? A bunch of women?”

“Nah, but now that you let the cat out of the bag that you liked that girl, we need to know the details. You know both Nick and I have a ball and chain, so let us live vicariously through you, man.” Jiles tucked the ball under his arm and grabbed his wrist. The expression on his face told me he wasn’t taking no for an answer, so I gave them as few details as I could but got them off my back.

“So, Madii and I had dinner one night. We talked. She let me know she’s ready to move on. I think she might want to see where this goes.” I tried to sip my water and act cool, but these jokers wouldn’t let up. They laughed and pointed.

Nick slapped me across the back and grinned. “So, you got laid?”

“How did you assume that from what I just told you?” I joined them in a chuckle.

“You’re finally not brooding anymore. First time I seen you smile in months I think.” Jiles set the ball at his feet and picked up his water bottle. Another clap of thunder rumbled across the sky just as my phone rang.

I sorted through my bag trying to find my phone, but it rang out before I found it. The caller ID said it was Tricia, one of the RNs on the floor at the hospital today. I wasn’t on call, so I

ignored it and shoved the phone into the pocket of my gym shorts.

“Another game?” I said standing.

Jiles rolled the ball in my direction. “Not me. I have to head out. We have a plumber coming tonight. See how exciting married life is? This is why I need those juicy details from you.”

“Ah,” I laughed, “but you have it all wrong. See you get to have sex whenever you want because you have a built-in partner. If I get laid it’s because some poor woman felt sorry for me.”

“So, you did get laid!” Nick snatched the ball up from the ground at my feet and laughed, then took off toward the court.

“See you at work tomorrow,” Jiles said as he picked up his bag and headed toward the parking lot.

My phone rang again, so I pulled it out of my pocket to see it was Tricia again. One call was a fluke, but two in a row? I answered the call.

“Dr. Carpenter.”

“Yeah, Doctor, you need to come in. We’ve had a problem we think you should address.”

“What’s that, Tricia? Is there an emergency?” I wasn’t massively concerned, given that Dr. Rutger was the surgeon on call today and the fact that all of my patients were either recovering from surgery well or in a coma.

“It’s Drew Heintz, sir. He’s had a seizure. Dr. Rutger and Dr. Smith are running some tests now, but since he’s technically under your care, they wanted you here.”

My heart sank a bit. If Madison found out there had been a change in Drew’s status, even one for the worse, she may change her mind about me. A seizure wasn’t necessarily a bad thing, nor was it good, but it meant things were happening.

“Sure, I’ll be right over. Have Gary send me any updates to my cell on the way.” I hung up, knowing Gary Rutger was one

of the leading neurologists in the city. Drew was in good hands with him, but that wasn't what concerned me.

"Come on, man! It's gonna let loose soon. Let's get some one-on-one going." Nick bounced the ball a few times as he shouted at me.

"Nah, I can't. I just got called in. One of my patients had an episode. I'll have to catch you later, alright?" I waved Nick off as I picked up my bag and water bottle. I needed to figure out what was happening before Madison did, so I could prepare myself for the inevitable.

* * *

After a fast shower and changing into more appropriate work attire, I headed into the hospital. Tricia met me as soon as the elevator opened with Drew's chart in hand. Dr. Tanya Smith was really the one overseeing his case and seeing that he had no need for surgery for the past 16 months, I really should have just let her take care of things, but Madison had been on my mind nonstop. So, I made my rounds anyway. Now things had changed, judging by the numbers on this chart, I knew why she was calling me in for the consult.

Tricia brought me up to speed as we walked to Drew's room. His mother hovered by his bedside and his father sat wringing his hat in hand. Thankfully, I did not see Madison in the room. Before heading in the room, I pulled Tanya to the side.

"So, what's the update?" I had invested in this emotionally more than what was healthy, and given state laws about treating family and friends, I should recuse myself. But I hadn't divulged any details of my personal interactions with Madison, so for now, at least, in the state board's eyes, I was still able to work on his case.

"Well, Gavin. It's not great. You can see from yourself from the readouts that Drew suffered a grand mal. I don't have to tell you that this is not a good prognosis for him. Eighty percent of patients who have late-post-traumatic events like this will devolve into epilepsy. The fact that he hasn't awoken

makes this more critical. In the absence of subdural hematoma, it could mean his brain is shutting down.” Tanya spoke clinical language that only doctors understand, so I was thankful for Drew’s parents’ sake that I was there.

“Thanks, Tanya. And the meds you put him on?” I flicked my eyes to see Alice crying and Henry comforting her.

“Anti-seizing cocktail. Routine stuff.” She thumbed through a file. “We will keep him hooked up to the EEG for a while. You know, seizures like this that are too late are just not good.” She clicked her tongue. “Don’t set them up for false hope. Give them the facts as they are. Last thing we need is a lawsuit because we told them activity in the brain could be a good thing.”

“Any activity means hope, Tanya.” I took the file from her and winked at Tricia. “But you’re right. I’ll give it to them simply. Thank you for calling me.”

Tanya nodded and walked away. I got a glimpse of Dr. Rutger as he exited the room and headed away from me down the hallway. I lingered there studying the chart a bit longer, even after Tricia walked away. Giving Alice and Henry this news wouldn’t be as difficult since Madii wasn’t here, but it was never easy breaking bad news to a loved one of a patient—even when you weren’t emotionally involved with them.

“Mr. and Mrs. Heintz.” I stepped into the room and gave them a moment to compose themselves. Alice wiped her face and Henry walked toward me with an outstretched hand.

“Gavin, we told you to call us by our names.” He frowned as he shook my hand. “How are you? And can you give us some update here? What happened?”

Alice ambled to the sofa and sat down, dabbing her eyes again. I gestured for Henry to sit with her, then pulled up a chair. As I sat, I took a deep breath to prepare myself. Henry looked at me with stern eyes, as if he were willing himself to be strong for Alice’s sake.

“So, Drew had what we call a ‘late-post-traumatic seizure.’ That means most seizures in brain injury patients occur within

the first seven days from the point of injury.” I collected my thoughts then continued. “The fact that there has been activity could be good or bad.”

Alice’s face fell, and Henry put his arm around her.

“So, the good. Tell us that first.” Henry squeezed, jostling her a little as he summoned a brave face again.

“Well, the good news is that of the known patients who awakened from comas this prolonged, most of them had events where brain activity increased slightly or substantially for weeks or months before awakening. A seizure is classified as activity, and a few coma patients did have this.”

“And the bad news?” Alice’s lip quivered. She clutched her hands together in her lap, her eyes intensely on me.

“Seizures this late in the game mean that more seizures are likely. If he wakes up, he may suffer from epilepsy permanently.”

“And we still have no way of knowing if he will wake up?” Henry slid Alice’s hand into his and held it. I watched their hands shake. This had to be so devastating for them.

“There is no way to tell. All we can do is watch the EEG and wait.” I wished I had better news for them, but Tanya was right. If I gave them false hope now, I would feel worse if Drew just passed away. “We have a team of experts watching him round the clock. He is in great hands here.”

I wanted to bring up Madison and whether they had told her or not, but I didn’t want to sound like an asshole. So I tiptoed around the topic hoping they’d volunteer the information.

“Has Madii been by today?”

“Oh, heavens no. Thank goodness. She would be distraught.” Alice smoothed her hands over her pants several times nervously. “The last thing she needs is to focus on Drew right now. She has her whole life ahead of her and she’s just been sitting here wasting it away.” She peered out the window where rain fell freely now, the thunder a faint hint of what it was when I’d been outdoors.

“Looks like the weather knew what sort of day it would be.” Henry pulled Alice to his chest and kissed her forehead. “Thank you, Gavin.”

I stood, offering my hand. “We’ll watch and wait. In the meantime, since Madii is not next of kin, I can’t divulge medical information to her. So, if you feel she needs to know, you should tell her.”

Henry stood and shook my hand again. “Alice is right. If nothing has changed, and we’re still just playing a waiting game, then Madison should just live her life. She needs to move on. It just breaks my heart watching her waiting for something that will likely never happen.”

I squeezed his hand firmly. “Right. Well, I will go talk to Dr. Rutger and see where we stand. Maybe he has some other insights for us. I’ll check back a little later.”

Relieved to know they wouldn’t be telling Madison, a new feeling washed over me. Guilt. I knew according to state boards, I was doing the right thing. But that didn’t get rid of the feeling I was keeping secrets from her.

MAD II

The mall was packed with shoppers, which was annoying. I didn't care for shopping much anyway, but Lexi and Crystal loved it. They'd drag me along on their shopping trips as if I was one of the girls, but I'd much rather have been hiking the Grand Canyon or riding dirt bikes in the desert.

I avoided a kid with a very messy ice cream cone and managed to keep my cool while walking through the crowd. Lexi was on the hunt for a new bikini, and Crystal was along for the companionship. I was there because they refused to let me sit around and mope, and for the first time since the accident, I felt like they were right. I needed to be around other people.

The conversation had evolved from small talk to girl talk, and then Lexi turned to me with wide eyes and focused it right on me. "So, when are you going to date that hot doctor?"

I chuckled. If they only knew. "I'm not. Gavin and I are actually friends though. We have lunch—had lunch—quite often. But I'm not really going to be spending much time around the hospital anymore." My heart sank. When Alice told me Drew had taken a turn for the worse, I had a million questions. She didn't go into details, and that was fine. Knowing cold hard facts would only make it more real. Drew wasn't coming back to me.

"So, there is no reason why you can't date him?" Lexi poked me in the ribs and hooked her arm through mine, leading me into the candle and lotion store. It smelled of a hundred different pleasing fragrances, all mingled into one sweet scent.

“Leave her alone, Lex.” Crystal picked up a blue candle and took the lid off, smelling it. She offered it to me, but I pushed it away. “Madii, you need to just take your time. Mourning someone isn’t easy, and it doesn’t happen overnight. Jumping into another relationship could be dangerous.”

Crystal’s words were sound wisdom. I really liked Gavin, but what happened the other night was spontaneous and probably a bit stupid. Just thinking about the way he touched me made my cheeks burn. I gave up that wild side of myself when I started dating Drew. I wasn’t proud of my behavior, even if I could rationalize it as being emotionally vulnerable and needing comfort.

“So, you’re not telling us something.” Lexi stood in my way, holding a bottle of lotion. She sniffed it, scrunched her nose, and closed the lid. “That’s awful.” After she put the bottle back on the shelf, she turned on me. “I can tell by the look on your face that your mind is somewhere else. And given the blush on your cheeks, I’d say you’ve already done a bit of dabbling that you haven’t told us about.”

Crystal cracked a smile and eyed me. “Is she right?”

My shoulders sank and I rolled my eyes as the grin spread across my face. I couldn’t hide things from my best friends no matter how hard I tried. We’d known each other for far too long. I tried to hide my deepening blush behind a cinnamon scented candle, but Lexi pulled it away.

“Dish.” She took the candle and set it down. “I want all the details.”

“God, Lexi. You’re so pushy.” Crystal gave Lexi a playful shove and giggled. “But for real, tell us what happened.”

Both of them stared at me. I was not getting out of this.

“So, Gavin invited me over to his place for this symposium. It was online through his TV, so we just had takeout and watched the lectures. Of course, it was all bad news. Every lecture just made me feel worse and worse. I kept thinking how Drew was never coming back to me, and how Alice and my mom were pushing me to start my life again.”

I paused, biting my lower lip.

“And?” Lexi urged.

“And, before I left his house, I kissed him.” I tried to keep the rest from coming out, but they knew me better than anyone.

“That’s not all. I can see it in your eyes. Why are you smirking?” Crystal offered a shocked smile as she pulled me down an aisle of scented bath salts, Lexi following closely. “What did you do?”

“We... uh, we kinda...” I stammered with my words, slightly embarrassed.

“You had sex with him?” Lexi let out a whisper shout, and two older ladies holding bottles of bath salt looked up at us in surprise. Both of them smiled and looked down as if they knew they’d overheard something they shouldn’t have.

“Shhh!” I hissed behind my grin. “Yes, but God, do you have to tell the whole store?”

Lexi and Crystal high-fived and Lexi wrapped me in a huge hug. “I’m so happy for you. I never thought you were going to move on. It’s so good to see you smiling again!”

I pushed her away gently and shared in the moment with them. It felt good to be a bit happier again, even if it meant leaving Drew behind. That bittersweet feeling crept across my face as a furrowed brow, which Crystal noticed.

“What’s wrong?” She stood in my way so I couldn’t escape her keen eye.

“It’s just that... Well, what if Drew wakes up? Does that mean I cheated on him?” The sick feeling rolling around my stomach was awful. Just the thought of breaking that promise to him hurt my heart.

“Listen... grief looks like a big gray box. On the outside it’s ugly and painful, but when you open it up it’s really just a box full of happy memories, right? That grief over Drew is just proof that he was real, and he was in your life. That’s all that you need to know. Let the rest come naturally. Go at your own

pace, and don't let anyone push you. Not even Gavin." Crystal glared at Lexi as she opened her mouth to reply.

"Or my mom I suppose." I sighed. Maybe this moving on stuff really was what I was supposed to be doing.

And as if he could read my mind and know the exact perfect moment to call, my phone rang, and it was Gavin. I offered a wide-eyed expression to the girls and held a finger in front of my lips to shush them. Then I answered the call.

"Hey, Gavin." It was a bit awkward given the fact that I'd left his house the morning after sex and hadn't even seen him since. I was avoiding the hospital, but that had nothing to do with him and everything to do with me trying to move on. Still, he probably thought I was avoiding him.

"Hey, Madii. I haven't seen you around for a while."

Lexi made kissy faces at me, and Crystal yanked her away so I could have privacy. I watched them disappear across the store, and then glanced at the older ladies, who were absorbed in their shopping again.

"Yeah, well I'm taking your advice about moving on. No need to sit by his bed every single day if I'm going to let it go and heal, right?" I twirled a strand of hair around my finger as I spoke.

"I'm proud of you for making such a hard decision. But I miss you."

His words pricked my heart. I missed him too, even though it was odd and awkward, and I really shouldn't be feeling what I felt. Just the sound of his voice made me feel more at ease.

"I miss you too. Days aren't the same without you popping in to remind me to smile." It was hard not to smile.

"Well how about I remind you later this week, say over dinner?"

God, he melted me with his charm. "Is this another invitation where you woo me and make me do horribly naughty things with you on your couch? Or is it really just dinner?" Fuck, did I just say that out loud?

I smacked my palm to my forehead. Who the fuck was I anyway? This was 18-year-old Madii, not 28-year-old Madison who is a thousand percent averse to dating older men. I had no idea how old he even was. I just knew the flecks of gray around his temples meant he was way older than me. And how old did a man have to be to become a neurosurgeon?

Gavin laughed. “I think I asked you if it was okay plenty of times.”

“Dinner it is then.” I pushed down the growing swell of anxiety in my chest and heard the giggles of my best friends behind me. I refused to turn around and look at them because I knew they would make my anxiety worse.

“Where would you like to eat?” Drew had never once asked me where I wanted to eat; he just planned things. So, it was nice being asked.

And suddenly the thought of Drew and comparing Drew to Gavin made my stomach lurch. In a heartbeat, the flirtiness was replaced with consuming guilt. My shoulders tensed; my mouth got dry. Major shame washed over me.

“Uh... anything.”

“Are you okay?” Gavin’s tone changed too to one of concern.

“I’m okay. Gavin, I just need you to know that this dinner—it’s as friends only. Okay? I’m not sure I’m ready for this.”

Without skipping a beat, he responded, “Of course, Madii. I wouldn’t dream of pushing you if you’re not ready. You really are a friend of mine, and I’d be delighted to take you to dinner just as friends.”

His tone was soft and kind, but I couldn’t help but notice a hint of disappointment in his voice. That only brought on more guilt. Now I hadn’t just cheated on Drew, I had also led a man on. God what was my problem?

“Good, so you text me the details and I’ll be ready.”

“Sure thing. We’ll talk soon.” Gavin hung up but I couldn’t face my friends. I charged out of the store to hide, but they followed.

“What happened?” Lexi and I sank onto a bench in the mall common area, and Crystal stood beside us.

“I am going to dinner with him, and I really like him. So why do I feel so guilty?” I leaned forward, planting my elbows on my knees and my face in my palms. “I am so stupid.”

“Hey, I can’t understand when you insult yourself if you’re covering your face.” Lexi pulled my hands away. “So, say that again without your hands on your face so I can smack some sense into you, silly.”

I glanced up at Crystal who offered a sympathetic look. “You go at your own pace. If you start to feel odd, just end the evening. If you are enjoying it, go with the flow.” She shrugged her advice in my direction.

“Gosh, why does love have to be so fucking messy?” I buried my face again and felt Lexi’s hand smoothing over my back. Was I infatuated with the good doctor because he was the first man to take interest in me since Drew? Or did I really like him?

“Put it this way. If you are moving on, then just move. You know as well as anyone else that you and Drew had some sort of gold that most couples don’t get. You may not strike gold again for 10 more guys, or Gavin could be the one. The only way you find out is to try.” Lexi’s hand rubbed circles on my shoulder blades.

“She’s right, but I caution you to take it slow.” Crystal snatched my hand and pulled me up to a standing position. “Now let’s go eat ice cream and try on every cute pair of heels in this mall. You need to have the perfect shoes for your date.”

“It’s not a date!” I hissed, but I followed them, wondering what the fuck I was actually doing.

“It’s a date!” Lexi squealed, clapping like a cheerleader.

For best friends, they sure could be pushy, but without them I would still be stuck in my misery and even this anxious uncertainty was better than depression. At least I thought it was. And maybe being loved by someone new was better than being alone, even if the transition hurt like hell.

GAVIN

I held my arm out to Madison, who lightly rested her hand around my elbow. She wore a pastel pink dress that really made her tanned skin glow. She wore her long black hair down, parted to one side, and her makeup was quite tasteful. In all, she was the most stunning woman in the restaurant. I led her toward the table, following our host as he weaved between tables carrying our menus.

Long burgundy curtains hung from ceiling to floor along the large pane-glass windows that lined the entire front and side of the restaurant. The view wasn't spectacular outside, but they made up for it by the design inside. The massive U-shaped bar in the center of the dining room had been fashioned like a 1930s mob dive, and the gold wingback chairs at every table screamed "money."

"This is a pretty nice place." Madison's grip on my arm tightened slightly, and I patted her fingers.

"It's just a restaurant. We can go somewhere else if you prefer." I wanted to make her comfortable. After all, we were supposed to be doing this as friends, so what type of friend would I be if I let her be miserable?

"No, it's okay." She offered a tight smile, then stepped away from me as the host pulled out her chair.

"We have fish on the menu tonight: pollack and salmon. And we have an excellent porterhouse steak too. Your waitress will be along shortly to get your drinks. Let me know if you need anything else."

The waiter pushed her chair in as she eased herself into it, and I took a seat across from her. “Thank you.” After dismissing the waiter, I unrolled my silverware from the cloth napkin, and draped it over my waist before scooting my own chair in. I’d been to this restaurant a dozen times on various occasions, and I knew their food was amazing. My mouth was already watering just thinking about the linguini.

“So, what’s good here?” Madison asked, picking up the menu the host laid on the table. She opened it and started poring over the contents, and all I could do was watch her. The slightest inflection of emotion on her face captivated me. I was falling in love with this woman.

“Excuse me?” I missed what she said because I was so enamored of how beautiful she was.

“What’s good to eat here?” She chuckled and looked at me with confusion. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m alright. I’m just thinking how amazing you look tonight.”

Madison’s face fell, her eyes locking back on the menu. She remained fixated on it for a few moments, her eyes darting between the pages so fast I knew she wasn’t reading it, and I wondered if I had said something wrong.

“So, Drew took a turn for the worse? Alice told me he did, but she offered no details.” She didn’t look up, and I wanted to look down, but I kept my gaze on her, watching her expression. She looked pained.

“Yeah, he did. I can’t really talk about the details—the whole doctor-patient thing, you know.”

“I know... Is that why you didn’t tell me?” She didn’t sound upset, but she didn’t sound like she appreciated the secrecy.

“We had just... well, it was the next day, Madii. I know by law what I have to do, and given what happened between us, well I didn’t know how to approach the topic.”

I reached over and pulled the menu down, so she was forced to look up at me.

“It’s okay. I understand that you’re bound by law. Just as a friend, we could have talked a bit, even without details.”

I grimaced. It felt like a kick to the gut. “You’re right. I am sorry.” Changing the subject, I added, “Speaking of what happened with us...”

“Yeah, about that.”

“I think I’m falling in love with you, Madison.” My mouth moved faster than my brain, and the words spilled out before I could contain them.

Madison looked up at me with concern in her eyes, but not surprised. Maybe she knew this confession was coming or something.

“I don’t know what I feel right now. This is happening really fast for me, Gavin. You have had months to stew over your feelings, while I was sitting there attached to a dying man.” She folded the menu and took a nervous sip of water, her eyes scanning the room as if she were seeing if others were watching her.

“I know and I’m not wanting to pressure you, but I really believe we could have something great. And I would take care of your heart so well; you know I would.”

Madii shrank back in her seat with an uncertain look on her face. She folded her arms over her stomach in a defensive posture, but I pressed on. I was ready to move forward and see where we could go. I felt like she was letting her reluctance get in the way.

“Are you happy right now with the way things are in your life?”

She looked up at me, her brow furrowed, and she shrugged. “Not really.”

“With hanging around a hospital waiting for something to happen that may never happen. With spending your days and nights alone.”

“I said no.” Her tone was firm but not cold. She got my point.

“But were you happy last week when we were together? Have you been happy when we spent time together, eating lunch, talking?” I saw the recognition dawning on her face slowly. It lightened her expression, until a wave of shame washed over her expression. “And do you think Drew would want you to be unhappy?”

“So, are you ready for me to take your drink order?” The tall lanky waitress stood with pen and notepad in hand, all smiles. Her dangling earrings swayed as she chewed gum.

Saved from the intensity of the conversation, Madison sat up straighter again. “I’ll just have water with lemon, thank you.”

The waitress scribbled on her notepad and turned to me. “And for you?”

“I’ll have whatever you have on draft.”

She scribbled again, then tapped her pen on the edge of the notepad. “Any starters?”

“No thanks. Just the drinks for now.” I offered a stern look and her eyebrows rose. She turned and walked away as quickly as she came, and I offered the same intense look to Madison.

“I am very happy when I spend time with you. It has really changed everything for me.” Her voice was timid, and she hid her eyes behind long lashes. “And Drew would want me to be happy.”

“So, what is holding you back then?” I reached my hand out to her, and she looked at it for a moment before sliding hers into mine. “Are you content to keep waiting for Drew, put your life on hold, watch your friends move on and leave you behind? Or do you want to take your life back and move on?”

She shrugged again, but she didn’t pull her hand away. We sat there for a while holding hands until the waitress brought our drinks and took our order. From there I let up a little. I didn’t want her to think that the only reason I invited her to come to dinner was to pressure her into a relationship with me. She talked about her photography and her friends.

Dinner was delicious and so was the conversation. I found her more intriguing every time we spent time together, and the

more I got to know her, the more I loved everything about her.

After dinner, I drove her home. It was the perfect ending to the evening. I parked in her driveway, and we sat in the car talking for another 20 minutes. I was perfectly content to walk her to her door and kiss her goodnight. But she invited me in...

MAD II

The way Gavin's hands fit perfectly on my hips as he kissed me goodnight was too perfect. The minute I opened my door, his fingers still laced through mine, I knew I wanted him to come in, so I asked, and he accepted, following me through the door.

I tossed my purse on the small side table next to the door and told him to make himself comfortable, then I grabbed a few beers from the fridge and the bottle opener. When I returned to the living room, Gavin was seated comfortably on the couch, his tie removed and his top few buttons open. The way his eyes watched me as I entered was hauntingly sexy, animalistic.

I sat next to him leaning sideways on the back of the couch and handed him his beer. He smiled as he took it, but his eyes didn't leave my face, even as he sipped the beer. It felt odd having him in this place where Drew and I lived together, but not uncomfortably so. I sat down and reached down under the coffee table for a koozie and placed the third beer I had brought into it to keep it cold.

Gavin grabbed the bottle opener and popped the cap from my bottle with a seductive look on his face and handed me my drink. I relaxed into the couch and took a large swig from the bottle. It had been a while since I had taken any of the beers from the fridge and wasn't expecting a chunk of ice from within to come crashing into my tongue. It caught me off guard, and I jerked forward, half choking on my drink and spilling it out over my face.

“A little cold?” Gavin asked as he moved forward, using his sleeve to wipe my face.

“I wasn’t expecting the ice,” I replied, feeling the soft touch from his hand as he took hold of my beer and placed it on the table. He leaned in close and kissed me. His lips soft and his tongue bitter with the lager on it. I placed my hand on the back of Gavin’s shirt and squeezed his back, gripping the shirt and pulling him in close.

My pussy ached to be filled, and like he read my mind, he slid his hand up my thigh and his fingers rubbed against my panties. I was dripping already; I wanted him. I thrust up toward his fingers as they moved my panties to the side. His fingers pushed into me softly as his kiss deepened. He set his own beer down on the table, then I felt his hand on my hip, his fingers still pushing into me.

I ran my hands through his hair, rising up a bit to intensify the kiss. Gavin slid my dress up above my waist as he pulled at my panties with the other. I remained patient as he worked my panties over my hips and to my knees. Then one leg at a time, he pulled them off, tossing them to the floor.

His kisses traveled to my neck, then my earlobe. My body shuddered as his fingers pushed into me again. I wanted something new, something adventurous. I bit my bottom lip before asking, “Your tie, where is it?” I asked, my cheeks were burning, my pussy aching.

“On the couch next to me, why?” he asked, intrigue on his face.

“Tie me up to something.” I smirked at him, hoping he would approve. Without hesitation he stood and hovered over me. He took hold of my hand and pulled me from where I was sitting then lifted my dress over my head. His hands made quick work of my bra and I stood naked in front him.

“Lie down in front of the table,” he said, picking up his tie. He didn’t have to tell me twice. I lay down on the carpet, a sensation of expectation building inside of me. I wanted to be teased, to lose all control and just lie there and let him pleasure

me. I could feel how wet I was, my cum almost dripping from my body.

Gavin grabbed my hands and bound them around the leg of the table, high over my head. He stood over me, slowly pulling one piece of clothing off after the other. I couldn't tell if it was apprehension on his face, or a mask of powerful lust tempered by his desire to not intimidate me. Either way, he was very hard, and I wanted him inside me.

“What now? he asked with a seductive, animalistic look on his face.

“Cover my eyes and tease me.”

Gavin took his shirt and straddled my body, the precum from the tip of his dick dribbled out onto my chest. He tucked his shirt under my head, then leaned in and kissed me. My world went dark when he pulled the sleeve up and covered my eyes, tucking it back in under my head on the other side.

I couldn't see what was happening, only felt his presence. His fingers started to touch me, ever so lightly. They stroked up and down my skin, a hair's width from the surface. He traced from my lips, down my chest to my navel. I quivered as he lifted off leaving me aching.

He traced my nipples, first left, then right. Then ran his hands back down my body and lifted just before my pelvis, landing again only just after my kneecaps. His fingers traced back up my inner thighs and stopped just short of my pussy. Fuck, I wanted to be penetrated, so I thrust towards his fingers.

One of his fingers traced over my clit, stroking me, but every time I thrust, he moved his hand just enough so it wouldn't sink. Then his fingers left me, and I felt a chill over my body as he lightly blew across my nipples and stomach. What happened next, I didn't expect. I heard the koozie slip from the unopened bottle on the coffee table and then felt the cool, condensation-covered bottle against my skin. He rubbed it across my nipples then proceeded to suck them as he ran the bottle across my stomach.

“Put it in me,” I muttered, spreading my legs. I’d used bottles before after drinking alone and finished myself off before bed—a last resort I assure you, and only because I was alone. But given the fact that Gavin had picked it up, I sensed he was ready to be adventurous with me.

“Are you sure?” Gavin asked, a slight hesitation in his voice.

I nodded quickly, trying to prepare for it. I felt him lean in close, his lips pressing against mine, and we kissed. The heat from his body radiated across my skin. He was so close but so far away. I swore I felt his cock brush my leg. He slid his tongue against mine, then he pulled away.

The suspense was getting to me. I couldn’t see what he was doing, and almost cursed myself asking to be tied up. I tried to move his shirt away from my eyes, but I was at his mercy now. He pressed a finger into me, then another. I squirmed still wanting more as he slid a third into me. It felt good, but I wanted to be filled, to feel full. When he pulled his fingers out and pressed the bottle against my opening, the cold caught me off guard. I forgot the contents were still half-frozen. My legs pushed back, but Gavin didn’t let up, chilling my opening with the icy bottle.

After a moment the sensation became a desire once more, and I thrust toward it. As I did Gavin pushed, sinking the bottle into my depth, stretching me, making me feel full. The cold made me tense; I’d never clenched so hard around something before and struggled as my body almost spilled into orgasm.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck...” I muttered, as he leaned in and sucked on my breast. I didn’t know what to think as I approached the edge. The way the bottle slid in and out of me, practically freezing me from the inside as his heat rested on my inner thigh, and his mouth encircled my nipple—I couldn’t take it anymore.

I felt the pressure from his hand release from the bottle, and his lips once again reached mine. It was all it took for my coil to snap. I clenched down hard and forced the bottle from myself, gasping at the now-empty void left from the makeshift toy, but what happened next, I wasn’t expecting—the contrast

in temperature from the icy bottle to his dick as he slid into my convulsing body.

He thrust into me, hitting my back wall. I knew he was close already. The insides of my pussy still felt icy cold, as the warmth from Gavin's dick filled me. I could already feel my coil tightening for a second time.

"Cum in me," I begged as Gavin's grunts grew louder, then he thrust into me, slamming against my back wall. I gasped as his warm seed flooded into me, and orgasm came again. Gavin fell on top of me, holding me in his arms as his warm seed filled me. Then his lips met mine, and we lay there, panting together.

When Gavin's breathing returned to normal, he folded his shirt off of my eyes, and untied my hands. He rose and helped me stand, offering soft touches and kisses as he guided me back to the couch where we lay down. His offering ran down my leg, but I didn't even care. My legs jiggled a little as I adjusted myself next to him, feeling him breathing heavily against my skin.

Gavin pulled me against himself, our skin damp with sweat. He kissed my temple, and pushed the hair off my face, stuck there with the perspiration. I had a feeling Gavin was a little shocked by my wild side, but he didn't seem to mind. I lay there in his arms content, feeling much more at ease this time than before. The way he tenderly brushed his thumb over my cheek stirred deep emotion inside of me.

"What is it? You look a million miles away." Gavin almost whispered, speaking in a comforting tone.

I looked up at him and smiled. "Nothing at all. I was just thinking how safe and comfortable I feel right here with you. I wondered if I'd ever feel that again with anyone.

Gavin kissed me softly, his lips lingering on mine. They were salty, the sweat from my body still clinging to them. He cupped my breast and squeezed a bit, then hooked his hand around my hip and pulled me tighter.

“Madison, I need you to know something, and I don’t want you to feel pressured or anything. But I love you. I think I’ve known this for months now. It wasn’t immediate.”

“Oh, no love at first sight?” I chuckled as he rubbed his nose against mine, then kissed me again.

He bit my lower lip as we intensified the kiss, then brushed his tongue across my upper lip before continuing. “No, no love at first sight. And not that you weren’t worth that, but it was complicated. I watched how you cared and visited and stayed hopeful. And all I could think was how much I wanted someone to love me that way. It’s the way I am as a doctor, always returning with compassion and hope. And at some point, I found that professional compassion and hope turn into something deeper for you.”

“You’d confide in me and ask me for my advice, and you were so genuine. I couldn’t help but fall in love with you.”

His hand returned to my face, brushing an imaginary hair away. He cupped my cheek and turned my lips up to kiss me again. I didn’t sense a hint of anxiety or nervousness in him. I knew what he was saying was true. He did love me.

“You don’t have to say anything.” He kissed me lightly on the forehead. “You can just enjoy me caring for you until you’re ready. No pressure. No obligation to return my affection. Just let me love you.”

I didn’t know what to say. I turned to face him, hooking my arm over his side and nestling into his chest. I really cared about him too. It wasn’t often that you met someone so compassionate and loving, and I’d be a fool to just dive in. Still, my heart stirred at seeing him. I wasn’t ready to say that I was over Drew. I didn’t know if or when that would ever happen. But Drew wasn’t coming back, and I had to accept that.

“You know, Gavin, I’m not ready to say I love you too, but I want you to know that I do really care about you a lot. And I am ready to see where this takes us. Just be patient and give me time.”

Gavin smiled against my lips as he leaned down to kiss me again. “Madii, you make me so happy. I can’t imagine sharing this moment with anyone else. I’ve had a few serious relationships that went nowhere, but I know you’re different. I can feel it. And I’m just going to wait until you’re ready, because I want to make you the happiest woman alive.”

We lay there for a few moments just holding each other, and when he moved to sit up, and I whimpered—almost dozing—he stopped.

“I have to go. I can’t stay the night, babe.”

He lingered there, and I winced at the pet name. He didn’t know that Drew had called me babe. I’d have to explain that to him at some point. “You have plans?” I sat up next to him, keeping my legs wrapped around him.

“Surgery at 5 a.m. on a kid with epilepsy. I need to be fresh. I have to check in at 4 and scrub up by 4:45.” He frowned and pulled me close, kissing my forehead again. “I really wish I could stay.”

“No, it’s okay. Go. I am so humbled and honored that you are a modern-day hero.” I grinned at him and pecked him on the lips quickly, then extracted my body from his, sliding away.

“We can have breakfast afterward. Maybe some awful cafeteria pancakes?” He smiled, reaching for his pants and boxers.

“Can’t. I have a shoot at 9 a.m. It’s this obnoxious lady with her toy poodle.” I laughed. “She gets portraits done every sixth months. Apparently, it’s a show dog.”

Gavin chuckled as he stood and pulled his pants up over his ass. Watching that hunk of meat disappear was a bit saddening, but I felt settled that it wasn’t the last time I’d see it. I gave him a light smack on the butt as he bent over to retrieve his shirt.

“So, no breakfast... When can I see you again?” He buttoned his shirt, turning to look down at me. It was amazing to me how I felt completely at ease being naked in front of him.

“How about lunch? Let’s meet at that little sandwich shop across the street from the hospital.” I stood next to him as he tucked his shirt in, tie draped over his shoulder.

When he had finished buttoning his shirt and tightening his belt, I wrapped my arms around his neck and stood on tiptoes to offer a kiss.

Gavin grabbed my ass, lifting me slightly as he took the peck I offered and turned it into a salacious treat. His tongue searched my mouth, his stubble scraping my chin. The way he held me, the strength in his arms, even the authority with which he took control of things just made me feel safe. I could fuck him again right there.

“I love you, Madison. I really look forward to lunch with you tomorrow.” He squeezed my ass then let me go, stepping away.

“I really look forward to it too, bud.”

I walked him to the door, grabbing the throw off the back of the couch to wrap around myself. Gavin could see me naked but the world outside my front door didn’t need to. I opened the door and let him step out, holding it open for him.

“Goodnight then. Sleep well tonight.” He offered me a kiss before heading out and I watched him walk away.

I shut the door, deadbolting it in place, then flopped back onto the couch. I couldn’t wipe away the stupid grin on my face for the life of me. When Gavin had cornered me at dinner about whether I was happy with the way life was currently, I had felt stuck. My answer had been honest. I wasn’t happy.

Watching Drew fade away was traumatizing. Everything I ever thought my life would be was over the moment he surfaced that day. And I had to relive every conversation, watch every dream die.

But with Gavin, all that hope was renewed. Sure, my heart was still torn between the two, but I was beginning to see that the moments I had with Drew were pleasant memories now. And the moment I had with Gavin was a reality I could bank on again. A reality and surety I hadn’t had in almost two years.

I closed my eyes, feeling the weight of the day pull me down into sleepiness. Letting a yawn escape, I snuggled into the couch and let sleep take me. Hopefully I'd dream of Gavin and my future instead of the nightmares of Drew and that scuba trip.

GAVIN

“**T**his leak is really bad, Mom. Why didn’t you just call a plumber?”

Water poured out of the joint where the flex hose joined the shut-off valve. One of the O-rings had rusted out and broke loose. With Dad away on his trip abroad, Mom called on me to take care of it for her. So, there I was, sprawled out on her kitchen floor with a soaking-wet t-shirt and water spraying in my face.

“I did call a plumber. I called thirteen of them to be exact. And not a single one has time today, or any day for more than a week for that matter. Who else was I going to call? And what was I going to do? I can’t very well stay here with all this water spraying everywhere. I don’t even know how to turn it off. I’d have to take Mittens to a hotel and stay for a week.” Her lip poked out and I wished there was a bird around to poop on it the way she used to scare me as a kid.

Mom spoke with her usual dramatic flair, sounding like a helpless victim who needed to be rescued. I was sort of tired of being her knight in shining armor when Dad wasn’t around, but I didn’t have a choice.

I reached up and turned off the cold water, so it would stop spraying out. The water slowed to a trickle, then a drip. “Hand me some towels.” I held my hand out to her, unable to see where she was. I lay with my upper torso half crammed in the cabinet below the sink. Mittens’s nails clicked on the floor as he walked up to me and began licking at the puddle on the

floor around me. A few moments later I heard Mom's rushed footsteps as she approached.

"No, Mittens! Icky! No, baby don't drink that." A few towels dropped on my stomach, and I heard Mitten's dog collar jingle as Mom scooped him up off the floor.

Sometimes I swore my mother cared more about that dog than anything else, including her half-a-million-dollar house.

Ignoring her nasally voice as she lectured her dog for drinking "floor water," I set to work drying the pipes off to ensure it was only residual dripping and not still a leak. And when I was certain it was not leaking anymore, I extricated myself from the cabinet and sat up, using the towels to dry the rest of the cabinet, the floor, and then lastly, myself.

"You didn't tell me I was going to need to change clothes before going home." I chuckled, trying to make light of the situation so Mom stayed calm and didn't get flustered when I told her the bad news.

"Well, how was I supposed to know!"

I was too late. Mom held Mittens under one arm, a towel in her other hand, drying his paws off.

I stood, putting the wet towels into the sink, and closed the cabinet doors. My shirt clung to me and chilled me a bit in her air-conditioned kitchen, but I knew the moment I went outside I would just bake again anyway.

"So, you will need that plumber. Looks like the O-ring around the pipe holding it to the fitting went bad." I wiped my hands on the front of my jeans.

"You can't fix it?" Mom pouted, her bottom lip out. She sat Mittens down on the kitchen counter and I cringed, wondering if that was a typical thing.

"Mom, I'm a surgeon, not a plumber. I hire people to do this stuff for me so I don't have to. I'm certain I could do the work, but you don't pay me for stuff like this."

Mom rolled her eyes at me and scoffed. "What type of husband are you even going to make one day? I mean

seriously, Gavin. It's just a leaky pipe."

I laughed at her. She sounded ridiculous. Before I even thought about it, I had replied. "If it's so easy, why didn't you do it?"

She glared at me; her nostrils flared. "Your wife is in for a big surprise."

"My wife will want for nothing." I kept the snark out of my tone, but I wanted to unleash on her. She was so selfish sometimes, making life only about her.

"If you ever get one." Mom took the towel in her hand and wiped it across the counter—the same towel that had been used on the dog's feet. "You know Selma Wyatt that is in my bridge club just told me she is on grandchild number 14. Fourteen! Can you believe that? And I don't have one."

How on earth did my ability or lack thereof when it came to plumbing turn into a discussion about my love life yet again? I pinched the bridge of my nose and sighed. "Mom, I'll call my guy and he will come out either today or tomorrow. He's super-fast and will get the work done for you quickly." I had no intention of sticking around for her continued badgering, so I headed for the door, my shoes squeaking on the wet floor.

"You should really think about what I'm saying, Gavin. You're 38 now. As it stands, you'll have to marry someone half your age just to have grandchildren for me, and by the time they are ready to go off to college I'll be in the grave and you'll be in a home, for Christ's sake."

All I could think of was Madison and whether she would fit Mom's picture of the "perfect woman." Not like it really mattered much because whether or not she approved, I was pursuing Madison with everything I had. I was certain Mom had some trophy wife ideal for what would make me happy. She had never been thrilled with my love of the outdoors and adventure, so she likely wouldn't be pleased with Madison's personality.

"When I get married, and who I choose should not really be that important to you. Having grandchildren is not a

competition. You can't 'keep up with the Joneses' when it involves major life choices of your children." I started toward the door again.

"Yes, well I'm not competing. I just would like to enjoy being a grandmother before I'm dead."

"Bye, Mom," I called over my shoulder as I let myself out. The moment I stepped into the sun as I strolled down the cobblestone path in front of her house, I felt warm again, despite being wet from my waist up. I peeled the wet t-shirt off and tossed it into my back seat before sliding behind the wheel.

Mom had a way of pressing every one of my buttons. She'd always been able to do that since I was a kid. I was the kind of kid who could be disciplined by a stern look of disappointment—no grounding or spanking needed at all. Anymore, her stern looks didn't bother me, but the pressure to be different did.

Feeling a bit frustrated, I dialed Madii's number, hoping she'd help me perk up, but she didn't answer. So, I left her a sweet voicemail and drove across town with my thoughts. Things had started to look up for me in my love life, but I didn't dare tell Mom yet, or she'd demand to meet Madison and likely that would ruin it. After she told me that she was on the pill, I figured she had no interest in having kids yet. She was about as adventure-seeking as they came.

I pulled into my estate, punching the gate code in, and then headed to my house. About the time I pulled into my driveway, my phone rang. The caller ID read Tanya Smith, and my heart sank. The only reason she'd call me on my personal cell phone was for Drew. After leaving the nagging session with my mother, then not catching Madii for that call, I was really frustrated and not wanting to deal with bad news of any kind, but I answered the call anyway.

"It's Gavin."

"Hey, Dr. Carpenter. How is your weekend going?"

Tanya's voice was not filled with uncertainty or remorse, but a strange hint of happiness. Her normal strict professional tone

had been replaced by something new.

“It’s okay. Just spent some time with my mom. How about you?” I wondered about the purpose of the call. Tanya and I weren’t friends, and even though she was a colleague, she was not in neurosurgery, so we didn’t have that much in common.

“Well, you know I’m working this weekend, so that’s not new. But I got a call from Gary Fenke from John’s Hopkins. They have a new treatment for long-term coma patients I think you should know about.”

“Really?” I wasn’t sure whether I should be elated for my patients in general, or nervous for one in particular. There was always a risk involved in every new or experimental treatment. There were also benefits if things worked. Either way a new treatment for Drew would mean Madison being informed, which would put her on edge in our relationship again, and just when we were getting somewhere.

“Yeah, I’ll send you the link and his phone number. It’s just out of trials and they haven’t announced it yet, so you’ll be one of the first to try it. Some sort of deep brain stimulation.”

“Yeah, wow. Thanks, Tanya. I’ll watch for that today.” I put my car in park, turned it off and grabbed my phone from the hands-free unit.

“No problem. Have a great day.”

Tanya hung up and I got out of my car, snatching my wet shirt. Every step toward my front door was laced with dread, my feet cinder blocks on the sidewalk. Patty and Jim, my next-door neighbors, waved at me, and I forced a smile and a jerk of the hand, but my insides churned.

Madison and I finally made some progress. She was ready to see where this took us, and I had no intention of giving her up now. The moment I had staked my claim, she became mine in my mind. My heart was too attached to let anything take that away.

My mind raced as I let myself in the house, then headed to my den, tossing my shirt in the hamper on the way past. I sat down at my computer to see no email from Tanya yet, but I looked

up her friend's name and John's Hopkins, and I found some trials he'd be involved in. Deep brain stimulation and certain other surgery techniques to awaken dormant function in gray matter.

The more I read, the scientist inside of me became fascinated. It was one of the reasons I'd even entered into this field of medical science. The way the brain functions and controls everything was interesting. I ended up spending more than an hour researching some things about the trials. I only stopped when my stomach growled, reminding me it was time to eat.

I made my turkey on rye with so many thoughts swirling in my mind I nearly lost my appetite. First things first, I had to speak with Tanya's friend and get all the details. Then I had to decide if any of my patients may benefit from the treatment, and if so, who. Then, if warranted, I'd speak with Drew's parents. The problem was, given the outcome of the last event with Drew and me not giving Madison the information, I feared she'd be upset again.

I carried my sandwich and a soda back to the den to sulk and do more research. It was a huge weight to carry around with me, but I didn't have a choice.

MAD II

“Now stand here.” I positioned the four-year-old’s shoulders, so he would face my camera, his tiny hand clenching tightly to his mother’s skirt. “Great job.”

He beamed with pride, his little chin jutting out as his mother ruffled his shaggy hair. They wore matching, blue-checked attire and denim sneakers. Their blond hair and blue eyes gave them away as mother and son. And the way her belly bulged a little, I could tell she was pregnant, though without the presence of a partner, I hesitated to ask many questions.

“Alright, you guys ready?” I positioned myself behind the camera as Meredith, my client, posed and smiled.

“Ready when you are.”

She was radiant. I snapped at least a dozen photos of her, but all I could think about was how much I wanted children one day. Drew and I had planned to have a gaggle of them, fill our house with noise and toys and love. Each pose I put them in only made me crave it more.

I had her sit on the park bench, sun shining from behind me for the best lighting. Her little guy stood next to her, hand resting on her knee. She peered down at him, and he looked up at her. I could see the love between them, the warmth. It stirred something inside of me.

As we wrapped up the shoot, I pulled a sucker from my camera bag and handed it to the little boy, Todd. His eyes lit up as he peeled the wrapper away and plunged it into his

mouth. I packed my camera equipment up and Meredith hovered nearby.

“So how does this work now? You mail me pictures?” She rubbed her belly a circle, watching Todd run off toward the playground a few hundred yards away.

“I will email you the proofs, and you can make your selections. There are a few different packages to choose from. I can’t do the prints for you, or you can have them compiled onto a drive and have them printed yourself.” I wiped a lens clean before capping it and putting it away.

“Thanks. I just really wish Josh were here to help me make these decisions. It’s so difficult with him gone.” There was a sadness in her eyes as she spoke.

“What happened?” My heart sank a little as I asked the question. I had gotten sick of people asking me about Drew, and I wondered if it were the same for her.

“Oh, he’s not gone gone. Josh is in the military. He’s deployed overseas right now. Sometimes it feels like he’s gone though.” Meredith sat at the small picnic table and rubbed her lower back. If I had to guess I would have said she was nearing birth, her stomach so large.

I sank down onto the bench next to her, tucking my legs beneath the table. Meredith and I weren’t that different after all. Although, she was a big farther along in her journey than I was when Drew left. She must have seen the sadness in my eyes because she offered a concerned look.

“You lost someone you love?” She angled her body to see me better.

“Sort of?” I sighed. “My fiancé and I were scuba diving for our bachelor/bachelorette party and his tank malfunctioned somehow. He nearly drowned. He’s in a coma.”

“Oh, God. I’m so sorry to hear that. It must be heartbreaking.” Meredith’s eyes flicked to the playground for a second, then back to my face.

“It’s easier now. It happened almost 18 months ago.”

Her eyes grew wide. “You’ve been waiting for him for 18 months? He’s still in a coma?”

I nodded. “Yeah, he is. But I’m not waiting anymore. His parents, my parents, all our friends tell me to move on. It’s tough some days because I know how close we were and what our dreams together were. But the odds are he won’t wake up, and he will just live the rest of his life in a coma or a vegetative state.”

Meredith frowned and took my hand. I was glad she was one of those strangers that didn’t mind lending an ear. I had overshared, which wasn’t typical of me, but the emotion of watching her with her children just got to me.

“I’m so sorry to hear that. I think your family is right. You should move on, but at your own pace. If something ever happened to Josh, I’d have a hard time moving on, that’s for sure. But there is a time for it.”

I smiled, thinking of Gavin and the special connection we had. Drew and I might have no hope for a future, but I did have a future in front of me, and I wanted it to be with Gavin. I wanted it to be with children, and a home, and memories, and love.

“Thank you for doing the shoot for us today. I’ll look forward to your email with the proofs.” Meredith stood and patted me on the shoulder. “And good luck. It’s a great big world out there. You’ll need an extra ounce of patience in searching for the next Mr. Right.”

With a wink, she headed toward the playground, waddling as she walked. I splayed my fingers on my stomach thinking of how amazing it must be to grow a human life inside of your womb. Drew and I had planned to have kids, and the few pregnancy scares we had hadn’t really been scares to me. The only thing I’d miss out on was some of my riskier adventure seeking. But wasn’t parenthood an adventure too? Drew had insisted on birth control until we were both settled on the notion, so I took it religiously to respect him.

I began to wonder what Gavin thought about kids. He had never asked why I was on the pill. When we had sex, he

mentioned how he didn't want me to have any surprises. That was probably a code for how he had no desire for children. He was older than me, with an established career. He probably never wanted kids, or else he would have been married, and would have kids a long time ago.

Part of me wanted to call and ask him right away what he wanted, because if he wanted no kids, then we were not going to work out. But another part of me wanted to call him just to tell him I loved him. Because the more I spent time away from him, the more I realized how empty my life was without him. And I wanted him there.

I rifled through my camera bag to find my phone and dialed his number. It rang several times and went through to voicemail, so I ended the call. I didn't know what to say in a voicemail. Exactly how did you approach the topic of kids with someone you just started dating? I didn't want to scare him off, though if the idea of me pining over my almost-dead ex-fiancé didn't scare him away, what would?

I watched Meredith and Todd play on the playground for a while, swinging and going down the slide. I was a bit lonely, so I called Lexi and she picked up right away.

"Hey, girl. What you up to?" Her voice was bubbly as usual.

"Just finished a shoot and wondered what you were up to."

The breeze picked up, cooling my skin a bit. I wished I had sat at a table in the shade rather than the direct sun, but I felt too lazy to stand up and move.

"Just eating some ice cream. You want to come hang?" I heard the clatter of a spoon in a bowl in the background. Ice cream did sound good, but I didn't want to drive all the way across town for that.

"Well, I would but I have another shoot later today. Just wanted to talk for a while I guess."

"Cool, so what's new?" There was soft music playing in Lexi's house too, like she was bummed out or something and shoving her face full of sugary treats to distract herself.

"Well, I had dinner with Gavin."

Lexi squealed. “Dish!”

I chuckled. “We went to this fancy place and talked for a while. Dinner was good. He took me home and walked me to my door and I invited him in.” I left the ending open so she could assume what we had done.

“Oh, god, you didn’t.”

“I did.” I smiled. She knew me.

“So, does this mean you’re ready to move on? That you’re going to really take a shot on the doctor?” Her voice rose a notch in pitch and volume as she spoke.

“Yeah, we actually talked about it. I’m ready, Lex. I want to see where this goes. After Drew took that turn for the worse, I kinda lost hope that he’s going to come back to me. And I don’t want to end up some middle-aged cat lady with no life.”

Lexi laughed at me. “You? A cat lady? You’re more likely to end up as a cougar.”

I rolled my eyes at the insult. “Hardly. I don’t even want to date guys that aren’t my age, let alone chase ones 10 years younger.”

“But isn’t the good doctor like 10 years older than you?” Her question smarted. I loathed those couples where the guy was in his 40s and the lady in her 20s and they acted like it was normal. Age-gap relationships just weren’t my thing.

But Gavin was.

“Yeah, he is, but it’s different.” I bit my lower lip. I didn’t know why it was different for him, but it was.

“Different because you let your heart get involved, huh?” Lexi spoke with a mouthful of food, and I sighed.

“Yeah, I have.” She didn’t even realize how much I’d let my heart get involved. It hadn’t just gotten involved; it had run away without me and already bound itself to him.

“You’re in love, aren’t you?” The squeal that followed drowned out my answer, though she didn’t need to hear it. She already knew.

“Yes.”

We spent the next 20 minutes talking about all the amazing qualities Gavin had. She loved his dark luscious locks. She asked about his body, if he was as chiseled as she imagined him. I kept the conversation above the belt, but she insisted she had to know if his dick was big enough to satisfy me. That was where I drew the line.

“You’re nosy.” I chuckled at her. “I should go. Okay? Do me a favor and don’t tell Crystal. I don’t want her to think that I’m rushing.”

“Sure, no problem, girl. I got your back. You tell her when you’re ready.”

“Thanks, Lexi. I’ll talk to you later.”

We hung up, but my phone lingered there. I just wanted to hear his voice, but for all I knew he was in surgery at the moment. So instead of calling him, I typed out a nice text message.

Madii 11:14 AM: Hey... So, I just finished a shoot and I’m thinking of you. I want to do something fun with you... maybe go dancing? There is this rave on 12th street, maybe we can hit it up on Saturday? LMK

I hit send and shoved my phone back into my camera bag. It was time to head to the next location and get out of the heat for a while. Louisiana summers were the bane of my existence, but the thought of the bitter cold moving farther north was worse. I’d visited the cold, but I didn’t want to live there. Drew and I’d had our share of adventures around the US, but now it was time for a new adventure for me. I just hoped Gavin was up for it.

GAVIN

“Dinner was amazing, again.” I offered Madii my hand and she took it, rising out of the car seat and stepping up onto the sidewalk next to me.

Music vibrated through the thick stone walls of the large industrial building that had been turned into a dance venue. I’d heard of it but I’d never been there. I was following Madison’s suggestion based on her previous experience and her friends’ advice. I watched the crowd of 20-somethings walk past and felt a bit too old for this scene, but Madii was excited, so I tried to fit in as best as I could.

“I can’t wait to dance!” Her eyes lit up as she spoke, a joy I hadn’t seen on her face in all the time I’d known her. It was exhilarating, removing any last trace of inhibition I had about entering the rave. She took my hand and dragged me toward the entrance, barely giving me time to shut the car door and lock it.

Smoke hung in the air from pyrotechnics displays happening on the main stage near the DJ, and the music was so loud we could hardly hear ourselves think, let alone carry a conversation. Lights flashed overhead, reflecting off a massive, mirrored ball hanging in the center of the room. Madii pulled me toward the bar that stretched along the wall from one end of the club to the other, at least four bartenders serving drinks to the customers who lined up shoulder to shoulder along its length waiting for drinks.

I watched the hem of Madii’s short skirt flounce as she walked, her hips swaying. Every now and then I got a peek at

her lace panties, which made me smirk, though I'd have appreciated it more had I not seen a half a dozen men also noticing it. But when she turned around, I noticed her eyes were only on me—no one else.

“This place is awesome!” she shouted over the roar of the music.

I only nodded and smiled, not wanting to strain my voice. And she seemed to take the hint. She screamed something at a bartender, and I offered my debit card, which he took gladly. He returned with a receipt and two fruity-looking drinks—Mai Tai's maybe? I wasn't a big mixed drink kind of guy, but at this point I'd do anything to keep that smile on her face, so I sipped it. It wasn't as bad as I thought, though I'd have much preferred a beer.

Drinks in hand, we made our way to the dance floor. It was so packed with people, I decided to switch my wallet from my back pocket to my front pocket, so it didn't get lifted. We danced in beat to the music amongst the gyrating bodies. Madison threw her head back and let her black hair down. The joy in her eyes brought me to a new high. I'd known she was drop-dead gorgeous before, but this made her completely irresistible.

When the music came down a bit to a slower song, she snuggled in close, her drink nearly finished. I chugged the rest of mine and stacked the cups together, sitting them on the tray of a passing bartender. He nodded and walked away, and I pulled Madii close against my body. With the slower song, came a slightly lower volume. I leaned in and spoke in her ear.

“So, you really like this place? You seem pretty happy tonight.”

She tangled her fingers in my hair and stared up at me. I never saw myself dating a woman so much shorter than me, but this was perfect. It was like she was created just for me.

“I would be this happy if all we did was sit and watch a movie, Gavin.”

Her answer surprised me. I smiled at her and offered a confused look. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. I’ve been thinking about what we talked about a few weeks ago.” Her fingers curled and uncurled on the back of my head, lacing through my hair.

“Yeah? What’s that?” I held her closer, her breasts crushed against my ribcage. Just having her there that close was arousing me. I found myself having to resist the urge to grab her ass as we danced to the slower music. She smelled like roses; it was intoxicating.

“About that thing... those three words... the ones you use that I haven’t.” Her pupils dilated, the rose of her cheeks deepening as she spoke. “You know the ones?” She clung tighter to me. I felt the energy change between us, the way she was talking, the tone of her voice.

“I’m not sure which ones you mean...”

Madii pulled my head down and captured my lips in a kiss, keeping her grip around my neck firm. I responded in kind, nipping at her lip and pressing my body against hers. The thought of those three words coming from her mouth sent my pulse racing. My cock throbbed in anticipation. She had to have felt it pressing against her body.

“Well, they’re pretty special and they can’t be taken back. Once they’re said, they’re said. You know?”

I let my kisses trail across her jawline and up to her ear, then down the side of her neck. She angled her head away as if giving me permission to explore her skin with my mouth.

“You want to guess what they are?” she asked, tightening her hand into a fist as I bit down on her shoulder.

“You want me?” I asked, growling into her ear. My hands slid lower on her back, resting against her ass but no farther. I wanted nothing other than to slide her skirt up and bend her over right there. The urge inside me growing by the second.

“Yes, I really want you, but that’s not it... Guess again.”

The way she ground her body against mine told me she felt my dick hardening. She enjoyed it. Just her admitting she wanted me made it impossible to restrain myself any further.

“You have to pee?”

She snickered and smacked my shoulder playfully. “No, silly.”

I pushed my hands against her ass, drawing her toward me as the music picked back up again. I was positive there were eyes on us, but I ignored them, grinding on her. It was just the two of us in that moment; the world had disappeared.

“I love you,” she said, but the music was too loud. I read her lips, and the way her eyes glistened. It was all I needed.

I grabbed her hand and led her away from the dance floor to the front door of the club. She came willingly, though I may have been walking a tad too fast. I just couldn't get her out of there fast enough. We burst into the night air and the door shut behind us, but I didn't stop there. I led her to my car.

She had a huge grin on her face as I pressed her up against the car and kissed her hard.

“God, I'd fuck you up against this car right now if only I'd parked somewhere darker.” My greedy hands searched her sides, hoping to feel skin. She returned my kisses eagerly too, hands pulling at my shirt. When a few people walked by on their way to the club, I knew we had to get off the street.

“My place?” I asked her, and she nodded. So, I unlocked the car and opened the door for her. When she was settled, I got in as quickly as I could and headed home. The ride was awkward to start, the heat of our arousal making it difficult to make small talk, but she helped ease that transition.

“So, you know, I'm not rushing.”

I glanced at her. “I didn't think you were.”

“I know what I want.” She turned in her seat and reached over to rub my groin, my hard cock very obvious at this point.

“Yeah, what's that?” The way she drew her thumb across my length drove me wild. I wanted to feel her skin doing that without the barrier of my trousers.

She worked at my zipper, sliding it down until my dick bulged through the opening pushing my boxers out with it. She searched, finding the flap and freeing me from the restraint.

“Well, for starters I want you. And I want you to fuck me really hard.” She stroked me, making me dangerously distracted. I kept my eyes on the road, driving slower. We weren’t that far from the estate and thank God because I’d either have had to tell her to stop or pull over so she could help me finish.

I turned into the estate and stopped to punch in the gate code. I had to enter it twice because my excitement made me punch it in wrong. When I cleared the gate, she continued.

“I also want to know where this is going. Because I have a plan to have a family and kids, and maybe even a really cool dog named Brutus or something.”

I had to laugh at her. It wasn’t exactly the time or the method I would have used to discuss what sort of future existence we may have, but I went along with it.

“Yeah? How many kids? And just one dog?” I turned into my driveway and stopped, sliding the car into drive.

Madii stroked my dick more, unclipping her seatbelt. She rose up on her knees and leaned over me, hair dangling around her like a curtain.

“I’m not set on the number of kids and for all I care it can be a horse.” She smirked as she lowered her mouth to my cock and began to suck, taking me in as deep as she could.

I gripped the steering wheel with one hand and rested the other on the back of her head as she worked, stroking and sucking me. The way her tongue flicked over the end of my cock felt amazing. I wanted to be inside her.

I could just imagine my neighbors looking out their window to see what the headlights were about, though, and seeing Madii’s ass up in the air. I bet it would be quite the show. So, I gently lifted her shoulder up and she got the point.

“Not here, okay...” I flicked my eyes to the house next door with the lights on. “Neighbors.”

“Ah, where is your sense of adventure?” She smirked at me as she stroked me.

“I think that went out the window when I got an actual reputation to uphold. And besides, the things I want to do to you... we just don't have room in this car to do them.”

She chuckled and let go of my dick, so I put myself away, ready to do the uncomfortable walk to my front door. By the time we got in the house, I was climbing the walls. Madii no more than got through the door and I was on her, tearing her clothes off. The tight-fitting blouse came first, a few buttons skittering across the floor from the way I ripped it open.

I sank my teeth into her breast as I walked her backward down the hall toward my bedroom. She was much more gentle with the buttons on my shirt, undoing them one at a time until she tugged it over my shoulders and down. I wrestled with pulling it off as she worked on my pants, which came down easily as we stepped inside my bedroom door.

Kicking off my shoes, I walked out of my pants and prowled toward the bed, herding her like a sheep into my lair. She reached for the button on her skirt, but I snatched her hand away.

“No, leave it.”

She smirked at me and held her hands up defensively as she backed up. When she bumped into the bed and fell backward, she let out a gasp of surprise. I stood over her trying to decide what I wanted first.

“No lights?”

I felt the bed jostle as she crawled up onto the bed. “I can feel or taste anything I need to, and I know what you look like.” I told her, joining her on the bed.

She lay with her skirt on, knees high, and legs spread. I couldn't make out the expression on her face, my eyes not adjusted to the darkness yet, but the scent of her arousal hung in the air. I slid my hand up her thigh, thinking I would find her panties and pull them off, but instead I found her pussy bare and soaked.

“Ah, no panties... So, you planned this?”

Madii’s hands gripped my shoulders, pushing me downward. “I told you I know what I want.”

She tried to force my head between her legs, but I resisted. “I know what I want too, and I’m just going to take it now.”

She scoffed. “You are?”

“Yeah, I am and you’re going to like it.” Before she could fight me, I flipped her over, lying down on her and pinning her to the bed. She laughed, which was the exact reaction I was hoping for. “Now, just hold still like a good girl.”

“You think you can just hold me down and get away with it?” Madii pushed her arms against the bed, but I knew I was stronger than her. Still, I let her think she was winning, lifting up slightly.

As she shifted, I pushed forward, sliding into her. She gasped, collapsing back onto the bed. I thrust forward again, sinking deep into her and felt her clench around me. She gripped the sheets and moaned softly, no longer fighting me. Her pussy felt amazing, hot and tight, and I wanted to take my time and really enjoy it.

“You liked being tied up?”

She offered only a guttural grunt as an answer.

“You like being teased?” I asked her as I smacked the side of her ass with a satisfying slap sound.

“Fuck,” she whimpered. But I felt her hips push up into me as I fucked her.

“You want something better than that? Because I have been itching to do something to you.” I squeezed a hand under her body to grab her breast.

“Shit... Oh, god...” was her only reply.

She was so wet I’d have no problem, but just for good measure, I pulled out and went down, folding her skirt up over her back as I gripped her hips and pulled her up onto all fours. I sank my tongue into her pussy, sucking at her lips and clit.

She pushed back against my face as I spread her moisture around.

“Fuck, eat me...” she panted. I could tell by the urgency in her voice that she was going to cum soon. She’d likely been on the edge since we got in the house judging by the amount of moisture she’d created.

I rose back up, sliding my cock through her cum, then pushed into her ass. She gasped, groaning loudly and gripping the comforter. She was tight, and I was so aroused I could go immediately, but I wanted her to go first.

So, I fucked her, pushing my girth as deep as she could take me. I spread her wider to push deeper, and she practically screamed. The way she clamped down on my dick was amazing.

“Yeah... oh fuck...” she panted.

“Yeah, you like that? Good girl... now cum for me. I’m way better than a beer bottle.”

I thrust faster, slamming myself into her, until her moans and panting dissolved into tiny, choked grunts. Her body convulsing around my cock, I let myself go, folding over her and gripping her breast again.

I slid in and out of her a few more times, and then we collapsed onto the bed. She whimpered again when I pulled out, but I knew she’d loved what I did. Her heart was pounding, her body slick with sweat. Now that my eyes were adjusted to the light, I had no trouble seeing her content expression.

I held her against myself and kissed her forehead. She pushed the hair off her face and looked up at me, kissing me intensely.

“I mean it, Gavin. I am in love with you. I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life, and I didn’t even feel this certain when I first told Drew I loved him, and maybe that was a horrible thing to say in a moment like this, but I just know I love you and—”

I kissed her again. I could tell she was nervous and rambling and she’d regret it and feel foolish later on. She calmed in my

arms, so I let her go.

“I love you too, Madii. So very much, and I want nothing more than to take care of you the rest of your life.”

Smiling, she turned away from me and let me hold her. As my heart rate returned to normal, I thought of our future and what that might look like. I pictured our children, our pets, even our home. Until something snuck into my thoughts and wrecked it.

I hadn't heard back with all the details from the doctor at John's Hopkins, and I still had reservations about the new therapy.

I didn't dare tell her now. I needed this woman to be mine now. I would not give her up to a ghost that haunted her past—not when we were so close to our future. So, I held her a little tighter because it was all I could do. When she laced her fingers with mine and clutched them to her heart, I felt confident we were going to make this work. And I'd never wanted anything more in my life.

MAD II

I sat at the busy café with my camera bag, waiting for Alice to show up. She had insisted we get together because it had been weeks since I'd stopped in to see Drew, eight weeks to be exact. I'd spent most of my free time with Lexi and Crystal or Gavin. Each time I thought of Drew now a guilty pang struck my chest, but I was getting better at pushing it away.

I sipped the bubble tea I had ordered and watched the door expectantly, and when Alice walked in, I stood and waved her over. She offered a huge hug and a smile.

"Oh, Madison, you're looking just radiant." She held me by the shoulders at arm's length. She'd gotten her hair cut, and if I wasn't mistaken, she'd added some color too. It was nice to see her beginning to care about herself again. For too long she'd just thrown a hat on to cover the gray's she had previously been anal about recoloring.

"Thank you, Alice. You look great too. How is Henry?" I gestured as I spoke, and we sat down.

Alice situated her purse on the chair next to her, and I slid the tea I bought for her across the table. In the packed room, there were only so many open tables, but I had been fortunate enough to get one right by a window, so we watched the passersby as they talked and waited on the traffic light to change.

"Oh, you know. Henry is doing okay. He's just working and keeping himself busy. Days pass now without us seeing Drew,

but there isn't much to see. The doctors keep us informed if things change." She fiddled with her tea, twisting it in a circle on the table. A puddle formed around the base of the cup on the table, condensation from the icy drink inside.

"I'm glad he is still staying active and not getting depressed and lonely." I sipped my drink, trying to know what to say. I had a sense that Alice needed me as much as I had needed her all those months, and without me she felt a little lost.

"Yes, well he has his down days, but we manage." Alice took the lid off of her teacup and swirled the straw in it, forcing the bubbles to mix around with the ice. She looked back up at me with a sad smile. "How are you doing? I haven't seen much of you lately, but it seems you're doing fine."

I shrugged, straw still in my mouth. As I set the cup down, a strange melancholy feeling washed over me. I had loved being like a daughter to Alice for so long, but this conversation almost felt like she was the mother bird kicking me out of the nest. Like saying goodbye to one part of my life and moving on to something different. Only, when I had gone through this with my own parents, moving out to be with Drew, it hadn't felt so difficult.

"I'm okay. I've been getting out more." I neglected to mention Gavin on purpose, afraid of what Alice would really think. It had been her idea to move on, and she had even encouraged me to take an interest in him because of his comments to me. But still I was apprehensive—always afraid of what other people would think of me.

"That's good dear." Alice snapped the lid back on her cup and took a drink, her eyebrows rising with delight. "This is really good." She held the cup up and looked at it and for a moment I thought I had passed the awkward conversation I didn't want to have. Until she set her cup down and said, "You know who else hasn't been around as much?"

I sighed inwardly. I knew it was Gavin. He'd been spending time with me instead of hanging out around Drew's room.

"Who?" I hoped that sounded as nonchalant as I tried to make it sound.

“Dr. Carpenter.” Alice smirked and batted her eyelashes. “Anything I should know?” She waited with an expectant look on her face as a blush formed across my cheeks, giving away my thoughts.

Deciding the cat was already out of the bag—who keeps a cat in a bag anyway? —I smiled and looked down.

“Yeah? Well, I guess we know the reason he was around so much then, don’t we?” My chest fluttered just thinking about him. He had quickly gone from a stranger who was really nice and bordering on a close acquaintance, to someone I loved. It was just awkward telling the mother of the man I still loved just as much as I always had, that I was moving on.

“Yes, and when I do see him, he seems to positively glow. I wonder why that is?” Alice seemed to grin behind her cup, though her face was obscured.

“You got me.” Looking her full in the eyes, I shook my head. “I went on a date with him—a few times. And I think he and I have a lot in common.”

She slapped the table, smiling broadly. “I knew it. I just knew it. I’m so happy for you, Madii. It is just about time you decide to take control of your life. I know it had to be a difficult choice for you but moving on is the best thing. You’ll see. You will just feel so much lighter and better.” She sipped her tea again, then sat it down. “I can’t wait to tell Henry. He and I just worry over you so much. You deserve so much more than to sit and waste away waiting for something that may never happen. I’m so happy for you.”

The tension in my shoulders lifted like a balloon, floating away and taking the apprehension with it. Just hearing those words calmed something inside of me that I hadn’t been able to put my finger on in weeks. Why had Alice and Henry’s opinions mattered so much? I wouldn’t ever know. But they had.

“So, tell me all about it.” Even her complexion looked better as she smiled, her mood changing. So not to deprive her of her joy, I answered her.

“Well, I went to Gavin’s house to learn more about Drew—a symposium that was online. Anyway, I’d been wrestling with what you said to me that day, about moving on and living my life, and as I sat and listened to the experts, I realized Drew is never coming back.”

I thought I noticed her eyes glisten with tears, but her smile never wavered as I told her about how the evening went, stopping short with a kiss. She didn’t need the dirty details.

“And that is that. Now Gavin and I are officially a couple. I think things are going pretty well. We have so much in common, and he’s such an amazing man.” It felt good getting it off my chest and seeing how she was so supportive made me feel right at home.

“Well, not as amazing as my Drew, but I’ll let that one slide.” With a wink, she drank more of her tea, playful and happy. “I really am glad you took my advice, Madison. You know as well as I do, that Drew would expect you to be on some mountain somewhere or jumping out of a plane. And it’s good to see you happy again.”

“Thanks, Alice. It’s good to see you happy too.” I took her hand and held it. Those hands had seen so many things, rocking babies, soothing heartaches, and now soon they would bury a son. My heart ached a little for what they would go through, but I vowed then and there to be there, even if I had moved on.

Alice and I chatted a while longer. It turned out she and Henry were planning a few updates to their home. She invited Gavin and I over for dinner once they were finished but I told her I wasn’t certain. It was strange enough talking about my new love with my former almost-mother-in-law. When it was time to go, it was bittersweet. I was definitely saying goodbye for what I thought would likely be the last time for a long time. She hugged me tightly and I thought she’d never let go.

“You take care of yourself, you got that?” Alice kissed my cheek and scooped up her purse.

“I will. You take care of Henry.”

I waved as she walked away, watching her with a twinge of sadness. And when she was gone, I opted to linger for a while and enjoy the solitude before my shoot. It was for a family of four. For so long shoots like this left me feeling drained of emotional energy. My dream of having a family had been stolen from me.

But today I was excited about it. I had new hope for a family, even if Gavin was significantly older than me. It might not look the same as what I had planned, but I was confident that my dream had been revived—so long as everything worked out with Gavin.

GAVIN

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I sat back in my chair, leg crossed over my knee. I'd been over the data from Dr. Smith's friend at John's Hopkins, and while it was promising for my patients, it was troubling to me. Gary Rutger sat across from me, clicking his pen in and out incessantly. His beard still covered with a face mask that clung to the bottom of his chin following a surgery he'd performed, he stared at me with a blank expression.

"I told you a long time ago when you first took this position not to get involved with your patients emotionally. And when I had said that I was referring to investing in their personal lives, you know—caring about them. But this? Gavin, this goes way beyond the realm of professionalism."

I wanted to take the pen and throw it in the bin. "Well, it's not like Madison was my patient." I lowered my hand, glaring at the clicking pen. "And it wasn't like I went looking for this on purpose."

"Still... What would the board say?" Click, click, click.

"Can you please stop that?"

"Stop what?" he asked, eyebrows raised. He glanced at the pen and then at my face, laying it down slowly. "Sorry."

"I asked you for advice. That's why you're here in my office. If you want to berate me, you can leave. I can call my mother for that." I picked up his pen and tossed it across the room. It skittered across the floor, skidding to a stop by the door. Gary grimaced and rolled his eyes.

“Okay, if you want my advice, I suggest you don’t tell her. She isn’t the next of kin, and she’s moved on—quite substantially if you are being truthful about your interaction with her. You tell the parents; let them make the decision. It is theirs to make, so you’re going through the proper channels.” Gary leaned forward, planting his forearms on my desk. He stared at me while I deliberated.

“And if she gets pissed because I haven’t told her again? The last time she blew it off; we weren’t really dating yet. But this time? What if she never forgives me?”

I could have asked Jiles or Nick, and maybe I should have. But Gary knew the law, and he knew patients. And now he knew everything about me and Madii—at least the not-so-intimate parts that I was willing to share. He wasn’t my superior, but he was someone I looked up to, even if I thought he was sort of obnoxious at times.

“Well, you got yourself into this mess. You’ll have to lie in the bed you made.”

Gary stood, strutting to the door with a cockiness in his step that betrayed his casual, friendly tone. He bent and retrieved his pen, clicking it a few times before sliding it into the chest pocket on his scrubs. “Just don’t say I didn’t warn you about this.”

He shut the door behind him, leaving me regretting ever saying anything to him. News would get around sooner or later. In fact, Tanya had likely told the nursing staff already, given the fact that she’d seen my interactions with Madii on a number of occasions, and half the floor knew I had lunch with Madison multiple times. It wasn’t like it was a secret. I just didn’t want that part getting back to Drew’s parents until one of us had a chance to tell them.

I slowly rose, shuffling across the cheap Berber toward the door. As I rounded the end of my desk, I picked up Drew’s file. Tanya had all the specifics on the new treatment from John’s Hopkins, but she wanted me there when the news was delivered. She said I had a better “bedside manner” than she

did, and felt they'd be more confident with me there. It would, after all, mean brain surgery.

Alice and Henry were hovering by Drew's bedside when I walked in the room. Tanya was not yet there, despite having set an 11 a.m. meeting with the two of them. They looked up at me as I entered. She looked expectant; he looked worried. They clung to each other's hands. I couldn't tell if it was to hide the shaking Henry's hands were doing, or if it was because Alice needed support.

"Hey, Mr. and Mrs. Heintz. Thanks for coming in." I checked the machines' readouts. Drew's vitals were good, and everything looked normal. Alice looked down at him and I followed her gaze, noticing how sunken in his cheeks were. Like every coma patient, he had lost substantial weight. By now his muscles were atrophied and weak.

"You have news?" Henry's eyes hadn't left my face. I raised my gaze back to meet his and gestured for the sofa at the end of the long narrow room. The lights were off, so the sofa sat in the shadows. I flicked the light on as I passed the door, glancing out the window to see if Tanya was coming yet.

"So, I want to wait for Dr. Smith because it was her who initiated this contact." I sat in the uncomfortable armchair, the leather squeaking as I settled in. "She has a friend at John's Hopkins who has done some research on coma patients and a new therapy."

"New therapy? What sort?" Alice joined us, she and Henry sitting closer than sardines in a can, she had her arms wrapped around his bicep, eyes wide. The last thing I wanted to do was give them false hope. Tanya had already lectured me about that, but this new treatment meant a degree of hope would be raised. There was no way to stop that.

"I think I should wait for her. She can explain this to you. I'm really just here as moral support for you, I think." I thumbed through the files in my hand, reading the same numbers I'd been reading for months. Nothing had changed. No improvement at all.

“Well, that’s true.” Henry’s gruff response surprised me. “Smith hasn’t been here at all. It’s like the doctors in this place don’t give a rip about us. They have nurses checking on us daily, but I haven’t seen the doctor here in at least three months. You’d think they would stop in when we’re here.”

Alice squeezed his arm tighter. “Now, dear. Don’t get worked up. Okay? Cecil and Pam have just been wonderful, Gavin. And you—oh, precious boy. Thank you for always stopping in and visiting and checking in on us. I realize as a surgeon you never had to do that. But it never went unnoticed.” Alice’s eyes sparkled with emotion. “What Henry is trying to say is, we are impatient. If you have answers, why wait?”

I pulled my phone out, hoping to have some sort of text or message from Tanya, but there was nothing. So, I put my phone back in my pocket and sighed.

“Alright. So, the treatment involves a surgery. We implant electrodes into Drew’s brain in very strategic places. They send electrical signals to parts of his brain that are showing less activity. Based on the trials and the research, we believe this may awaken those parts of his brain.”

I watched Henry’s face go from frustrated to hopeful. But Alice’s changed, suddenly more fearful than anything. Her brow creased and her bottom lip quivered.

“And he will wake up?” Henry put an arm around Alice and jostled her in the process. She scrambled for his hand, clinging to it again.

“We aren’t certain. During the trials, all of the patients showed improvement, but not all woke up. We can’t predict how Drew will respond. What we do know is that if we do nothing, then nothing will change. This treatment offers a hope that we’ll see something improve.” Closing the chart and laying it in my lap, I folded my hands and watched their faces.

Alice’s eyes studied me. I tried to read the emotion there, but the only thing I saw was a desperate mother, clawing for a shred of hope that her son would come back. She and Henry locked eyes for a moment and then he turned to me.

“How soon can we do it?”

Just that fast, they both stood, holding hands. I joined them, clutching the file in my hand. I hadn't expected such an abrupt response. Most of my patients' loved ones had taken time to deliberate and think on it. Two of them still hadn't responded to me yet. But I could see in Henry's eyes the urgency. Watching your loved one die slowly was painful, and I'd given him a new reason to hope. I just prayed that hope would not end up destroying him if it got deferred.

“Now, hold on. We have a bit of prep work to do. We have to ensure he is healthy enough that his body can withstand the surgery. Then we have to run labs to make sure he has no sign of infection. There are some steps.”

Henry walked away but Alice lingered beside me.

“So,” she said, “if he is healthy, how long 'til surgery?” She wrung her fingers together, biting her lower lip. I'd seen Madii make that same face so many times I couldn't count. And instantly the thought of Madii made my heart pound.

“I think about two weeks until the tests are in. Then surgery is just a matter of scheduling the OR. I can do it myself, or we can let Dr. Rutger handle it. Either way, I can be here for you both if you prefer.”

Henry bent over Drew's bed, lying across his chest. I could hear the soft cries and turned away. When a man cried, it was a sacred thing. I fixed my gaze on Alice who seemed to also feel the same way.

“Yes, I'd like that. Dr. Rutger is a fine doctor, and you can interpret what he says, you know.” She hooked her arm in mine and led me to the door, glancing over her shoulder at Henry, whose sobs shook the bed.

I lingered for a moment, shutting the door behind us. I wasn't sure what she wanted to say, but I knew Henry needed the privacy. There was still no sign of Tanya in the hallway, and Alice paced like a caged cat. She had her hand pressed to her forehead, nervously saying something under her breath.

“Mrs. Heintz?”

“I told you ages ago to call me Alice.” She stopped and stared at me. “Now, please... I need to know the facts. What are the chances that he wakes up?” Her eyes bored into me, an intensity I’d never seen from her.

“Honestly, Alice, I was being truthful. It’s about 50-50. Seventy-seven percent of patients had improvement. Twenty-one percent woke up.” I shifted the file from one arm to the other.

“And the others?”

I shook my head. She didn’t need to know that some of them never made it out of surgery. Even though I didn’t say a word, I could see by the look on her face that she knew what I was getting at. She nodded, pressing her hand to her lips. I watched her eyes fill with tears as she stared through the window to Drew’s room at Henry, who still lay across Drew’s chest.

“Don’t tell her.”

Confused, I offered her a furrowed brow and squinted eyes.

“Madison.” Alice locked eyes with me, her intent stare haunting. “You can’t tell her. She’s so happy now. You haven’t seen her like this before, Gavin, so you don’t know. All you’ve seen of Madison is the depressed shell of the woman she used to be. Since the moment she stopped coming here, she glows. Her life is back. She’s happy. If you tell her this, she will be at his side in a heartbeat, waiting, pining... And worst of all, anything that she may have had with you, it will just vanish.”

I wanted to protest, to tell her she was wrong, but deep in my gut I knew she was right. I hadn’t ever seen Madison on her best days, but I’d seen her come out of her hole of misery. I didn’t want her to lose that, not for any reason. I nodded curtly, not able to articulate a response.

“And don’t forget that she is a precious treasure that needs to be cherished and loved.” Alice looked down and walked away, shutting herself into Drew’s room just as Dr. Smith strolled up.

“You told them?” she asked, watching them through the window as they embraced.

“Yeah... What the hell took you so long?” Nerves got the better of me, my fingers shaking a bit, so I shoved my hand in my pocket.

“Patients.” She rolled her eyes. “You, okay? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

I shrugged. “Some things are harder than others to communicate...” I watched Henry wipe his eyes, then continued. “They’re in. Talk to them about testing and prep. Rutger can do the surgery. I need to clear my head.”

Without another word, I walked away. My heart was ready to explode. I wasn’t lying to Madii by keeping this secret, especially at the request of Drew’s mother, but still it felt wrong. Deceptive.

My shift was over, and I needed air. It was time to hit the court with Nick and Jiles and work off some of this stress before I went crazy.

MAD II

“All set!” I picked up my climbing bag and headed for the door. It was a gorgeous day for a climb, and Gavin and I were headed to the new gym in town. He followed me through the living room and out my front door, jingling his keys as we walked. He was in a bit of a somber mood, and I wondered if something had happened at work, but I didn’t want to pry. Things like this had a way of working themselves out most times.

He took my bag for me as we approached the car, and popped the trunk, tossing it in beside his. Then he opened the door for me. I tried to give him a kiss before sitting down, but he seemed distracted. So, I settled in, intent on trying to cheer him up even if I didn’t know what was going on.

He slid behind the wheel and started the car, and I waited until he was in gear before reaching for his hand. He held mine, but it was not an intimate touch he offered.

“Is everything okay?” I studied his face as he drove but couldn’t read him.

“Yeah, it’s okay. Just ready to hit the gym.” He drove a bit faster than normal, the sullen expression still plastered on his face. I hated that something was bothering him, and he wouldn’t tell me what it was. I thought we were much closer than that, but maybe I was wrong.

I rode in quiet, not really sure what to say. I could tell something was wrong with him, but if he didn’t want to talk, I couldn’t make him. And I didn’t want to start an argument

with him by insisting he should speak about what was bothering him. So, I stayed silent.

The gym was on the other side of town, so Gavin hopped on the belt to avoid the traffic. We'd been driving nearly 15 minutes when his phone rang. Usually, he ignored his phone when we were together, but this time he pulled it out and answered it—another red flag. He scowled as he held the phone to his ear and I heard the grating nasally voice of a woman, though I couldn't tell what she was saying. The conversation lasted only a few minutes before Gavin hung up.

“We have to go to my mom's house.” He tossed the phone into the center console of the car and flipped on his blinker, indicating he was exiting the highway.

“What why?” A sudden anxiety struck me, making my pulse race and my hands sweat. I hadn't met his mother yet. He hadn't even broached the topic of his mother with me.

“She's having an issue she needs help with. If it's not okay, I can drop you back at home. I am not sure how long it will take.” His eyes flicked at me then back to the road. I didn't know how to take it. Did he want me to go with him? Or was he trying to get rid of me?

I sat nervously picking my fingernails until he stopped at the red light at the end of the exit ramp. He turned and grabbed my hand. “It's okay if it is too much too fast. My mom needs me. My dad is traveling for a while and when he does, I have to take care of things she needs. If you want to go home, I can take you home. I can come back and pick you up when I'm done. We can still do the gym; it will just be later.”

I sighed, realizing I was being too uptight. “Of course, I'll go with you. I just feel a little anxious, that's all. Like, is your mom going to be upset that I'm along with you?”

Gavin turned his attention back to the road and his hands to the steering wheel as the light turned green. “My mother is going to be my mother.”

“That doesn't sound like a good thing.” I chuckled, trying to clear the air.

“Just a little background for you. I had three serious relationships that looked like they were going somewhere before you came along. My mother was certain that each of them was the one. I was not. Mom wants me to marry someone who will be a perfect baby machine for her and give her grandbabies, while simultaneously adding to the family reputation and not embarrassing her.”

I couldn't help but smile at his description. I could tell he loved his mother very much by the way he'd spoken of her on a number of occasions. And based on the way he described her; I could tell she was likely a little high maintenance.

“Don't worry, Gavin. I can handle Momzilla.” I rested my hand on his thigh and his shoulders relaxed a bit.

“Good because you'll have to be very patient. I'm warning you; she's going to ask you about having children.”

I wanted to tell him that we should talk about that topic anyway, that I wanted to know how he felt about kids. But I held my tongue. He was upset about something anyway, and with this side trip, I didn't think now was the time. As we drove toward his mother's house, he warned me about the dog—Mittens—and the barking. Then he told me about the time his ex-girlfriend got bitten by Mittens. In fact, he told me how every woman he'd brought over to meet his mother hated that dog. It didn't leave me with high hopes that the experience would be good, but I kept a brave face.

We parked in front of her home, a sprawling ranch in a ritzy neighborhood. Large weeping willow trees shaded the house on all sides, and a water fixture next to the front door greeted us as we approached. Gavin didn't even knock; he just walked right in, closing the door behind us.

“Mom?” His voice echoed around the entryway that seemed more like a foyer at a law firm than a home. Marble floors and mirrors on every wall made it too impersonal for my taste. I was glad Gavin had not gotten his taste from his parents.

I followed him down the hallway through the kitchen to the back door. Giant picture windows framed in the back side of the house, overlooking a massive deck and pool. A beautiful

woman sat cradling a dog—Maltese maybe? —and appearing very impish, as if she had ulterior motives for calling Gavin away from his date with me. Her hair was styled in a short bob, silver streaked throughout the blonde, and she wore what I can only describe as “rich-lady clothes.” A white blouse and white, loose-fitting capris. Her nails were manicured and her makeup perfect.

“Well, who is this?” She looked up at me over the rim of her chunky black sunglasses. “You didn’t tell me you were bringing company. I would have set out some drinks.” She rose, shoving the dog into Gavin’s hands. “Gavin, introduce me to your friend.”

Gavin rolled his eyes behind her back and mouthed “I’m sorry.” I tried not to smile at him, but it was difficult to keep my composure when he took his hand and drew a circle in the air by his ear—a gesture to indicate he thought she was acting crazy. I smiled brightly as I extended my hand and introduced myself.

“I’m Madison Springer. Nice to meet you.”

She looked at my hand like I had the plague and then back to my face before lifting her glasses and resting them on top of her head.

“Margret Bloom-Carpenter.” She eyed me, then my hand. When she looked back at my face, I retracted my hand awkwardly. “How do you know my son?”

I assumed her question was meant to learn more about me, but it sounded almost hostile. If she wanted Gavin to meet a woman and give her grandbabies, this sure was a horrible way of making his date feel welcome.

“Uh...” I looked up at Gavin and choked. I couldn’t tell her how we met. It was too embarrassing.

“I know her from the hospital, Mom.” Gavin shifted the dog in his arms. “Mom, Madison. Madison, Mom... Now that you know each other, what’s wrong with the dog?”

Margret kept her eye on me for a moment but slowly turned toward the scruffy furball. “He has a broken nail. Look.” She

pulled out one of the dog's feet and stretched his arm out so far, I thought she'd break it off.

"You called me for a broken dog toenail?" Gavin sounded irritated. I didn't blame him. I would have been furious too.

His mother shrugged innocently and handed him a pair of nail trimmers. "He won't sit still. What if he gets it snagged on the carpet?"

Gavin huffed and scowled at her, taking the trimmers. He sat down on the chair she'd just vacated and went to work, and I tried to maneuver closer to him, but Margret stepped in my way.

"So why were you at the hospital?" She sounded polite enough, but I could hear the edge in her voice. And judging by the way Gavin's shoulders tensed, he could too.

"I was visiting someone." I tried to change the subject. "You have a lovely home, Mrs. Carpenter."

"Bloom-Carpenter. I kept my maiden name and added the Carpenter bit. No need to lose the prestige that comes with being a Bloom in this town." She picked at an invisible thread on her shirt as she spoke. "And where do you live?"

"I live here in the city, but I was raised up north in a small town." Gavin fidgeted with the dog, and I wanted to rush to his side and hold the poor thing so he wouldn't squirm so much, but Margret stood planted in my way.

"And you have designs on my son?" Her brow furrowed. "You realize that he is quite the surgeon, and he needs a wife of good reputation."

I took a step back nervously. I had never felt so uncomfortable in my life. The dog yelped but Margret did not turn around. It seemed she was more intent on grilling me than making sure her beloved pooch was okay. She stared me down.

"What do you do for a living?"

Intimidated, I looked around her at Gavin who seemed focused on the dog. I took another step backward, praying somehow, she'd leave me alone.

“I’m a photographer.”

“Oh, for a newspaper?”

“I, uh... No. I take family portraits, wedding pictures, that sort of thing.”

She inched closer to me as I spoke, and I took yet another step backward. She wasn’t exactly being rude, but I didn’t feel it was polite to intimidate a guest like this.

“So, you have no real job?” Her eyes narrowed at me, and she was about to say something else when my phone rang.

I had never been more happy to see my own mother’s name on the caller ID. “Sorry, it’s my mom. I need to take this.”

Before she could say anything else, I swiped right to answer and held the phone to my ear, heading back in the house. “Hey, Mom.” I headed down the hall toward the front door, not stopping until I was standing next to Gavin’s car. He had locked it, so I had to stand next to it in the sun to talk to my mother, who I now wanted to get rid of. But at least she had been my reprieve from the hawk in the backyard.

“Dear, how are you? The way you left when you were here just upset me. I worried about you, but your father wanted me to leave you alone. It’s been weeks. You haven’t called.”

“I’m okay, Mom. Things are okay.” If I told her that I had moved on it would start a deluge of suggestions: date this boy, go to this place to find a nice man, try this dating service. I had no intention of telling her anything had even changed.

“Okay, dear. Your father and I were just worried about you, that’s all. You know Violet will be home in a few weeks. We’d like you to come stay with us for a while. That is, if Drew will be okay with you not being there.”

I shook my head at her veiled attempts to make me feel bad for clinging to emotions I had for Drew.

“I’ll see. Listen, I have to go.” I noticed Gavin coming down the sidewalk and felt a bit anxious again. “I’ll call you later, okay.”

I hung up before Mom could respond, just in time to catch a huge hug from Gavin that took me by surprise.

“Wow, what is that for?” I chuckled, as I draped my arms over his shoulders and locked my hands behind his head.

“I’m so sorry my mom is so awful.”

“No worse than mine, which is exactly who called.”

Gavin kissed my forehead then my lips, lingering there for a moment. When he backed away, he had a confused look. “Your mom... Is she the one who visited the hospital a few times? Dark auburn hair and glasses?”

I nodded, stepping aside for him to open the car door. “Don’t get me started, okay? Let’s just agree that parents can be the worst at times and leave it at that.”

As I sank into the car seat, prepared to head to the climbing gym, I recalled a time when Mom had visited me at Drew’s bedside. The conversation we had had been overheard by Gavin and it was not a pleasant one. Mom had been herself that day, insisting I just dump Drew and move on. I was “too good to wait around.” Gavin had been a saint, coming to my rescue just when I needed it to ask Mom to leave so he could administer therapy. He wasn’t even the therapist, but it had gotten Mom out of the room, so she stopped badgering me. I should have known back then how amazing Gavin was.

As he sat down next to me to drive us away from this horrible experience, I sighed contentedly and took his hand. Whatever had been bothering him before was no longer bothering him and that was all that mattered.

GAVIN

The highway wasn't nearly as congested as I thought it would be when I set off this morning. I'd left plenty of time for traffic and would likely be arriving much sooner than I had originally planned, but for an unplanned visit—at least on their end—time wasn't really that concerning. What was concerning was the tense pressure in my chest to get this right.

"You're where?" Nick's voice came across the speaker in my car loud and clear. He called hoping to meet up for a game of hoops and I had already left my house.

"I told you, I'm on Highway 10 headed north." The hands-free unit kept me focused on the road and able to enjoy the conversation.

"Where are you going?" I heard the basketball bouncing in the background, which meant Nick was likely on the court already.

"Headed to Madison's parents' house." A grin stretched across my face just thinking about my mission. I didn't even know if Madii had told them about me, and it had been such a short time, but I knew what I wanted.

"Ah, I see. Hey, Madii!" Nick bounced the ball a few more times.

"Nick, she's not in the car." I chuckled at his mistake.

"Oh! Ooooh! Snap. You're going to talk to her pops about getting hitched?"

Now he was getting it. I couldn't help feeling giddy. Madison had no clue what I was doing, and I wanted to keep it that way. I'd scheduled my day off but told her I had a surgery that would last all day. She'd expect me to be at the hospital and never try to contact me. I was home free.

"Wow, man. Congrats. I had no idea it was that serious already." I heard the ball thunk off the backboard and then smack the ground.

"Thanks. So yeah, I can't really play basketball today. But maybe on Tuesday after work."

"Yeah, sure... Hey, Gav, do you think this is moving too fast?"

Nick had never been the voice of reason. Usually, I relied on Jiles to be that for me. In this instance I was a bit surprised but not entirely. He was right. Madii and I were moving fast, but it wasn't like we had only known each other the 10 weeks we'd been dating. We had taken the past 18 months to get to know each other as friends.

I knew she liked her yogurt with granola on the top. I learned that over a few breakfasts next to Drew. I knew she liked listening to music while she read books; I'd seen her do that plenty of times. I knew her mother and her had a difficult relationship, but that she loved her father more than anything. The only thing I didn't know was how she felt about her sister—Violet if I recalled the name correctly.

"No, it's not like we're getting married today, I'm just asking for her dad's permission to propose. We could end up with a two-year engagement."

"Or you could jet off to Vegas tomorrow." Nick laughed and snorted. "Dude, you're crazy. After that last bitch did you like that, and you're jumping into this so fast. I gotta hand it to you. You really do take risks."

"Not going to happen. Listen, I'm nearing my exit, so I have to focus. I'll shoot you a call later."

"Good luck," Nick replied, hanging up.

Did I need luck? I was a successful neurosurgeon at one of the biggest hospitals in the state. I had two doctorate degrees and

worked my ass off to get what I wanted. I had patiently waited for Madison to choose on her own that she was ready to move on, and even then, I waited for her to take the lead, despite my gut urges to take the lead myself. I didn't need luck.

One-hundred miles of highways, state routes, and back roads, and I pulled into Hampshire, Louisiana. I was tired of being in the car, but not quite ready to stop by Madison's parents' house yet. So, I saw a few of the sights. Visited the quaint coffee shop first and picked up an espresso. Then I strolled through the town square, trying to get a feel for how Madii must have grown up.

After driving past the local school and through a few neighborhoods, I got myself in the right mindset. I drove to the Springer's and parked in front of their house. It was an older Victorian style home with a porch that wrapped around the front, and a round Portico near the corner where a swing hung. My eye was drawn to the massive tree in the backyard of the next-door property where a treehouse had been built. It made me smile to think maybe Madii had grown up climbing that tree.

I stood there facing the house staring up at that old tree when a voice interrupted my thoughts.

"Can I help you?"

I turned my gaze in the direction of the voice and saw Madison's father standing there holding a spindle that looked like it had been tooled recently. She hadn't mentioned that her father liked woodworking, but we hadn't spoken about her parents much anyway. He was a stout man, full beard and striking black hair with a little salt-and-pepper look around his temples.

"Mr. Springer?" I didn't have to ask if it was him, because he'd come to the hospital more than once early on to comfort his daughter.

"Do I know you?" His eyes narrowed and his brow furrowed in thought.

I held out my hand and walked toward him. “Dr. Gavin Carpenter, sir.”

He shook my hand as the recognition washed over his expression. His eyes lit up. “You’re that doctor from New Orleans. What the hell are you doing here?” He shook my hand vigorously and smiled. “So nice to have you. You come right on in here and we’ll fix you up with a glass of lemonade.”

“Thank you, of course.” I followed him into the house, and he pointed to the couch.

“Just take a load off. I’ll get the Misses and she’ll bring us some drinks. We can talk about what brought you up here.”

I sat and took in the sight. Wood paneling adorned the walls, covered in picture frames hung meticulously. The old couch was plaid, the stuffing worn and the colors faded—well-loved for years I assumed. The carpet near the entrance was threadbare in places, decades of foot traffic and maybe even a few pets. The home that Madii grew up in was growing on me. It felt like home instantly, more so than the marble palaces I grew up in—a new one every few years.

After what seemed like forever, Mr. Springer returned. It appeared he had washed up a bit and put on a fresh shirt. His hair was combed, and he was followed by Mrs. Springer. I rose to greet her, offering to take the tray of lemonade and tiny finger sandwiches she’d brought out.

“All this for me?” I grinned, setting it on the table. She blushed.

“Not too often we get a fancy doctor out this way.” She nodded politely and sat, and Mr. Springer and I followed suit. “What brings you?” Leaning forward, she poured three glasses of lemonade and served them up, pointing at the snacks. “Eat up.”

“Thank you.” I sipped the lemonade and picked up a sandwich. It looked like white bread with cold meat and American cheese stacked together and cut in small triangles, toothpicks holding it together. I wasn’t picky. I wasn’t here to

judge her family on their hospitality, I was here to confess my love for their daughter and ask for her hand in marriage.

“Let’s cut to the chase, son. Is there something we need to know?” Mr. Springer looked concerned, and that was not at all what I had intended for him to feel.

“Absolutely not.” I chewed the sandwich quickly and swallowed, washing it down with a drink. “Mr. and Mrs. Springer...”

“Please call us Dave and Becky.”

“Yes, of course. Dave, I am here because I’ve been seeing your daughter.” Dave’s eyebrows rose and he looked to his wife. “I am sure you’re probably shocked. I don’t know if she even told you or not.”

“No this is the first we’ve heard of this.” He sat a bit straighter, and when I looked at Becky, she was sipping her lemonade, her expression of shock hidden behind the rim of the cup.

“Well, I am deeply in love with your daughter, and I would like to ask for her hand in marriage.” I leaned, elbows on knees, and folded my hands. That comment drew a gasp from Becky, who choked on her lemonade and had a coughing fit. Dave scrubbed a hand down his face and sat back in his chair. He stared at the ceiling for a minute, ignoring his wife gasping for breath, and took a deep breath. His large belly rose and fell slowly.

“Well, Dr. Carpenter—”

“Please, call me Gavin.”

“Okay, Gavin,” Dave started, sitting up and matching my posture. We sat across from each other in a stare down. “I have a major concern here.”

I didn’t let him ruffle my feathers, but it wasn’t the answer I was hoping for initially.

“What’s that?”

“Don’t you think you’re a little bit old for her?” Dave raised an eyebrow, his shoulders squaring a bit as he stared at me. “I

mean, you're what, 40? And she's practically a baby still. You've probably been married and divorced and she's still figuring out what she wants in life."

I stared at him, baffled by this sudden onslaught of questions. He went from not even knowing his daughter was dating someone to questioning our entire relationship based on my assumed age—which he had gotten wrong on the first guess. And he had done it in under two minutes.

Careful to compose myself so I didn't make the wrong impression I said, "With all due respect Mr. Springer, Madison is hardly a baby. She's 28, and she's a very strong woman. It takes the resilience of a warrior to walk through some of the things she's had to shoulder and if that isn't proof enough, then I fear you may not know her as well as perhaps you should.

"And I am 38 years old, never married. I live alone and I work hard. My dedication and devotion to Madison hasn't wavered in the now almost 20 months I've known her. We developed a friendship that is very strong, and as of the past three or four months, I've grown to love her more deeply than I can even express. I don't feel age should be a factor in the decision."

I held my breath, waiting for his reply, but as he opened his mouth to speak, Becky cut him off. "Dear, listen to the man." I looked at her pleading eyes. She appeared on the verge of tears while still smiling. "We have prayed day and night for someone to come along and help Madison live again. If she is happy, then who are we to intervene?"

"But Becky... How do we know this guy isn't some kook?" Dave was a protective father—a quality I valued greatly.

"Would a kook drive all the way from the bayou to ask for your daughter's hand in marriage?" Becky stood and held her hand out. "Welcome to the family, Gavin. I believe if you are as honorable as you seem, then Madison will be very happy with you. And I really look forward to getting to know you better over time."

I held Becky's hand in mine gently, pulling it to my lips for a kiss as I stood. Dave joined us, standing with his stout belly

protruding. He had a look of apprehension, one side of his mouth drawn up in thought. But he thrust out his hand.

“If you break her heart, I will hunt you down. You hear? She’s been through enough.”

I had to stifle the chuckle that threatened to escape. The stereotype about dads in the Deep South being very protective over their daughters was not in any shape or form a lie. I looked at Dave and wondered if I would feel the same way when I had a daughter of my own.

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” I shook his hand, the pact between me and him that for all intents and purposes, Madison was mine. Now I just had to convince her that I was what she wanted forever.

MAD II

The sun was perfect for landscape shots, and I took probably a hundred of them. The park was beautiful that time of evening, and Gavin had invited me to take a walk with him. He slid his hand into mine, but for the hundredth time, I slipped away to snap a shot.

“Sorry, it’s so beautiful. The sunset is so colorful.” I grinned at him as I pointed my camera at him and snapped the image. He didn’t seem to mind, smiling back at me and striking an occasional pose. As photogenic as he was, however, my focus was on the scenery.

Large deciduous trees lined the path on both sides, accented by floral bushes and just the right touch of color in the sky. We had the park mostly to ourselves, which seemed odd considering I’d been there all times of the day and night, and I’d never seen it that dead, but I wasn’t complaining.

After a few more shots, I joined Gavin on the path again, this time not waiting for him to take my hand. I slid my fingers between his and leaned on his shoulder as we walked, my camera draped around my neck by its strap. They weren’t the typical scenery shots I took, but given my lack of true adventure seeking lately, they were the only ones to which I had access.

“One day, I want to do some real climbing. Maybe out west or something. Those sunsets have to be amazing.” I looked up at Gavin and noticed a new expression on his face, not quite unhappy, but not the same smiling face he’d had earlier. “Everything okay?”

His smile returned, followed by a warmth in his eyes that hadn't been there before. "Yes, everything is fine..." He glanced around, his eyes stopping on a bench a short way down the path. "Can we sit for a moment?"

"God, I'm so sorry. You're on your feet all day long. You must be so tired and here I am snapping a jillion photos. Of course. Let's go sit down." I pulled him toward the old wooden bench. With wrought-iron end caps and wooden slats, it had weathered a lot of storms and the heat of the sun for a long time. Its paint was chipping off, but strangely in that moment the bench struck me as a pillar of strength. It still stood strong despite the wear and tear, just like my heart.

"What's that smile for?" Gavin asked, sitting down and patting the bench next to where he sat.

"Oh, nothing." I sat down, realizing that the gray peeking through in Gavin's hair around his temples was just like the chipping paint on the bench. I stared at him, suddenly feeling so in love with him. All my former apprehensions about dating a man so much older than me seemed trivial now—as if a part of me inside just shifted.

"Doesn't look like nothing." He angled himself on the bench to face me and I shrugged.

"Just thinking how much I love you, I guess. I really never thought it would be possible, but here we are."

"Yes, here we are." His eyes twinkled as he pushed a hair behind my ear. I felt like our hearts were experiencing the same magical moment, even though it was a boring city park at sunset on one of the hottest days of the year so far. "And I've been thinking about some things."

"Like what?"

Gavin turned toward me more and rested his arm across the back of the bench, playing with the sleeve of my t-shirt. His eyes were fixed on his fingers as they lifted the sleeve hem and then smoothed it back down. He was silent for a moment, but I was patient. The serious expression on his face had me a bit concerned though, and my belly started to churn. We had

been having such a good night; there was no way he had brought me out here to dump me.

“Is everything okay?” I didn’t even know if I wanted to know the answer to that question.

“Do you want children?” His question came on the heels of mine, and I wasn’t ready for it. It took me a moment to respond.

“Of course, I do. I want to have a big family.” Confusion started to set in. What was he up to?

“And you want to stay here in the city?” His eyes focused on mine.

“Yes.” I offered a confused expression. “What are you getting at?”

“I’ve spent a very long time building my career.” Gavin grew more serious, taking my hand and holding it firmly. “My family money put me through college, but everything I have now, I earned by working hard. I established my practice, and now, I’m up for a promotion to head of neurology for the entire hospital.”

“Oh my god! That’s so amazing, Gavin. Congratulations—”

“But I’d give it all up for you, if you wanted to move home. Or anywhere, or just travel the world and go cliff diving.” He squeezed my hand harder, and I couldn’t help but smile bigger.

“You never have to do that for me. New Orleans is my home now. I don’t belong in Hampshire or any other small town. And we can do all the adventuring we want while maintaining careers and living here... Do you think I’m not happy here?”

Gavin did not answer my question. Instead, he slid off the bench, lowering himself to one knee. Shock settled in as I realized what he was doing. I covered my mouth, feeling tears already burning my eyes. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small black box, holding it in one hand and staring down at it.

“Madison, I am in love with you. More in love than I ever have been. I know this is very fast and probably a complete

shock to you, but when you know what you want, you don't have to think about it for weeks or months. And I know what I want."

He looked up at me, his deep brown eyes piercing mine and causing the cascade of tears to begin. He slowly opened the box and inside was a simple silver band, no embellishments, no stone, just the symbol of his love. I choked back a happy sob and stared at that ring feeling completely overwhelmed.

"I want you to be my wife. I want to cherish you, and take care of you, and wake up to your face every morning. I want to tuck you in when you're sick and hold your hand when you're happy. And most of all I want a family. I want to do it with you."

He plucked the ring out of the box and took my hand. My hands shook as he fumbled with the ring, dropping it on my lap once before slipping it onto my finger.

"Will you marry me?"

I didn't even have to think about it. I knew my answer the moment he slid to his knee. I nodded, unable to say much because of the sobbing. I threw my arms around him, not even caring about what the ring looked like and clung to him. He held me as I cried, though I was certain he probably wondered why I was crying so hard. His hands smoothed up and down my back in a soothing motion until I had composed myself.

"Fuck..." I pulled away from him, wiping at my eyes and drying my fingers on my jean shorts. "I'm going to look like a raccoon with this running mascara now."

"Raccoons are cute." Gavin sat back on the bench next to me and offered me a folded napkin from his pocket. "And you'd be the cutest raccoon I know."

I smiled at him, blowing my nose before stuffing the napkin in my pocket. I looked down at the ring, twisting it on my finger and grinning like an idiot.

"Do you like it?"

I looked up at his apprehensive face. "I love it. It's so simple and pure. I think you know me better than anyone in my life

ever has. A big clunky rock on my hand would just get in the way of climbing and hiking—or diving.”

His face relaxed and he leaned in to kiss me. I accepted his kiss, pulling him in. His stubble scratched my chin, but I didn't care. I hadn't been this happy in so long, I'd forgotten what being happy felt like.

The sun had faded from the sky so much the vibrant pinks and oranges had deepened to blues and purples, but my mind wasn't on the colors anymore. I rested my head on his shoulder and sighed, watching the last fingers of light tiptoe across the sky.

“I think we should head home before it's too dark to see our way out of the park.” Gavin stood, taking my hand. “And I have surgery in the morning again.”

I offered a peck on the cheek and walked alongside him, heading toward the park entrance. By the time we got to the parking lot where both had parked, I could barely see to put my key in the door.

“Want to have dinner Friday to celebrate?” He stood next to me as I fumbled with the lock.

“Sure... Gosh, Mom is going to freak out. I haven't even told her I was dating someone. The last time I went to visit, she pressured me to live my life and I ended up walking out because I didn't think I was ready.” I opened my car door and stood there. Gavin kissed me again, then walked away.

“You never know... She may take it better than you think,” he called before climbing into his car. With the window down he added, “See you Friday.”

I started my car and turned the headlights on, waiting for Gavin to pull away before deciding that Mom could wait. She didn't know I was dating, so she wouldn't know about the engagement either. I had to decide the best way to let her, and Dad know all the details without them worrying I was racing into something.

Driving home, thoughts of Drew came crowding into my thoughts. When he went into the coma, I was his fiancé. Life

was good and he was looking forward to a future with me. If he woke up everything would be different for him. Life had moved on while he slept. My mind started to spiral into negativity and discouragement, feelings that I was betraying him, that I would hurt him beyond repair.

But I reminded myself of what his mother told me, to live my own life. She had reminded me that Drew wouldn't want me being miserable and waiting for him. Maybe she had meant just adventuring or making new friends, but even when I had told her about Gavin, she was happy for me. I had to believe the stars had aligned for me and Gavin. I needed to cling to that anchor in this storm because when the winds blew like they do in every relationship, I'd need that reassurance.

I looked down at the ring as I drove. I was going to be Mrs. Gavin Carpenter, and I couldn't wait.

GAVIN

“This is delicious.” Madison took another huge bite of the pasta, dripping a dollop of the thick creamy sauce onto her chin. She grinned as she put her fork down and used a napkin to wipe her face clean.

After a long day, we ditched our plans to have dinner out, and we ordered in. Rosatti’s Italian was the ritziest place this side of town that delivered, so I bought a bottle of wine and set the table as if we were in a fancy restaurant. I sliced into my lasagna, carefully taking smaller bites so I didn’t make a mess of myself, but Madii didn’t hold back.

“It’s good to see you’re so comfortable eating in front of me. When you’re Mrs. Carpenter you’ll be doing a lot of that.” I smirked at the speck of sauce on her chin that she missed. “Missed some.”

She rolled her eyes at me as she dipped her breadstick into the alfredo and sopped up the buttery mixture. She didn’t seem to care that more sauce dribbled onto her chin before wiping it off. The lights flickered as a crack of thunder shook the house, the leading edge of a weak tropical storm overhead—yet another reason to eat in.

“Glad this one didn’t turn into a hurricane.” She took another bite of her breadstick and chewed carefully, this time making no mess. Maybe me pointing out the last mess made her self-conscious.

“Yeah, well we are safe together, and we have plenty of time to ride out the storm. So, what do you want to do? We can play

cards, maybe go in the basement and shoot pool. Or we can watch a movie.” I took the last bite of my lasagna, savoring the rich flavors, and washed it down with a sip of my beer.

“Well, we could talk wedding stuff?” Madison’s eyebrows rose as she pushed her plate away. There were a few morsels left, but in all the times we’d eaten together, I’d never seen her clear her plate. There were always a few bites remaining when she was done.

“Yeah?” I stood and picked up our plates, carrying them to the sink. “We can do that. I’m thinking my best man will be Nick—you haven’t met him, but you did meet Jiles one day as you were leaving the cafeteria after lunch.”

“He’s a doctor?” She stood and brought the silverware to me as I stood rinsing the plates. It was nice doing the mundane things of life with her. I looked forward to doing this every night.

“Jiles? Yeah. He’s a pediatric specialist.” I opened the dishwasher and loaded the plates, then carefully placed the silverware into the caddy. “Nick is a salesman. If you need a good car, I know who you can call.”

She chuckled. “No thanks. I will keep my old beat-up sedan until she falls apart. Who wants a car payment in this economy? Especially when you’re planning a wedding.”

After grabbing a beer, she headed out of the room, so I followed, snagging my beer off the table on the way past. We wandered into the living room and collapsed on the couch. She kicked her feet up and rested them on my thighs, and I took a long swig of beer before setting it down on the table.

“So, who will stand for you?” I rubbed her foot a little as I talked.

“Obviously Lexi and Crystal. They were in my wedding with—” Her eyes fell, and she sighed. I couldn’t imagine how difficult it must have been for her to be planning a new wedding when the former one had been so abruptly canceled.

“I’m sorry, Madii. We don’t have to do this tonight.”

She sat up and snuggled in close to me, curling up against my side. I held her against my body, rubbing her arm and wondering what she was feeling. But I didn't pressure her. If she wanted to talk, I'd listen. But I wasn't going to force her to. I knew in time she would feel better about things. I was just glad she let me be a part of her healing.

"No, it's okay... I think maybe I'll ask Violet. But that would make the parties uneven." She picked at the button on my shirt.

I had known she still had a lot of emotion that she'd repressed, and I should have been prepared for the ambivalence she would feel as we made plans. But when I heard her sniffle, it broke my heart. I pushed my finger under her chin until she looked up at me.

"Really, Madison. We don't have to do this tonight. In fact, we don't have to rush into getting married at all. We can have a long engagement if you want. Some people wait five years."

She shook her head and sat up, keeping her hand splayed on my chest. Her long hair fell around her shoulders, framing her face perfectly. And despite her eyes being puffy from crying, she was just as ravishing as always.

"I'm okay. And I don't want a long engagement. What you said when you asked me to marry you—that when you know what you want you get it. I know what I want, Gavin. I want to be your wife. And I don't want to wait to do it."

She leaned down to kiss me, and I pulled her waist toward me, feeling her leg slip across my lap. She settled down on top of me, straddling me and letting her hair hang like curtains around us. When she sat up, I took her hands. Her eyes searched my face. I could see the angst behind them, the ache there.

"Is everything okay?"

Her shoulders fell and she dropped her gaze. She toyed with the ring on her finger until I covered her hands with mine.

"Talk to me."

Madison sighed and said, "I think I need to do something."

“What’s that?”

“I want to go to the hospital and visit him.” Her lip quivered. “I know he’s not really there, that he can’t really hear me or know what I’m saying, but I need to tell him. I have to give the ring back too.”

Coughing away the discomfort I felt as tension invaded my chest, I pushed a hair out of her face. She needed closure. That was a noble thing. So why was I so uncomfortable with that?

“Will you go with me?” She looked up at me with longing eyes.

“As a friend? Or as his doctor?”

“However you feel comfortable.” She curled up on my chest, and I wrapped my arms around her.

She belonged there in my arms, draped over my chest. I had never known anything more true or right—even if my mother disapproved for whatever ungodly reason she would come up with this time. Madison was the most important thing in my life and if she wasn’t okay, then I wasn’t okay either. I heard her sniffle more, so I just held her calmly.

“Gavin?” she said, sitting up.

“Yeah, babe. What is it?”

“Make love to me?”

She didn’t have to ask again. I cupped both of her cheeks tenderly and pulled her lips to mine. It was soft and sensuous, the flavor of beer lingering on her tongue. Her hands pushed against my chest, holding herself up as I deepened the kiss. It was an awkward position, so I rose, and laid her down on the couch, resting a knee between her legs.

Leaning over her, I slipped my hand beneath her t-shirt. She shuddered as my fingers searched the elastic of her bra, lifting it so I could enjoy her more fully. She began unbuttoning my shirt, her fingers working dexterously with the tiny buttons, even with her eyes closed. I gave up trying to lift her bra up, and just reached for the clasp, freeing her breasts so I could

touch her. She made soft sounds of pleasure as I twirled a nipple between my finger and thumb.

“I love you, Madii...” I sucked on her earlobe, then backed away. Lifting her shirt up over her breasts, I took a nipple in my mouth and bit down gently. Madison sucked in a hiss and scraped at my back with her fingernails. I could feel my cock swelling, burning to be inside of her, but I took my time, enjoying her.

She pulled my shirt up, untucking it and raising it so she could get her fingers to my skin, and I went lower, finding the button for her jean shorts. I wanted to taste her, to bring her pleasure so she could relax and enjoy our evening. I worked at the button, opening her fly and backing away so I could pull her shorts off. She shimmied out of them as I tugged, and then spread legs as I tossed the shorts away.

The way she looked up at me told me she wanted me to, so I did it slowly, tracing a finger up her inner thigh. I drew a circle around her soft folds, careful not to touch anything to erogenous and ruin the sensations. She arched her back, trying to thrust her body my direction so I’d be forced to sate the lust, but I pulled away, smiling at her.

“You want me to do it? Or you want to do it?” I asked her, resting my hand on her knee.

“You do it,” she whispered, “Just do it fast.”

She pulled her shirt up over her head, tossing that and her bra to the ground with her shorts. Her perfectly tanned skin was magnetic, drawing my eye. She was so beautiful lying there peering at me. I started unbuttoning my pants when my phone chimed—a text message.

“Fuck...” I would have ignored the message; except I was on call for the evening and Rutger was away on holiday. “I have to check this.”

With my cock throbbing, aching for relief, I reached into my pocket. I opened my notifications and saw the message was from Victor, the charge nurse in the ER. They needed me at

the hospital STAT. Something about a car accident and brain swelling.

Madii propped herself up on her elbows, watching with concern on her face as I read the message. “What is it?”

I sighed. “I’m on call tonight. There was a car accident, and the victim has brain swelling. I may need to do surgery to place a shunt.”

I stood, fastening my pants back in place and clearly disappointing Madison. She frowned as she sat up, snatching her shirt off the ground. She didn’t look angry, but I knew she was sad. Who wouldn’t be—being interrupted in the middle of that.

“I’m sorry, babe. I should have told you I was on call.” I buttoned my shirt and shoved the hem back into my waistband.

“No, it’s okay.” She forced a smile as she shrugged her shirt on, then reached for her panties and shorts. “How long will it take?”

I leaned down and kissed the top of her head. “Not sure. Maybe a few hours, or maybe all night. I’m really sorry.”

“It’s okay. I’ll just curl up in your bed if that’s okay.”

I swiped my keys off the bar and headed for the door. “Yeah, that’s okay. I’ll text you when I have a minute.”

Leaving her like that broke my heart, but duty called.

“Go save lives.” She smiled and waved me off and I headed out the door, wishing I could have just held her in my arms and fallen asleep. Soon enough that would be my reality every night. I just had to be patient.

MAD II

It had been two weeks since Gavin proposed, and I still hadn't told my mother we were even dating. Gavin told me she would respond better than I thought, but I just couldn't shake the feeling that she would be upset with me. When I had told her that I was dating Drew, she had given me the third degree, asking a dozen questions about him and demanding to know what our future plans were. She worried about me; I knew that, but sometimes her worry looked more like controlling me than caring for me.

I sighed as I held the phone in my hand, dreading the call I promised Gavin I'd make. I didn't dare tell Lexi or Crystal about the engagement until I'd told my mother. I knew they would post it all over social media and Mom's friends would surely go asking her. So, no one in my life even knew. It was saddening, but I didn't want to hear the lectures I knew would come. Crystal would tell me I was moving too fast. Lexi would probably cheer me on, but she was more like me when it came to adventure. And my dad... well, he would likely lecture me about the age difference—something I'd finally come to terms with. So, telling the people in my life would be more of a lesson in humility for me than an exciting event to share. It wasn't exactly something I looked forward to.

Like the time in high school when I dropped my physics class but didn't tell anyone until the first term was up and I had to show a report card. I knew the decision I had made was the best for me at the time, but I also knew what Mom and Dad expected. When I showed them the report—all outstanding marks—they only pointed out the failure, not the way I

excelled in everything. I ranked fourth in my graduating class, but I knew that ranking would have been much worse if I'd have taken physics. Besides, who needed physics for photography anyway?

I lounged back on my bed, staring at the ceiling. Dread washed over me in waves. Like a yo-yo I would prepare for the call, dial the number, then hang up before it connected. I even thought maybe it would be easier to tell Violet first, then have her tell Mom and Dad, but that wouldn't work because they'd be upset with me for not telling them myself. Mom was already upset with me for leaving the house so abruptly the last time I visited.

Finally, I decided the call wouldn't make itself, so I dialed the number and put it on speaker phone, laying it on the bed next to me. It rang a few times, and secretly I hoped that no one would answer so I didn't have to face the music, but after the fourth ring, my mom picked up.

"Hello." She sounded a bit winded, as if she'd been in another part of the house or outside working and rushed to the phone.

"Mom?"

"Oh, Madii! It's so great that you called. How are you doing?" I heard the cushion on the couch squeak and knew she had sat down.

"I'm okay. How is everything there? Any word from Violet?" Small talk wasn't the reason I'd called but how did I just jump in and tell her?

"Oh, she's fine. Finals are over. She's taking a semester off, so she'll be home this weekend. You should come and visit. We could go shopping like we did when you guys were just kids."

Shopping, where Mom nitpicked every purchase I made and told me what to buy? No thank you. I bit my tongue and scrunched my nose. I wanted to get the conversation over with as quickly as possible, but I knew she would drag it out if I let her.

"Yeah, maybe. I'll talk to Vi about it and make a plan." It might not be so bad to visit and shop with Violet. Maybe we

could talk wedding plans too.

“Anything new?”

The way Mom’s question hung in the air made me acutely aware that I was about to be bombarded by her questions and nagging. A lump formed in my throat preemptively, trying to choke back the news. As if that would help. It wasn’t like I could get married and just bring Gavin home for Christmas one day without telling them. I could, but it wouldn’t be the best thing.

“Yeah, actually there is.” Here it came. I bit my lip and pinched the bridge of my nose.

“Really? Well, tell me all about it.”

I sat up, readying myself. “I’m engaged.” Like pulling a bandage off, I gave her the news. My pulse thudded in my ears as I waited for her response. Part of me expected her to get snarky because I’d made that comment multiple times in response to her pushing me to date someone new. I’d told her I was still engaged to Drew and that was the reason I wasn’t dating.

Instead of a snide remark I heard the squeals of delight. “Oh, dear. I’m so happy for you.”

Shocked, I picked up my phone and turned off speaker mode, holding it to my ear. A million questions flooded my mind. Why was my mother so happy?

“Happy?”

“Yes, oh that doctor is just perfect, don’t you think? Madii, you will be so happy.” I heard a door shut and then I heard Mom say, “He asked her!” with another squeal.

“You know?”

I was so confused. The tension and apprehension I’d felt was washed away by surprise. How did she know about this? Had Gavin told her?

“Yes, dear. Dr. Carpenter—Gavin—he came to visit a few weeks ago. He spoke with your father. It was so romantic. You

know your father never did that before he proposed to me. God forbid he do anything even remotely romantic for me.”

I could almost see Dad’s eyes rolling at her remark. “Gavin came and asked Dad if he could marry me?” My heart began to melt as Mom told me how Gavin visited and had lemonade with them, sitting on the couch and asking Dad for my hand in marriage. I cringed at the thought of him visiting that little dump we called a home, given the fact that he was wealthy enough to demolish that house and make something much more presentable. But I felt honored that he would even think to speak to my family about us before he approached me. A true southern gentleman.

“Dad was a bit nervous about it. Are you sure he’s not too old? That it’s not too fast?” Mom’s helicopter parenting style came out like I knew it would.

“Mom, I’m happier than I’ve been in years. Gavin and I are in love. Age is just a number.” I smiled as I said the words, knowing they were true.

“Well, that’s quite a change from the Madii of 5 years ago.” The tone of her voice was pained, nostalgic even. It was as if she didn’t want me to grow up anymore. Like I was her baby girl, trapped forever in time. I didn’t know who had taken the trauma of losing Drew worse—me or Mom. It seemed all she wanted to do was protect me now. But I didn’t need her protection anymore.

“A lot has changed, Mom.”

It was true. So much had changed since Drew’s accident, including me. I’d grown in ways I never knew I would. I left Hampshire and my home growing up and I’d been so intimidated by the world, scared to be on my own. Drew’s accident forced me to grow up and face life alone. I could have gone home at any time, but I needed to be with him, to stay by his side. Now, after all this time—the growing and the changing, I was a new person.

“I’m so happy for you, Madii. Really. Now you come visit me and we’ll make some wedding plans. I think a Spring wedding is perfect.”

“Mom, we’re getting married soon. Like maybe a few months. We don’t want to wait. When you know you know.” I held my breath as the line went silent. I knew she would think I was crazy. But I only heard a muffled sigh. Then she responded.

“Well, then I should go dress shopping! So, you plan a visit with Violet, and we’ll make a day of it.” I could just imagine how that day would go. Shopping for the dress for my first planned wedding had been a nightmare, but my mom was my mom, and I had to love her even if she was a bit overbearing at times.

I wanted to ask, “*Who are you and what have you done with my mother?*” but I decided to leave well-enough alone. “Great. I’ll call Vi tomorrow. And Mom?”

“Yes, dear.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.” She hung up and I breathed the largest sigh of relief I’d ever taken. If Mom hadn’t freaked out about it, then maybe I was entirely wrong about the situation. Next, I called Crystal. I had been right about her reaction. In fact, she was upset with me for moving so quickly and acted irritated, but I calmed her down by letting her know Gavin had gone to ask my parents for permission. That seemed to calm her down a little.

Then I called Lexi. And as I suspected, she flipped out. She had a million questions for me, which I answered patiently enough. And then she insisted we all take the trip to visit my mom and Violet. I asked her to be my maid of honor and she agreed. But it wasn’t until I hung up with her that it hit home. I rolled off my bed, sliding my feet into the fluffy slippers I wore around the house. And I padded to my closet.

Opening the mirrored door, I pulled the plastic garment bag out and unzipped it, splaying it across my bed. The white satin gown was still in pristine condition, beads on the front that sparkled in the light. I stared at the wedding dress I was supposed to have worn for Drew, knowing I could never wear that down the aisle for Gavin. It was tainted by grief. I needed something new.

The dress had cost over a thousand dollars, so returning it would help with the cost of the new dress, but I would have to go home to do that. That would be a bittersweet trip, but with the support my mom and friends had shown me I knew I could do it.

Then I padded to my dresser, pulling open the top drawer where I kept my socks and panties. I sorted through the garments until I found the black velvet box. Sadness overtook me as I pulled it out and opened it, sitting on the edge of my bed as I stared at the jeweled ring. A diamond set in the center of the fitting, with two opals on either side of it. The golden band was supposed to symbolize our eternal love, but now it just symbolized a part of my life I'd never get back. And I was so happy with Gavin I didn't know if I wanted it back.

Drew had been the centerpiece of my life for long enough. I had to follow Alice's advice fully. Which, to me, meant I had to return this ring and move on. The ring, the dress, even the leftover wedding decorations that still sat in the trunk in the back of my closet—they all needed returned. Life was taking me in a new direction, and I was ready for it, even if moving on was bittersweet.

I closed the ring box and put it back, then zipped up the garment bag and hung the dress back in the closet. There was no point moping over something that had ended when I needed to focus on what was starting. I was going to be Mrs. Gavin Carpenter.

GAVIN

“**Y**es, I understand.” I leaned back in my chair, phone pressed to my ear as Gary Rutger carried on about the trials he’d been learning about. Following the surgery on Drew, Gary had dived into more research, including offering a new experimental drug to Drew’s family. They had gladly accepted but given the fact that I had begun to distance myself from the entire situation because of Madii, I had not been fully informed until now.

“I’m telling you, Gavin. It’s revolutionary. And coupled with the deep brain stim we’ve been doing, we’re sure to see major results. He’s already shown an increase in brain activity.” Gary seemed excited, and rightly so. For all intents and purposes, he had taken over as the neurological specialist on Drew’s case, with Tanya as the primary contact to the family. But he was away on holiday, and I would be the one forced to pass on the exciting news to the family.

I laid my head back and stared up at the ceiling as he fleshed out all the details: dosage amounts, things to watch for. He forwarded this all to my email, so the conversation was redundant. Still, the longer he talked, the longer I had to sit and stew and not have to go in that room and see their hopeful faces. The fact that they would be happy about this was a good thing, except for how it would affect me. I was being selfish, which I knew would happen, which was why I’d given up the case to Gary.

“Yeah, this is all great news.” I tried to force a hint of genuine pleasure into my tone, but it came across more like sarcasm.

“Really... you should never have gotten mixed up in this. You know that.”

I closed my eyes to try to shut out the guilty feeling. “Yeah, you’ve told me that a dozen times already. But how was anyone supposed to know this new procedure was going to come up? And I don’t think I’d have introduced that drug to him at all, let alone this close after a major surgery. It could have devastating effects on his brain function; his kidneys are already weak, and his liver?”

“Do you really think his family cares about any of that? To them he was already dead, and anything we can try to bring him back would be nothing short of a miracle.”

Gary had a point, and that point was shadowed by my fear that Drew would wake up and take away my world. It was ironic that the very thing that had happened to Madison was now a threat to me.

“I’ll tell them. Okay? Just finish up your vacation and get back here because I don’t want anything to do with this case anymore.” I hung up the phone, frustrated. Perhaps I was handling everything the wrong way, and for certain, I should have been telling Madii. But I finally had a good thing, something I didn’t want to let go of.

I rose from my seat, folding the file on my desk shut and carrying it with me. I took the long way from my office up to the fourth floor where Drew’s room was. Since the surgery and new medication, Alice had been staying with him almost round the clock. She’d spent a few nights at the hospital in a family room, and some at home with Henry, but she spent every day from breakfast to bedtime right at his side—the way Madii used to.

I expected her to be there seated next to him, reading a magazine or book to him while the TV played a soap opera or sitcom. And I was right. I stood outside the door watching her lips move, though I couldn’t hear her. She had a book in her hands, her eyes scanning the page. The light from the window behind her caused her to appear more like a dark silhouette than the vibrant, joyful woman I knew she was. She looked so

calm and at peace I didn't want to disturb her, so I just watched a while until Pam strolled up with her cart.

"It's good to see her have hope again, isn't it?"

Pam's beaming smile contrasted with the angst in my heart as I replied. "Yeah, it is." Pam didn't seem to pay attention to the melancholy way I said it, and I knew I was a horrible person for feeling so discouraged presenting such good news to the family of a patient. A professional would have acted more like Pam—smiling, encouraged, hopeful.

I took a deep breath and squared my shoulders, offering the most hopeful expression I could muster, then followed her into the room. I hovered behind her as she pushed her cart up.

"Well, well, Ms. Alice, looks like you're enjoying the morning. How is baby boy today?" Pam logged in to her computer and double checked the new IV bag tag to match it to the prescription pane in Drew's file—a process that was mandatory to ensure all patients got the correct medication and dosage.

"He's doing the same." Alice smiled at me, folding the book shut and laying it next to Drew on the bed as Pam changed out the IV bag.

"And what are you reading today?" Pam nodded at the book, and I busied myself studying the file I had already memorized.

"Oh, it's a book about a woman who was beaten by her boyfriend so badly that she went into a coma, but she wakes up." Alice pushed the book toward Pam. "It's based on a true story."

Pam hung the IV bag then turned and picked up the book. "I think I heard about this. Happened up north. Girl woke up but her memories were all jumbled up right? Didn't she have a kid while she was in the coma?" I vaguely remembered the story being put on the news, but I never really investigated because I had been engrossed in other studies at the time.

Pam dropped the book onto the bed and took out her syringe, checking the serial number against the computer before injecting it into Drew's IV port. Intrigued, I stepped forward,

closing the file and glancing down at the book as Alice went on about the plot. Part of the cover was obscured by the folds of the blanket, but I could clearly see it was a romance novel, the second half of the title was “awakening.” The word stung my heart. What if he really did wake up? What if the surgery and the new drug together was just what he needed?

Alice was feeding the hope that Drew would wake up, and the news I was about to present to her would only fuel the fire.

“Well, I’m done here. You let me know if you need anything, alright Ms. Alice?” Pam pushed her cart back out the door and shut it, and suddenly it was my turn.

“Hi, Gavin. It’s been a while.” Alice’s soft smile was as sincere as always, but I wasn’t as receptive as I used to be.

Whatever funk my emotions had been in was worse than ever. I had to fight just to stay in that room.

“Hello, Mrs. Heintz. I have some updates for you.” Professional was the only thing I could be right now. Gary had been right. I should never have gotten so involved.

Alice’s expression changed to one of concern. “Is everything okay?” She sat straighter, folding her hands in her lap. “Should I call Henry?”

“Oh, no.” I held my hand up to assuage her concern. “Everything is okay. It’s actually good news.”

Her smile returned instantly. “Good news?” She glanced at Drew then turned her full attention on me. “What good news?”

“Mind if I sit?” I pulled the rolling stool up to the bedside and sat opposite her, Drew strewn out between us.

“Is the surgery working?”

“Well, it’s not that simple.” I folded the file out at the foot of the bed and opened up the EEG readings pointing at them. “See this line here indicates where his brain function was three months ago. This one—” I moved my finger “—indicates where it was days after surgery. And now three weeks later, we are here.” I pointed at the final line, only a millimeter higher

on the chart. I knew a millimeter was excellent, but she didn't know that.

She offered a confused expression. "I thought this was good news. That doesn't look any different."

I folded the file shut again. "I know on the outside it doesn't look good yet, but we've had more news from John's Hopkins regarding the trial drug Gary—uh, Dr. Rutger—put Drew on. When coupled with the surgery, patients are seeing an increased level of improvement."

Her eyebrows rose. "How much?"

"Substantial." I looked at Drew with his sunken eyes and pale complexion. "It appears a larger percentage of patients are responding to the drug if they've had the surgery."

"So, he might wake up?"

I felt like I got kicked in the gut. I stared at him wondering what Madii saw in him, what they had. I battled with the way I treated her and if I had something Drew didn't have. If she would even wrestle with the decision to stay with me should Drew wake up.

"Gavin, are you okay?" Alice took my hand, jarring me from my sulking. I took my hand back, clutching the file to my chest as I stood.

"I'm—"

"Because if this is about Madison, you shouldn't be worried." Alice joined me in standing. Her concern evident in the way her brow furrowed. "She loves you. She has moved on now. You two have a real shot and whether or not Drew wakes up won't change that." Alice walked around the foot of the bed and took my hand, squeezing it. I could see why Madii was so fond of this woman. "You love her, and you've done everything you could for both her and Drew. I know you're probably really wrestling with this, but I'm telling you. She loves you. I know her well enough to know that."

I nodded, thankful that Alice was so open minded and compassionate. "I feel awful for not telling her these things. It's why I've distanced myself from Drew's case. Gary is an

exceptional doctor and I know he is probably the best fit for Drew now. I just get so torn.”

“Well, don’t be.” She patted my hand and let me go. “Drew is not back with us yet, and Madii is in love with you. So, you just live your life. If she is upset with anyone for not being here for this part, she can blame me. I ordered you as a medical professional not to tell her, and you followed the orders of the patient’s family.”

While her words should have been reassuring to me, they didn’t settle my heart. It wasn’t just about the way I’d kept secrets from her. It was also about the fact that things were working and Madii was in the dark. If Drew woke up, I would lose her. I just knew it.

“Thanks, Alice.”

I left the room feeling like I’d been hit by a Mack truck and left as roadkill on the side of the highway. Even a basketball game with Jiles and Nick didn’t help, though they gave me the same caution that Gary had offered and the same comfort that Alice had given.

Deep in my heart, I knew Madison would be upset with me, but there was nothing I could do about it now. So, I swallowed it, shoving down the guilt and feeling of regret. And I went home and sat on my couch, staring at the TV and having a few cold beers to get my mind off of it. There were exactly eight weeks until the planned wedding, and I knew it sounded horrible, but if we could just say “I do” before there was any more improvement in Drew’s case, I knew I would have nothing to be afraid of. I just feared the “I do” was going to come too little too late.

MAD II

“This one!” Lexi held up the ugliest dress I’d ever seen. It looked like a combination between a 1980s prom gown with puffy sleeves and a European A-line gown with layers of tulle ruffles that cascaded into a six-foot-long train. Crystal laughed and I gagged, and even my mom rolled her eyes at the joke.

“Seriously, guys, we have to find the perfect dress.” Violet shoved her hair out of her eyes for the millionth time—she was in an emo phase—and sorted through the rack of dresses.

“I agree.” Mom pulled out a silver gown with small rhinestones on it, held it up, then shoved it back into the rack. “And if we can’t find something here, we are out of options.”

I had tried on over a hundred dresses today so far at the various stores. We’d been to Henry’s Bridal, the Bridal Emporium, the Wedding Shoppe, and now at the Gowns for Gals Showroom we were left with slim pickings following a bridal show only three weeks prior. Had I known they were having a sale, I’d have jumped at the chance, but my ego had kept me from even telling anyone.

“I’m so glad you girls were all able to join us.” Mom held up a pastel yellow sundress. “What do you think? Bridesmaids’ dresses?”

I scrunched my nose up. “No, Mom. Yellow is awful.”

Lexi smirked and hid it behind another dress she held up. She had a pile in her arm, draped there as she walked from rack to rack searching. I could see a few of them were likely selected

as potential dresses for her, but at least three of them were bridal gowns. Crystal had a few too, both of them there to help me say “yes” to the dress.

“So, what do we have so far? Should we head to the dressing room?” I was exhausted from so much shopping, but thankfully my emotional state was calm. Mom had been on her best behavior. Maybe Dad had given her a talking to.

“Yes, let’s head that way. I’ll get the sales lady.” Mom disappeared, her own few dresses on her arm, and Violet swiped a hand across her brow.

“Mom is really acting strange. You think she is feeling okay?” Violet elbowed me and smirked as we headed toward the dressing rooms. “Seriously, when was the last time she was hospitable at all? Normally she is grumpy and nagging—especially when it comes to you.”

I chuckled. “Maybe Gavin really made an impression on her when he visited. Or maybe she is just finally seeing that she can’t control our lives and if she wants to be a part of them everyone is happier when she just takes her hands off?”

Violet shrugged and ducked into the fitting room area. Crystal handed me two dresses, and Lexi handed me her three. Both of them had a few of their own to try on.

“You know, Madii. I know your mom hasn’t said anything, but I’m still concerned that things are moving a bit too fast.” Crystal shifted the dresses on her arm to the other arm and gave me a concerned look. “It’s been what, four months or something?”

“Our wedding day will be four months and twenty-two days.” I had to admit it did sound a bit short, but that wasn’t taking into account the sixteen months of getting to know him.

“Yeah, but still. You hardly know him.” She grimaced at me, and Lexi gave her a gentle push.

“Lay off her, Crystal. She’s happy. Can’t you see that?” Lexi winked at me and followed the saleswoman as she passed, unlocking several rooms.

Crystal lingered there, staring at me as Lexi ducked into the first room. I noticed even Violet looked worried. Mom grinned though, ignorant of the comment Crystal had just made. I waited until Mom was in a room with the door shut before I replied to her.

“I know enough to know that I like what I see. I love him. And any relationship means getting to know someone, their skeletons, their issues, and then loving them in spite of those things.” I rested my free hand on the doorknob to a dressing room. “I’m sorry if you think I’m rushing. I know what I want.”

I tried to smile at her as I stepped into the dressing room, but it ate at me. For the first time in my life, my mother seemed genuinely happy for me. My father had given his blessing. Gavin was an amazing man with so much to offer—not to mention he was really handsome, wealthy, and he knew how to satisfy me. He also had so much in common with me. We both loved being outdoors, and I knew he would be an adventurer with me.

I just didn’t see why everyone was so concerned with how quickly it was moving. Drew and I knew each other eight months before he proposed. Granted, we did have an extended engagement, but still.

I peeled off my clothing, folding and stacking it neatly on the small bench in the fitting room before tugging on the first dress. It was a scoop-neck with a tight-fitting bodice decked out with beads and embroidery. It was too tight and would have to be let out if I was going to wear it, but it was pretty. I didn’t bother stepping out to show anyone, but I did pick up my phone and snap a picture.

I missed a text message from Gavin, so I opened it up and read it.

Gavin 2:13PM: If you don’t find the perfect dress, just wear some skinny jeans, a nice pair of Vans, and a t-shirt. We’ll go skydiving instead of the traditional waltz down the aisle.

I grinned at the message. Clearly, he knew me too well. I typed in a fast reply before moving on to the next dress.

Madii 2:15PM: Don't joke like that because with the lectures I'm getting today I may just take you up on that!

Two dresses later—they were both too small—I put on one I really loved. Spaghetti straps held up the satin bodice, no embellishments, nothing fancy, just simple satin. It had a princess waistline, the skirts flowing all the way to the ground. The material puddled at my feet, so I'd have to have it shortened, but it was perfect. It showed a hint of cleavage and hugged my curves. I smoothed my hands over my hips.

“Madii? Come see this!” Violet called me from the other side of the door.

“One sec.” I took a moment to admire how the gown made me feel—alive. Then I turned and fumbled with the long train of the gown as I opened the door.

As soon as I stepped out, Mom, Lexi, Violet, and the saleslady all gasped.

“Oh, goodness, Madison, that is ravishing.” Mom covered her mouth.

“Wow, Madii, that is really gorgeous. I love it.” Violet hustled over to me, picking up the skirt. “So simple and so beautiful. Gavin will love this.”

Crystal ducked out of her fitting room wearing a pretty blue gown with a low neckline. It was T-length and pretty but didn't really fit with the Keds she was wearing.

“Yeah, man, that's amazing.” Crystal joined us.

“You guys really like it? It's not too plain?” I shrugged, looking down the long room to the mirror.

“I think with as beautiful as you are, no one will even notice how plain the gown is. You're going to be a showstopper.” The saleslady smiled at me, and I felt her comment was genuine, not just an attempt to sell the dress.

“So, what am I looking at?” I glanced around to see Violet holding up a different gown, one that had been left in a dressing room there I assumed. It was pretty, but nothing like the one I wore.

“Yeah... This one is not going to make the cut. You have the winner on.” Violet handed the other gown to the saleswoman who whisked it off.

By the time we were done trying on dresses we had settled on a dress for everyone, even Mom. Exhausted and ready to collapse, Lexi and Crystal headed back to the city, and I went with Mom and Violet to have dinner. We chose a Mexican restaurant, where Mom warned me about eating too much cheese dip because it will “make your dress not fit, dear.”

Things were going really well until Violet brought out a ton of brochures from a travel agency for me to look at.

“I stopped by yesterday when I got into town. Mom and I want to help you plan the honeymoon too. I know you’ll have to pass this through Gavin, but I know you well enough to know what you want.” Violet pushed her nearly empty plate out of the way and spread out a few brochures.

I continued eating, though my stomach started to tell me I was full. And when I looked down at the brochures Violet had laid out, my heart sank. Pictures of beaches and lakes, boats, women and men swimming and surfing, all displayed in front of me like some of the grandest adventures anyone could have.

I had to admit, Violet did know me. When I was a teenager, she and I planned out our perfect honeymoons. Both of us were nearly mermaids at heart. We loved the beach. We loved everything water and sand and sun. And my honeymoon trip with Drew was supposed to be Fiji—a raised cabana over the crystal blue waters where you had to take a catamaran out just to get to the front door. It would have been perfect.

My stomach turned, and tears burned my eyes. I tried to keep eating, but the food soured on my tongue. My hand shook: my heart raced. I couldn’t breathe.

“Honey, are you okay?” Mom set her fork down and reached for my hand which I pulled away, probably a little too hastily.

I stood up, picking up all the offending brochures one by one. Violet had tried to do a good thing, but all she had done was

trigger something deep inside of me that sent me into an emotional fit.

“Woah, Madii. Stop. Are you okay?” Violet stood next to me, grabbing my wrist and taking the brochures from my hand.

“No.” I continued picking them up, tears flowing freely.

“Please sit down, girls.” Mom’s eyes darted around the dining room where people were beginning to stare.

“I’m sorry, Madii. I was trying to help.”

“I don’t need help,” I hissed, surprising myself. I froze, dropping the brochures. “I’m going to go now.” I picked up my purse.

“Madison Elaine.” Mom stood, folding her napkin. “What has gotten into you?”

“I need space.” I swiped at my eyes, but there were too many tears.

“Madii, everyone knows you’re taking this too fast. There is nothing wrong with taking your time.” Violet tried to hug me, but I pushed her away.

“Why do you insist it’s too fast? Why can’t you let me live my fucking life!” I took a step back, acutely aware that the entire restaurant was now watching.

“Maybe you’re running away from something you need to face, Madii. Gavin doesn’t deserve that.”

I glared at Violet; the feeling of anxious nausea being replaced by rage. “Mom, I’ll send for my dress.”

Feeling very attacked and too emotional to handle any more, I stormed out. My hands were shaking so badly I couldn’t drive, so I had to sit there a moment to calm down. I wanted to call Gavin and feel his comfort, but I didn’t want him to know how upset I’d gotten. He may assume the same thing—that I was running from Drew instead of choosing to marry him.

But I was choosing to marry him. Wasn’t I? And even if I still had unresolved trauma issues, Gavin was the one helping me out of that mess. So why wouldn’t I run?

I wiped my face and started my car. I just wanted to get home and call the man I loved. Then everything would be okay.

GAVIN

I had everything ready the moment Madii pulled into my driveway. I could tell as she walked up the sidewalk to the front door that she had been crying. Her eyes were red-rimmed and her cheeks tear-streaked. She sniffled and clung to my chest as soon as she saw me.

“Hey now, sweet girl. I’m so sorry. It’s okay.” I smoothed my hand down the back of her head and pulled the hair out of her eyes. For a moment we stood in the threshold, and I just comforted her, but eventually she pulled away, taking my hand as I guided her into the house.

It had been a long day. Mom had stopped by to do some cleaning and found an earring Madii had lost. It was on the ground by the coffee table, likely from an escapade we’d had on the couch at one point or another. I was just thankful she hadn’t found any undergarments, and that Madison was a classy woman to not leave those things lying around. I had a lot on my mind already, but that was all pushed to the side as soon as I saw how upset Madii was.

“Want to talk about it?” I sat on the couch, pulling her onto my lap. She curled up like a child, though she was a little large for me to hold properly that way. But if it made her feel comfortable, I’d do anything.

“It’s my mom and sister. They think I’m rushing.” She sniffled again. Her body shuddered a bit as she breathed, a sign she had cried really hard. I’d seen her cry that hard before, but never over anything to do with her mother and sister.

Typically, those sorts of cries were reserved for someone else—someone I didn't want to hear about.

I'd done enough talking about that person today. I had been forced to visit his room again, speaking with his mother for the third time in two weeks. The mediation had been upped again, and they were seeing more results. Not exactly the best news for me.

"Are you listening?" Madii sat up, giving me a hurt expression.

"Yeah, sorry, babe. Long day. I just had a lot on my mind, but you're the most important thing in the world, and I'm sorry I got distracted."

She cupped my cheek gently, her eyes brimming with tears. "I'm so sorry you had a rough day too. Do you need to talk?"

I chuckled at her and smiled. "No. I'm a big boy. I can handle things. I just want to comfort you now."

She slid off my lap, sitting cross-legged beside me, facing me. I saw just how bad the emotion had weighed her down. I'd completely missed the damp spots on her shirt, her tears soaked in. Her shoulders sagged, and her nose was puffy.

"Do you think I'm just rushing?" The sincerity in her eyes was humbling. If I had to be honest, yes, we were rushing. And maybe that was partly my fault because I knew there was a timeline in place that she wasn't aware of. But I had no reservations, no doubts. Madison was the woman I wanted.

"I want to spend the rest of my life with you, Madii. So, does it matter if we start tomorrow, next month, or ten years from now? We will be together no matter what."

She nodded, but I got the feeling she wasn't telling me something. That something else had happened. I tried to cheer her up by changing the subject.

"Okay, well if you don't want to talk about it more, we don't have to. Let's plan our honeymoon. That should be a really happy event for us, something to cheer you up and take your mind off things."

Without warning, Madison burst into tears, standing up and storming off to my bedroom. I sat there shell-shocked, watching her walk away, wondering what I'd said wrong. I stood and followed her, picking up the box of tissues from the corner of my coffee table. She'd shut herself in, so I knocked, uncertain if she wanted the company.

When I cracked the door, she lay on the bed curled up and sobbing.

"Go away," she sobbed, pulling a pillow over her head.

"What happened, babe? Are you okay?" I tiptoed to the bed, setting the tissues down and sitting on the edge of the mattress.

"Nothing happened. I am just tired." She scooted away from me, but I didn't take it as an invitation to join her. It was clear she was hurting.

"Please talk to me." I laid my hand on her hip, but she pushed it away.

"I just want to be alone."

I'd never seen her this upset. She had never refused my comfort before, and it made me want to call her mother to see what had happened.

"I love you." I sat there, my heart aching for her. I wanted to take away her pain, but she was pushing me out. Nearly 15 minutes went by with her crying beneath the pillow and me hovering, wishing I could do something. And I decided to honor her wish to be alone. I let myself out and shut the door, giving her privacy.

After about half an hour, I returned, only to find her sleeping. So as quietly as I could, I collected my gym shorts, bag, and water jug, and headed out. I scribbled a note and hung it on the door, letting her know I was out for a pick-up game with the guys, then called Nick and Jiles. I needed reinforcements.

Once on the court, I felt more in control. We played hard, working up a sweat. Jiles told me a dozen times I was being a little aggressive, but I had to work off the emotion I was feeling somehow. When I plowed into Nick, knocking him down just to get the layup, Jiles held the ball and stared at me.

“What the fuck is up with you, man? You’re out of control today.” Jiles offered a hand to Nick and helped him stand. I felt like an asshole. I asked my friends to meet up so I could blow off steam, and I was taking my anger out on them. I had nothing to say. I sulked over to the bench where my bag and water bottle sat, and I picked it up, taking a long drink before throwing it violently across the court.

“Dude, what’s eating you?” Nick picked up his water and sipped it. Jiles and he stared at me, and I raked my hands through my hair.

“Shit is falling apart.” I wanted to scream, punch something—someone.

“What shit?” Jiles gestured for the bench, so we all sat. I was horrible at this—talking about my feelings. I was a very private person, not the sort to go venting all the time.

“Shit with Madii. I mean, she came home today after wedding shopping with her mother and friends. She won’t talk to me. She just lays there and cries.”

“Is she pregnant?” Jiles asked, laughing. He high-fived Nick and turned back to see my glare. His expression sobered as he said, “I mean, could she be pregnant? My wife got super emotional when she was.” I could tell he was trying to recover his composure, but I was irritated.

“No, she’s not pregnant. She’s on the pill.” I gritted my teeth, then relaxed my jaw and rubbed my temples. “She said something about her sister telling her she’s moving too fast. What if she backs out? What if this whole bullshit with her ex just blows up in my fucking face?”

“What bullshit?” Nick sipped his water again.

“They have some new treatments. He’s been improving. What the fuck do I do if he wakes up and Madii is feeling second thoughts?”

I scream-growled and picked up Jiles’s water bottle and threw it the same direction I’d thrown mine. No one had answers. No one had help. I had gotten myself into this situation and I had no clue how to get out of it. I couldn’t stop the sweater from

unraveling because Fate himself was pulling the string. No matter how many times or how hard I tried to control things, nothing was within my control. And that made me furious.

“Just talk to her.” Nick spoke calmly as Jiles retrieved the water bottles.

Talk to her. That’s what I had to do. But how? I was in no shape for talking.

MAD II

Lexi was nearly wasted, drinking almost a whole bottle of wine by herself as we planned wedding decorations. The guys mostly sat and drank beer; Gavin himself being the most involved of the group. But his input was really “You choose, babe,” which was frustrating, but freeing. It gave me the opportunity to let Crystal and Lexi help in ways they hadn’t been able to with Drew.

“So, the centerpieces will be silver milking buckets with lavender, wisteria, and white lilacs? Greenery?” I held up my phone, showing Crystal the sort of leaves, I was thinking about, and she nodded.

“Gorgeous. You really have a knack for this.” As soon as she said it, I watched her wince. “Sorry.”

“No worries.” I brushed off the comment, knowing she was insinuating that I’d already planned a wedding, and thus was good at this type of thing. There had been so many instances over the past few weeks of things like that being said, that I was getting used to it. After the outburst with Violet about the honeymoon brochures, I’d apologized to her, but I stood my ground.

Gavin had tried to convince me that we could take our time, but I made it clear that if we moved slower, it would not be good. I was feeling cold feet, but I wasn’t about to tell anyone. Besides, I’d felt cold feet with Drew too. I chalked it up to being a normal thing for brides before they got married.

“So where is the bachelorette party going down?” Lexi slurred out, holding her empty glass up as if she wanted more. I took it away from her, setting it to the side. We hovered around the kitchen table at Gavin’s place, all manner of wedding decorations spread out in front of us. The guys perked up at the mention of a party.

“I’m not sure.” I pushed it from my mind. Gavin deserved to have a bachelor party if he wanted one, but I didn’t want one at all. Just the thought of it made my chest tighten. “Jiles did you plan something for Gavin?”

Nervously, my eyes flicked to him, hoping to make the conversation go away. I stood and picked up random color swatches and strands of ribbon that lay strewn about. I needed to busy my hands so my mind wouldn’t run wild.

“Nah, that’s Nicky’s job.” He winked at me then clinked beers with Nick, who had a mouthful of spinach-artichoke dip.

Once Nick had swallowed, he coughed a few times and said, “We’re going to take ol’ Gavin to see some ladiesssss.” Jiles and Nick high-fived. It must have been their thing because they’d been doing it all night.

I turned and gave Gavin a stern expression, and he waved his hands in the air. “No strippers for me, guys. The only beautiful lady I want to see half-naked is my soon-to-be wife.” He shrugged his shoulders and smirked at me, pulling me onto his lap. I laughed as he tickled my sides and kissed my cheek.

“Shit, man. You’re boring.” Jiles set his beer down. “Just like my old lady. No strippers... what sort of bach is that?”

Lexi hiccupped and reached for a bottle of wine, which Crystal moved out of her reach. “I’ll be a stripper.” Lexi grinned and winked at Jiles, who laughed.

“I was thinking combined is good.” Gavin nibbled on my ear. I could tell he was a bit tipsy, but he was playful, and it helped me stay relaxed.

“As long as we don’t do scuba diving.” Lexi snatched the bottle off the table and held it to her lips, guzzling a few drinks

before Crystal pried it away from her. The room fell silent as the comment hit me.

I felt like I couldn't breathe again. My chest tightened and my hands got instantly sweaty. My mouth was pasty, my tongue sticking to the roof. I stood and walked out as Lexi called out, "What did I say?"

The kitchen called to me, beckoning me to hide and fight back the panic attack that loomed. I left them all behind as I leaned against the refrigerator, trying to control my breathing. Tears stung my eyes, but I refused to let them fall. It was only a few seconds before Crystal was there, wrapping her arms around me. She squeezed so tight I thought I'd suffocate, but I clung to her too, letting the panic subside.

"Are you okay?" she whispered, and I shook my head no. I wasn't okay. Memories of being under that water, watching Drew's face as the seconds ticked by and I was swimming him to the surface flashed in my mind. My heart raced.

"Is she okay?" Gavin's voice filtered into my conscious thought, but the room was spinning.

"Here, Madii. Sit down." A chair was pushed beneath me and in a daze, I scanned the room, though my eyes didn't seem to focus on anything in particular, until Crystal's blue eyes were right in front of mine. "Madison, take a deep breath."

Something about the command helped me snap out of it. I took a deep breath, blowing it out. Then another. After the third breath, Crystal's eyes were replaced by the deep brown pools of love that were Gavin Carpenter's. He looked worried.

"I sent them away, okay? Nick will drive Lexi home and they'll get her car tomorrow. Crystal, I'll clean up. Just give us some space, okay?"

I watched Crystal walk out of the room, then heard the front door shut. I was alone with him, alone with my feelings. Alone with the panic of what the fuck was I doing?

"Madii, we can't do this. We can't move forward until you're ready. I don't want you to have regrets later on." Gavin pulled

another chair up, scooping me up and forcing me onto his lap. I straddled him, feeling frozen with emotion.

“I am ready. I swear it. It’s just that everything to do with weddings is just traumatic. You know? It’s not like I was in a bike accident, and it was traumatizing, but I can go ride my bike a dozen times to desensitize myself to it.” The logic made sense to me, so I used it to ground myself.

“Yeah, that makes sense, but if it causes you this much panic, then maybe we should wait.” He tucked my long hair behind my back.

“I don’t want to wait, Gavin. If I wait, then any number of dumb emotional triggers will make me back out. We can even just go to the courthouse and get married now if you want.”

Gavin laughed. “They’re closed. But if you are serious, we can do that in the morning.” With a wink, he pulled me down to kiss him.

“I’m not serious. My dad would kill me.” He kissed me deeper, so I lingered there, his tongue tracing my bottom lip. I could taste the beer on his lips.

“I really love you; you know? And I don’t want you to have any doubts or reservations. You’re the most amazing woman I’ve ever met, and I love you.” His hands rested on my hips, squeezing me, pulling me down onto his lap harder. I could feel him growing hard; he wanted me, but I just wasn’t in the mood.

I returned his next kiss but pushed my hands against his chest. “I’m just not feeling it tonight, Gavin.” I climbed off his lap, leaving him with a sullen expression, and he followed me out past the dining table toward his bedroom. He turned the deadbolt on the front door and shut off the lights as we passed, then shut the door behind us as we entered the bedroom.

Without another word, I took off my clothes, down to just my panties and t-shirt, and pulled the covers back. He slid into bed behind me, curling up around me. I felt his dick pressing into my backside as his arm draped over my mid-section and a hand cupped my breast.

My body responded to him. I could feel my groin tense and the dampness in my panties, but my heart just wasn't in it. Something inside me felt off, so off that I just wanted to sleep and forget the world existed. Maybe returning the ring to Drew would help. Gavin had promised me that he'd take me to see Drew one last time, to return the ring and get my closure.

I knew that was all I needed to make sure I didn't feel like this on my wedding day. And that thought was enough to help me drift off to sleep, even if my sleep was fraught with horrible dreams.

GAVIN

“Are you ready for this?” I held Madison’s hand as she stood there outside of Drew’s hospital room door. She clutched the small black velvet box to her stomach and nodded, though I wasn’t certain she was ready at all. I’d seen her wrestling for weeks with her emotion. She had refused to talk to me every time I brought it up.

Now only three days before our wedding, we were saying goodbye to Drew for good. I couldn’t get it over fast enough. Just the thought of Madison getting the closure she needed to feel better was compelling me to swallow my pride and be there for her. So, I held her hand as she shook.

“And you’re sure Alice and Henry aren’t coming?” She looked up at me, eyes pleading with me to make the pain go away.

“I’m certain, babe. They left earlier and said they’d be back tomorrow.” The sun had set over the city and most of the patients in this wing had their lights out already. I’d asked Cecil to leave Drew’s lights on—told him there would be a final visitor tonight. Obediently, Cecil had obliged, leaving a loaf of home-baked bread sitting on Drew’s nightstand with a note for the visitor to take and enjoy. But I doubted Madison would take it.

“Then let’s do it. I just need to speak my piece and leave the ring. That’s all. Then I know I will feel better.”

Part of me wanted to pick her up and carry her away, whisk her off to some deserted island somewhere we would never have to deal with any of this again. But that wasn’t practical.

The hospital was looking at me for a promotion, and she had her family and friends around. I was offered a position with a group of traveling physicians in Somalia, but I knew no matter how much adventure-seeking Madii did, that wasn't her type of thing.

As she stepped forward toward the room, I moved with her, my feet cement blocks. I opened the door and let her pass in, but I hovered by the door as she approached the bed. The room smelled like Alice's perfume, a stark reminder of many visits to this very room.

Madii sat down in the chair she would always sit in, just the same way I'd found her a hundred times. Her hair was tied back in a braid, but strands fell in her face, veiling her expression from my eyes. The monitors clicked and beeped like always, keeping tabs on Drew's vitals, and instinctively my eyes searched them. Everything was normal, except the way my heart felt watching my fiancé pick up and hold another man's hand.

I pushed away the jealousy, knowing this was a permanent goodbye for him so I could have my future with her. But it still hurt.

"Um, Drew..." Madison was crying. I heard the way her voice shook as she spoke. I thought to grab her a box of tissues but restrained myself. The sooner she got this over, the better. "I, uh, well I fell in love."

She wiped her eyes with the back of her wrist and continued. "And, well, you wouldn't want me to sit here wasting away waiting on something that will never happen."

She broke into sobs, laying across his bed, her head resting on his hip. I wanted to go to her and hold her, but she had to do this herself. My heart broke, hearing her talking to him like that. When she calmed herself, she sat up and continued.

"I need you to know that I love you. That you did everything right. You loved me so well; you cherished my heart. You were my best friend. We were just kids who grew up together. This isn't your fault. This is my fault. I'm the one who wanted

that damn scuba diving trip and this all happened because I couldn't be happy rock climbing with you."

As she cried softly, the pieces all started to click, why Madison stayed by him for so long. Yes, she deeply loved him, but she felt guilty. She blamed herself for his accident, and so she had stayed by his side for so long, much longer than others would have.

"Drew, I have to go now, okay? Because it's time for my life to move on. It's time for me to take the next adventure and run. I can't wait anymore—not without hope."

I felt like I'd been kicked in the gut. Guilt surged to the front of my mind. I had robbed her of that hope for months now. Hope that in some way may have tied her to this man lying in this bed helpless. But I'd kept it from her because of my own need to have her, my need to keep control of the situation so I didn't get hurt.

Scrubbing a hand down my face, I bit back the anger I felt. I was angry with myself, not her. She hadn't deserved to be kept in the dark, yet I'd done it. Shame weighed me down.

"I brought back your ring." She produced the ring, tucking it into his hand. "I know you can't do anything with it, but I didn't feel right keeping it. You bought it for the woman you love, but I'm not that woman anymore. I've changed. I've grown and grown up. I just wish you were here to grow up with me."

I heard some shuffling outside the door and glanced over my shoulder to see Cecil with a cart. I held my hand up to halt his entry, then quietly let myself out.

"What's up?" he asked, ready to pounce on the room and run his tests.

"It's Madii. She's saying goodbye."

Cecil's eyebrows rose. "Goodbye? Did something happen? I thought he was improving?" He stood on tiptoes, peering over my shoulder at the intimate scene.

"He is. But she has moved on." I was grateful for the reprieve of being out in the hallway away from the intense guilt that

pummeled me, but I wished I could be listening to those final words. It felt unnerving knowing she was with her ex privately, even if he was in a coma.

“You mean she’s just leaving him? Like she found someone new?” The way Cecil said the words stung. Maybe he was the sort of person who would have waited forever, and maybe I had been wrong for insisting Madison get on with her life. But I didn’t regret my choices, at least not the choice to encourage her to move on. When I’d made that decision, it had not been in an attempt to woo her away. I had been out of the years of experience I had. I had no way of knowing at the time that medicine would change, and new treatments would come available.

“Well, Cecil, she wasn’t married to him. She is 28 years old and has her whole life ahead of her. If he stays in a coma for 10 years more, she may miss her opportunity to be a mother. In fact, she’s missed so many great opportunities already.” I watched her dab her eyes with a tissue. She glanced up at the door then patted Drew’s hand and stood.

“Seems to me if you love someone enough, you just wait. No matter how long it takes, you just sit and wait.” Cecil pushed his cart closer to the door and waited. As Madii opened it, he smiled, nodded, and pushed his cart through.

“Ready?” She reached for my hand, and I took it. She already looked lighter; her shoulders not slumped as badly.

“Yeah, let’s get out of here.” I looked back at the door one last time as we walked away. Cecil stood there giving me a knowing look as I held her hand and guided her toward the elevators.

“Want to get dinner?” Madii leaned on my shoulder.

I did not want dinner. I wanted to vomit out all the guilt and remorse I felt for keeping all the secrets from her for so long. Regret ate at my soul.

“Sure. Dinner sounds nice.” I pushed the elevator button and waited for it to arrive. Madii turned to face me.

“He had a head bandage again. When did that happen? Was it because of the seizure?” Her questioning eyes lanced my heart.

“Uh, yeah. Alice and Henry decided to try some experimental procedures.” My heart wanted to unravel all the lies and half-truths, but not only had Alice specifically requested I not tell her, I knew deep down if I did, she would be angry.

“Any improvement?”

I swallowed hard. “Nothing to note.”

The elevator doors slid open, and Madii turned away from me to enter it. If this guilt didn’t let up soon, I would be a wreck for our wedding. Just three days...

MAD II

“I ’m so glad we decided to do this together!”

Gavin turned his ear to my mouth as I shouted. The music was so loud no one could hear a thing. It vibrated me to my core, making the sensation of the alcohol even more intense. My drink sloshed as I swayed and bounced to the music, the lights flashing in rhythm.

He smiled at me, hooking his arm around my waist. The odd combination of friends my age and his jerked about on the dance floor, celebrating our last night as singles. I had to admit, Gavin’s friends did seem a lot older than mine, and that made me uncomfortable. They didn’t seem to mingle well either. Lexi and Crystal stayed on one side of the group and Jiles and Nick held to the other side surrounded by several other doctor-types that had been invited.

Despite the awkward non-mingling, everyone seemed to be having a good time. We danced until we were exhausted. When there was a lull in the music, I excused myself to the ladies’ room and Lexi followed me. We went everywhere in pairs and the night of my bachelorette party was no different. After we relieved our bladders, she stood next to me at the sink washing her hands.

“You know, Gavin isn’t all that bad. I thought he’d be the stuffy professional type. But he’s pretty cool.” Her words were slightly slurred, but she had learned her lesson following our wedding planning dinner several weeks ago.

“Yeah, I think I’ll keep him.” I winked at her feeling the effects of the mixed drinks I’d had. “I want to go home, I think. We have to be up before 7 a.m. to start getting ready, and I don’t want to be too tired for my wedding night.”

“Ohhhhh,” Lexi called, wagging her eyebrows. “Alright, I’ll get the gang to head out. Back in 5.”

Lexi ducked out of the bathroom, and I splashed some water on my face, so I’d feel a bit more awake and fresh. I glanced at the time on my phone, 11:38 p.m. It was early enough to enjoy a bit more of the night, but late enough that I was beginning to wear out.

I headed out to the foyer of the club and waited. Crystal and a few of our friends from college came first. I said my goodbyes to a few of them, but Crystal gave me a hug and returned back to the club. Apparently, she had met someone who she wanted to continue the night with.

When Gavin came out, all smiles, I felt my heart surge. In just 18 hours I would be seated next to him at a dinner table, and I would be his wife. It made my stomach flutter just thinking of it.

“What’s that smile about?” he asked as he pulled me against his body. I could smell the hint of alcohol on his breath, but I knew he had abstained from most of it.

“Oh, nothing. Just thinking about hearing you call me Mrs. Carpenter for the first time.” Gavin’s hands searched my back as he leaned down to kiss me. “And maybe you can do it while you fuck me... You know, boss me around a little and use my full name because I’m a bad girl!” He sunk his teeth into my neck and grabbed my ass.

“Is that what you want to do tonight?” Nibbling my earlobe, he ground against me.

It had been weeks since we’d had any physical intimacy, mostly because I’d been so caught up with my emotions that I had pushed him away. I felt badly for that, but I had needed the space. Now, after getting my closure with Drew, I felt much better. Tomorrow was my wedding day, and maybe I

should be waiting for my wedding night for that reunion, but I wanted him now.

“Yeah, I think it is.” I draped my arms over his shoulder, the tight-fitting dress pulling across the back as I did. Gavin slid his hand up my back and grabbed a handful of hair, pulling so hard my head leaned back exposing my neck. He scraped his beard along my soft skin as he sucked and kissed my neck.

“Wow, get a room.”

“Yeah, save it for the wedding night.”

Nick and Jiles came parading out with women dangling from their arms, one Jiles’s wife, the other Nick’s girlfriend. They high fived, which I decided was their trademark, and laughed. Gavin pulled away long enough to give a playful glare and flip them off.

“See you tomorrow!” Nick waved as he left the building, Jiles hot on his tail.

“Let’s get back to my place.” Gavin took my hand and tugged me toward the door. His excitement was contagious. We said our goodbyes to the rest of our friends and left. On the drive across town, we talked about practical wedding details, who would be where, when they would be there, and how we were getting from the wedding venue to the airport—our honeymoon destination the Grand Canyon.

But as soon as we were at his house, we left all practicalities behind. The minute he shut the door, he turned the deadbolt and pinned me against it, kissing down my neck. His hands worked at the hem of my dress, pulling it up so his fingers could tease me through my panties.

“Woah, slow down. You act like you haven’t had any in months.” I joked with him running my fingers through his hair as he sucked at the top of my breasts, which peeked out of the top of my dress.

“Well, someone has been withholding, so I have had to be patient. But I am taking what I want tonight.” He raked his teeth over my collar bone before biting the shoulder strap of the dress and pulling it down. I giggled, wrapping my hands

around the back of his head. My dress rolled down with his efforts, exposing my left breast, which he greedily nipped at and sucked as his hand worked between my thighs. I could feel the moisture in my panties already.

“Can we at least go somewhere more comfortable?” I let out a soft gasp as his index finger ground against my clit.

He stood and pointed toward his bedroom. And when I turned to go, he smacked my ass, which made me jump and snicker. I hurried toward the bedroom and continued peeling my clothing off as I went. When I tossed the dress and turned around Gavin wasn't there, so I slowly undressed the rest of the way. My panties and bra dropped right next to my dress, and I crawled onto the bed, posing seductively for him. I assumed he went to the toilet or something.

Gavin walked in holding a cup, a smirk on his face. “Fuck, you're so gorgeous. I can't wait to make you, my wife.” He set the cup down on the nightstand then undressed. I watched every item of clothing fall to the ground, revealing more and more of his skin as they dropped. For a guy who spent most of his time in a hospital taking care of other people, he looked exceptional. He had to spend just as much time in a gym somewhere.

I lay there stretched out, propped up on one elbow waiting for him. He slid his boxers off and his dick stood erect. It made my groin ache to feel him inside of me. I scooted across the bed, taking hold of him and stroking him as he picked up the cup and had a drink. He growled as I took him into my mouth, sucking lightly and stroking.

“Shit...” he hissed, his hips involuntarily beginning to thrust into my mouth as I sucked. I closed my eyes and heard ice clanking together in the cup as he set it down. And then, he climbed on top of me, straddling my face. I was pinned to the bed, his dick forced down my throat as he lay over me and spread my legs.

I wasn't ready for the chill of his tongue on my clit. His lips were ice cold as he sucked me. I shivered, sucking him harder. My pussy clenched, needing penetration, but he teased me

with his tongue, tracing my lines and sucking up my moisture. Each thrust of his hips pushed his dick into my throat, so I relaxed, timing my breaths with his rhythm.

I tried pushing my hips upward, but he craftily avoided my attempts to urge him on. Instead of giving me what I wanted, he lifted my legs, practically folding me in half and pinning my lower half to the bed, legs wide and pussy exposed. He licked and sucked at me until his tongue was no longer cold. And I missed the cold.

The cup of ice was within reach, so I reached up and found it on the nightstand. I attempted to grab it off, but it spilled over, and I picked up a few of the ice cubes. The noise was enough to distract Gavin for a moment, and he pulled out.

“Fuck... the ice please...” I offered him the ice cubes, and he looked back at me and smirked.

“You really are adventurous, aren’t you?”

“Just shut up and fuck me.”

He took the ice cubes from my hand and put them in his mouth, and I used my other hand to guide his dick back into my mouth. Tasting the salty precum that beaded on the head of his rod, I knew he was getting closer. So I stroked, sucking greedily to taste more of him.

Gavin’s cold lips returned to my clit, sucking and teasing me, but I wasn’t ready for him to really dive in. He plunged his tongue inside of me, pushing two ice cubes into my body. Then he put his fingers in me and sucked my clit, finger fucking me. The chill, combined with the intense arousal from being teased for so long made my body react.

I arched my back, moaning, and he shoved his dick down my throat, stopping the moan. He fucked my mouth and my pussy at the same time, bringing me to orgasm. I convulsed, wishing there were more inside of me to clench around, but the sensations were too overpowering to complain about.

Every nerve was on fire, every muscle twitching. The way he devoured my juices drove me wild, until my body calmed. I tried to let the relaxation take hold, but his cock was still down

my throat. He kept thrusting, his body growing more tense by the second. And just when I thought I would pass out from lack of oxygen, I felt his release.

His dick pulsed with each contraction, the salty explosion filling my mouth. I swallowed quickly, stroking him, feeling his balls drawn up and tight. He moaned against my pussy, sending vibrations through my entire body. And he pushed his fingers into me harder, touching the raw nerves that had just been exhausted by his ministrations.

As his thrusts slowed, I pushed at his stomach, and he pulled out and rolled to the side. I lay there sprawled out on the bed, the afterglow of a lifetime weighing me down onto the comforter. Gavin lay next to me, turning so we faced the same direction. My chest pounded, my breath coming in short and choppy bursts. I curled into his embrace, facing him, and closed my eyes.

“I love you, Madison Springer. And tomorrow I will get to call you Mrs. Carpenter.” He kissed my forehead and for a moment I was sad that he hadn’t kissed my lips. But given the fact that I’d just sucked him off, maybe that was the reason. I couldn’t help but chuckle at the thought, which made the whole bed shake. And Gavin joined me in laughing.

“What are you laughing about?” He pulled me close.

“Oh, nothing. You know, I think I’m really going to enjoy being your wife.” I picked at the hairs on his chest.

“Yeah? What makes you think that?” He pushed some hair behind my ear.

“Well, for starters, this time around feels different. I mean we both came home from our bachelor party.” I had to make the joke—I knew if he did it would hurt my feelings because they were still a bit raw. In honesty though, I had been tense all night.

“I love you, Madison. We’re going to have a long and happy life together.”

I lay there letting him hold me until I was almost asleep. He lifted me up, folding the covers back and tucking me into the

bed properly. As he curled around me, I felt safe. For the first time in our relationship, I knew that all things happen for a reason and that reason was love. Gavin really loved me, and I really loved him.

I could go to sleep feeling confident that tomorrow was going to be the best day of my life. He and I were meant to be together.

GAVIN

I rolled over in bed, stretching my arm out to feel for my beautiful bride, but the bed was cold. Instead of the warm kiss of her skin, I felt a piece of paper. I smiled before I even opened my eyes, knowing she'd left me a note.

Propping myself on one elbow, I slid the paper toward me and folded it open. Madison's handwriting was scrawled across the lined surface. She had flowery swirls and loops in her signature. It made me wonder how she'd sign my last name after today.

Gavin,

It's bad luck for the groom to see the bride on the wedding day! I'm off to get hair and nails done with Lexi. Then we have to make sure the dress still fits—I'm sure it will. But I wanted to leave you this note. When we exchange vows today our souls will be inexorably linked.

You are the love of my life. I've never found anything quite so special with any other person, even my best friends. And Lexi and I have known each other a very long time. Your friendship over the past almost two years has been such a treasure to me, and knowing that I get to call you my husband so soon... Well, it means the world to me.

So get up, eat the breakfast I laid out for you. Enjoy your morning. Finish your last set of rounds at the hospital before our honeymoon and brace yourself.

You're marrying probably the biggest adventure seeker on the planet.

I love you, Gavin.

~Madii

She signed her name with an XO and drew a heart next to her name. I smiled and collapsed back to the bed. The day had started well, though it would have been perfect had she been there in bed next to me.

With so much to do, I couldn't lie in bed and waste any time, so I popped out of bed and threw on some shorts, heading to the kitchen. Madii had left me brioche with strawberry cream cheese and a glass of OJ. I scarfed down a few pieces and opted for coffee instead of juice, but I'd have to make sure to thank her later on.

After a shower and getting dressed for the morning, I climbed in my car to stop by the hospital. Rounds would take me roughly an hour, and then I would be a free man for two weeks. I had never had two full weeks off in my entire career, so it would feel strange. Of course, I still had to be on call for all my patients, to answer questions Rutger had as he took over my caseload. I'd covered for him on his holiday, so it was fair that he covered for me too.

At the hospital I walked into whoops and cheers. The entire staff knew I was getting married, and they didn't let me forget it. Jokes were made and I played along like a good sport, but I was really ready to get the work over with and head to Nick's house to get ready for the wedding.

"Are you really ready for this?" Gary leaned over the nurses' desk and folded his hands in front of himself, elbows holding him up. I turned my back and leaned on the chest-height counter, watching as an elderly man was wheeled by in a chair by an orderly.

"Yeah, I think I'm ready. I've been ready for this for years. I just didn't have the right partner." The orderly waved at me, and I waved back. I didn't know him, but it seemed everyone knew me.

"You know, marriage is a lot like a surgery." Gary mused aloud, and I was certain he thought he was going to offer me

some deep introspective advice I had never heard of. So, despite the fact that I wanted to roll my eyes at him and walk away, I listened.

“Yeah? How’s that?” I asked, folding my arms over my chest. Pam walked past, waving and smiling. She was on her way somewhere in a hurry, but I didn’t ask.

“Well, you cut into your patient and see the guts, right? Like you open them up and it’s messy. You have to sort out the issue, locate what’s wrong, fix it, then sew them up. And sometimes you have complications. Except, the thing is, with brain surgery, you don’t get a do over. If you fuck it up, they die, or something horrible goes wrong. At least with marriage you get a second chance.”

Gary slapped me on the back and stood next to me. I couldn’t help but laugh at his “advice.” It was the worst analogy I’d ever heard. Even my own father had done better than that when I talked with him about things, and he had been about as absent as a person can be as a parent and a partner. Mom, however, was another story. She hadn’t even commented more than “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“Thanks.” I started to walk away, but Gary kept talking, walking alongside me.

“And just wait ’til you start having kids. Those little bastards just never let up. You think you have issues with your spouse until you have kids. Then everything is like brain surgery on steroids. You have no clue which way is up.”

“Thanks for the advice, doc. Now if you don’t mind, I have two more patients to visit, and then I’m going to go kiss my lovely bride for the first time as my wife.” I winked at him and started to walk away when his pager went off. It was the alert code, which meant something emergent was happening. So, I paused and watched his face as he called the number. “What is it?” I asked, but he held up a finger.

He blanched, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he took a breath. “You might want to call Madison.”

Confused, I shook my head. I studied his face for a moment as a sudden realization hit me. Horror curdled my stomach. “Why?” I didn’t want to know the answer. Part of me hoped it was a car accident where two surgeons were needed immediately. Part of me knew what he was about to say even as he opened his mouth.

“He’s awake.”

My world started to spin. My chest tightened. I leaned on the nurses’ station and waited as the adrenaline surge took over.

“He’s what?” I struggled the words out, trying to understand what was happening.

“He has asked for Madison. Gavin, Drew is awake.”

Gary’s voice faded in and out, but all I could do was focus on the one phrase “he’s awake.” My worst nightmare was not a nightmare; it was reality.

Madison was getting her hair or nails done right this instant for our wedding. In less than five hours she would be my wife. He couldn’t be awake. Not now. I tried to focus on Gary’s face, but my brain zoned out, my eyes not able to focus on anything. My pulse throbbed in my ears; my body felt numb and heavy.

I vaguely recalled hearing Gary make a phone call, to whom I did not know. I stood there for a long time, long after Gary left my side. Tanya came and asked me a few questions which I couldn’t answer, and then left. The ticking of the clock was a hammer smashing my dreams. My phone vibrated in my pocket several times, but I ignored it. Then it rang, but I stood there staring at the computer on the nurses’ desk, unable to move.

“Are you okay?” Pam put a hand on my arm and offered a concerned look. She pushed a chair up to me, but I refused to sit. Sitting felt weak, powerless. I was not powerless. I had spent months courting Madii, wooing her. She was in love with me. Our wedding was today. “Gavin, you need to sit down.”

“How long... What time is it?” I mumbled, turning her direction without really looking at her.

“It’s been over 45 minutes.” She held a glass of water out to me.

“Did someone call...?” My throat was a knot of emotion, barely choking out the words.

“Yes, they called her. Gary did it. You should go to his room, Gavin. She’ll be here soon.” Pam’s warm tone pulled me a bit further out of my stupor. She walked with me slowly as we made our way down the hall.

I could see from a distance how the door to Drew’s room was propped open. Before I got there, I knew the chaos of the moment would be too much for me. Nurses and doctors rushed in and out of the room, the crash cart stood outside his door. There were two orderlies manning it as if it would be stolen.

“Gavin!”

Madison’s voice stopped my heart. I turned to see her rushing up the hallway, her hair in rollers, makeup half done. She looked like she’d been crying. She raced to my arms and squeezed me so tight I couldn’t breathe.

“God, I thought something happened to you. Dr. Rutger called me and told me there has been an emergency and I needed to come right away.” She held me at arm’s length and looked me over. “What happened? Are you okay?”

“I... I-” I couldn’t say. I was not okay. Not even a little.

“You don’t look hurt.” Her eyes shifted to Pam, who frowned, looked down, and walked away. “What’s going on? What’s wrong? Why was I called here? It’s bad luck to see me before the wedding—”

“He woke up.”

Like a ghost haunting the hallway, my voice crept out and bit her. She stopped, releasing me and backing away. Her face paled, her eyes grown wide.

“What did you say?” she asked me, hands clutched to her stomach.

I stared at her face for a long moment, unable to move. I watched as her panic turned worse, her pulse quickening. I

could see her chest shaking with each heartbeat. The tears formed in her eyes.

“He’s awake. He asked for you.” My tone was hollow, my words just sounds at this point.

I thought she’d cry, or scream, or run to his room, or run away. Anything. But she blinked a few times and stared at me. I watched her start to sway, then I watched her knees buckle. My hands shot out to catch her as she collapsed, just like my entire world.

I pulled her to my body, then slowly lowered to the ground, kneeling there and holding her as she passed out—the shock was too much for her system. It was too much for me too.

The entire hospital vanished in that moment. The only thing left was the woman I loved in my arms, blacked out, and the remnants of my hopes and dreams floating away. Madison was supposed to be mine. Drew was not supposed to wake up.

This wasn’t supposed to happen.

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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