

AN AGE GAP CHRISTMAS
AMNESIA ROMANCE

BABY

Bump

SOFIA T
SUMMERS

BABY BUMP

AN AGE GAP, CHRISTMAS AMNESIA
ROMANCE

SOFIA T SUMMERS

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The following story contains mature themes, strong language and sexual situations.
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DESCRIPTION

**It's one thing to wake up in a hospital with zero memories.
It's another to have your hot doctor tell you he's the father
of your child.**

Ethan Lewis is every woman's dream.

So, I took about a second to believe every word he told me.

Strong, handsome, and wealthy.

He's basically all the things that my ex is not.

The ex that is *sure* to stir up trouble in my no memory La-La
land.

Ethan doesn't care that we violated the rules when his fingers
trailed down my jawline.

The moment he held me is the only memory I really care
about.

But it's only a matter of time until I remember all the forgotten
moments.

And that would be the moment of truth.

Ethan's secret would spill out this Thanksgiving... along with
the legitimacy of the story my ex tells me.

But I'm not the only one discovering a secret this holiday
season.

Christmas will bring a *sweet little gift* for Ethan, one that I
thought I could hide from him forever.

PROLOGUE

My heartbeat pounded through my temples like a jackhammer. It was dark, so dark that all I could see was the flicker of red and blue flashing lights as I tried to blink my eyes open. Everything hurt, including my stomach, where my hands attempted to reach, but my arms were heavy. I was dizzy too, as if I'd been spun around in an amusement park ride and left to wait out the rush of vertigo left after the ride was over.

“Ma’am, I’m going to need you to hold still.” The voice wasn’t familiar. It was masculine and gruff. I tried to turn my head to see where the voice came from, but a hot pain in my shoulder stopped me, as did someone’s hand on my jaw.

“My baby...” I mumbled, but the sound was drowned out by a horrible grinding and screeching noise. It was so loud I cringed, sending more zaps of pain through my shoulders and neck. I blinked again, more light coming into focus, and realized I was upside down. “Oh, God...” I didn’t know what was happening or even where I was.

The screeching of metal and a loud engine noise continued to vibrate me to my core as tears streamed from my eyes, flowing over my forehead. I felt pressure on my hips and chest, and my hands and arms were numb. The man’s hand on my jaw steadied me as he wrapped something around my neck, and then the horrible cacophony quieted.

“Get me a bag of O-negative STAT and start a line. She’s going to bleed out if we can’t get this door off.”

My eyes focused on his face, a middle-aged man with dark skin and warm eyes. His full beard was well-groomed, the way I remembered my father's beard. He pushed some hair out of my eyes, and I felt it pull free from something sticky on my face. I wanted to scream and wake up because it was obviously a bad dream, but my head throbbed so badly I thought I'd vomit if I opened my mouth again.

"Ma'am, you've been in a car accident. I'm a paramedic here to help you. I need you to hold very still. You have a laceration on your side that is bleeding badly. We're working to get you out of this wreckage."

He spoke in a very calming voice, and I felt his hands searching my shoulders and back. There was a loud bang and then suddenly, a whole lot more light flooded into the darkness. I saw shards of glass everywhere. The man's blue uniform was soaked in blood. Was that my blood? And why was I upside down?

"Passing the long spine board now."

That voice was distinctly female, and she was close to me. I blinked my eyes, trying to make them adjust to the new brightness as lights beamed in onto my body. It felt surreal, as if I were in a nightmare, but the pain was very real. Breathing was difficult with the pressure on my chest, but the man's hand on my body tethered me to reality, helping me stay calm.

"I'm going to cut the seatbelt now, and we're going to get you on the board, alright?"

"My baby," I croaked, and I felt bile in the back of my throat.

"Let's do this on three. One... two... three..." The man counted off, and then I felt more hands on me, lots of them. The pressure across my hips and chest suddenly vanished and I felt like I was falling. I jerked, stiffening my muscles, but found myself cradled in very competent hands. In seconds, I was lying flat on my back with my arms relaxed at my side.

"My baby... please..." I whimpered, finally able to take a full breath.

“Ma’am, did you have a child in the car? I don’t see a car seat. Someone check the grass.” The woman’s voice was back, and she sounded emotional. My head hurt so badly it made it hard to think. Did I have my baby? My hands went instinctively to my stomach, but they were still numb. I could feel them touching my belly, but my fingers were senseless.

“There’s no car seat, Kendra. There was no child in this car.”

“Ma’am, are you pregnant?” Her question was louder this time. I blinked my eyes again and looked up at her. She was a petite woman, pretty features. Her hand gripped the board I was strapped to, and she carried me effortlessly with the other few paramedics.

The flashing lights hurt my eyes, and I pinched them shut again. It was a bumpy ride with them walking me somewhere. “My baby...” I said again, slowly beginning to regain feeling in my arms. My hands searched my belly. I felt dampness everywhere now. “Oh, my God, my baby.” I grew frantic, trying to sit up, but I found even my head was strapped down.

“Ma’am, please stay calm, okay? We’re going to check on the baby for you.” The same female paramedic was there, but where was the man? He was calming. She wasn’t.

“Get an IV now, push a shot of adrenaline. Get that blood hooked up.” I felt a jab in my arm and looked down to see the man was back. He had a needle in the crook of my elbow. He smiled at me.

“Starting an IV, honey. You’re going to be okay. We’ll stitch up your cut and we have to run some tests.” I kept my eyes fixed on him as the light got brighter. They lifted me into an ambulance, and a few paramedics hovered over me there too. “Can you tell me your name?”

I blinked again and again, unable to make the pounding stop. My side hurt, and so did my neck. It felt like I’d knocked my head pretty good too. “Lily,” I mumbled. “My baby.”

I felt a searing pain in my side and looked down to see the female pushing on it. “You’ve got a deep laceration. We’ll

keep it from bleeding anymore while we get you to the hospital. We just need you to hold still.” She was stern and commanding. It made me decide to do exactly as she said. It made me afraid of what would happen if I didn’t.

“Let’s have a listen,” the man said. I looked back at him. The IV line lay across my hips and thighs and wound around to a bag of blood hanging from a hook overhead. He had a stethoscope clipped to his ears, hammer in hand, pressing it to my stomach. When I looked down at my clothing, I saw what the fuss was about. From my left hip upward, I was soaked in blood.

“Oh, God,” I whimpered, feeling faint. His hands ripped at my clothing, exposing me and the gash that oozed blood. The female’s hands were there too, working on my body as I stared at the small baby bump beneath the waistband of my panties, also soaked in blood now.

I sucked in another labored breath, this one urged on by terror. It was loud as the sirens began blaring. Despite being strapped down, my body jostled around as the ambulance started moving. I tried to hold on, but they grabbed my arms and tethered them down with something. My eyes fluttered shut, nausea rolling through my belly, and I turned my head and threw up.

Then I surrendered to darkness again. The lights still flashed, but these lights were twinkling on a tree. I watched as my little girl twirled and swayed, arms held high in the air as she grinned. I laughed and clapped happily, seeing her spinning with glee in front of the Christmas tree. She wore reindeer antlers and fuzzy socks, and her father took her hand and twirled her around and around.

She was beautiful, warm brown hair with golden highlights and large chocolate eyes, just like me. And when she laughed, it sounded like tinkling bells. Her round, rosy cheeks turned my way, and she giggled before shouting, “I love you, Mommy!”

“I love you too, baby,” I told her, but no words came out. I reached for her, but my hand passed right through her form.

My hands trembled, and I reached again but couldn't touch her.

“I have to go, Mommy.” She chuckled. “See you soon.” She turned and ran, her little pigtails bobbing with each step.

I screamed for her to stay, to come back to me, but she was gone, disappeared into the black night, and my heart was torn out with her. Pain seized every part of my body, making me tremble and shout. I lashed out, screaming for help, for someone to stop her. This was my baby. She couldn't leave, not now, not when I needed her. We were supposed to have a good life. Why would this happen to me?

I felt tears on my cheeks and sat in humble silence as the sound of her laughter faded, and all I could hear was a rhythmic whirring and a constant beep. This couldn't be happening. Not to me. I was a good person. I didn't deserve this.

1

ETHAN

My phone vibrated, so I pulled it out of my pocket and looked at the notification. It was from the emergency department, stating they needed a consult. I sat at my desk with at least an hour of transcripts that needed to be typed up and entered into patient files and knew I was in for a long night, but patients came first. I collected my tablet and stethoscope and flipped the lights off in the room as I let myself out and locked up.

As the neurologist on call this weekend, I didn't expect much excitement. I lived in such a small community that we had no need for multiple doctors, and I hardly worked weekend shifts as it was, but with my boss out of town for the weekend, it fell on my shoulders to keep the fort held down. It was a chance for me to shine too, really show this place what I had as a doctor. St. Rita's was a great place to land and build a solid career before transitioning to somewhere bigger and better, and I intended to prove myself.

The ER was alive with activity as I walked in. The single-vehicle accident had triggered a line of traffic on the interstate, leading to several smaller fender benders and at least a dozen folks waiting to be seen for minor injuries. I noticed Amily tending to a woman with a contusion on her forehead and waved at her. As charge nurse, she'd have all the information I needed for whichever patient they believed needed my help.

While I waited for her to catch me up, I opened the tablet and scrolled through the files for my current patient load. There were a few of them who worried me—a woman

recovering from a brain tumor excision and a man who had a stroke only a few days ago. As a neurologist, I often saw very tragic injuries and diseases and because of it, I'd grown a real backbone. Though I had such compassion for these people, I had taught myself to not feel—because getting emotionally invested hurt when a patient didn't make it.

“Here!” Amily shouted, snapping her fingers as she strolled past me. She was a very commanding woman, took charge of this ER like it belonged to her despite not being the director down here. “Female, twenty-seven, presenting with a moderate concussive event. She lost a lot of blood and was unconscious for more than six minutes, so we're testing for hypoxia, and she hasn't regained consciousness since she's been here.”

“O2 stats?” I asked her, looking down at the chart as it populated my tablet screen. Amily's fingers flicked over hers as she walked. “And do you have her medical history? Is the family here?” With a head injury, oftentimes the only way to get information was to ask family members. Patients sometimes remained unconscious for hours or days, and sometimes, even when they did wake up, they were groggy or had memory issues.

“Vitals are stable now, though her heart rate is high. No family yet, but she has a friend with her. She drove by and witnessed the accident. Amily pulled the curtain to exam one back and stepped in. I followed her, though my eyes were firmly fixed on the chart. Her blood pressure was a little low, and a fast pulse meant low blood volume.

“How many units of blood...” I asked as I raised my eyes to look at the patient, Lillian Bennet. I let the question hang in the air as I took her in. Soft brown hair caked in blood framed her warm complexion and round cheeks. Her face was soiled with more blood, tear streaks making a trail through the mess. Her clothing had been cut or torn away, and she had a few hospital blankets draped across her body. Her hand was cradled in the hands of the friend she'd come with, who sat at her side, crying.

“She had two units of blood, and that stabilized her. Seventeen stitches on her side to close the laceration and a splint on her left femur until we can do X-rays.” Amily checked the IV line and bopped around the small room, adjusting the IV flow rate.

“Your concerns for me, then?” I had to pry my eyes away from Lillian’s beautiful face. Such a shame that such a beautiful woman had a horrible accident. It always ripped my heart out to see someone so innocent become injured.

“She was in and out of consciousness and the MRI shows a good bleed. She keeps mumbling something about a baby, but we can’t find a heartbeat. That doesn’t necessarily mean she’s crazy, because sometimes in emergency situations, the mother’s heartbeat can be too loud. We’re running blood tests and I have an ultrasound scheduled for twenty minutes. The EEG was inconclusive to us, and we want a second opinion.”

“Oh, she’s pregnant,” the friend interrupted, standing. “She’s not crazy. God, you have to do the ultrasound sooner. What if the baby is hurt?”

My knee-jerk reaction was to reach for the friend and calm her, but my responsibility was to the patient first. Amily eyed the girl and nodded at me as she walked out, leaving me to begin my exam.

“Ms....?”

“Wright. Erin Wright, Lily’s best friend. Doc, you have to do something. Lily doesn’t deserve this. She’s such an amazing, sweet woman. Please.” Erin’s eyes welled up, and she clung to Lily’s hand with a fierceness I’d only seen in a mother before. It was clear to me that these two ladies were close.

I pulled the penlight I always carried out of the breast pocket of my lab coat and walked to the head of the bed. Setting my tablet down next to Lily, I said, “Tell me more about Lillian.”

“Well, it’s Lily. She thinks it’s nicer because it’s like the flower.” Erin sniffled as I worked and kept talking. “Uh, Lily

is a teacher, high school kids. She chose them because she felt like they often get a bad rap and she wants to make a difference. Uh, she loves reading and coffee shops and poetry. And oh, she volunteers at the library.”

I held one eye open and used my light to look into her pupils, which were fixed and dilated. That wasn't a great sign, but it was normal for concussed patients. Then I checked her other eye to see the same results.

“She sounds like a pretty wonderful woman.” I slid the penlight back into my pocket and picked up the tablet again to go over the EEG results as Erin continued talking. “Tell me more about her.” I focused on the tablet because I found myself feeling such a deep connection to this woman I'd never met before, and I didn't want Erin to pick up on my distraction.

Erin smiled. “Well, she hates camping, but she loves hiking. She's never been outside the country, but she has always wanted to visit Paris. She's a hopeless romantic.” Erin chuckled. She was relaxing as she talked, which made it easier to do my job. But the way she described Lily pulled at my heartstrings.

As I continued to examine Erin, my thoughts drifted to Lily. I imagined her reading her favorite book in a cozy coffee shop, her long hair falling over her face as she concentrated on the words. I imagined taking her on a hike, showing her the beauty of nature, and seeing the awe in her eyes. I imagined walking through the streets of Paris with her, holding her hand and admiring the art and architecture around us. And I wondered what the heck was happening to me.

I couldn't shake the feeling that Lily was someone I needed to meet. It was as if destiny had brought us together, even if we had never crossed paths. I felt like I knew her, like we had already spent countless hours talking and exploring the world together. Erin's words only confirmed what I already suspected—that Lily was one of a kind.

“Beep-beep!” Amily chimed as she entered the room pushing an ultrasound machine. “Erin, I'm going to have to

ask you to step out. We have some family here and we have to get this ultrasound done too.”

My stomach tightened as Erin nodded and picked up her purse and jacket and walked out. Amily worked in silence to prepare the machine as I skimmed the EEG. Everything looked normal to me, and I could tell her that and leave, but I felt drawn to Lily’s side, as if I needed to stay there, even when a stern-looking man walked in and parked himself at her bedside in the chair Erin had vacated.

“Do you have to stand in the way?” The man, probably in his late twenties and badly in need of a shave, shook his head and scowled at me.

“Sir, my name is Dr. Lewis. I’m a neurologist. They called me down to assess—”

“Look, I don’t care what you do. What’s that for? We don’t care if the kid is alive. Just make sure Lil is okay.” He sat back in his seat and crossed his right leg over his left knee. It wasn’t the pose of a person who was genuinely concerned, which raised a huge red flag for me. I found myself wanting to run to Lily’s side and keep her away from this guy and I knew nothing about him. For all I knew, he was her husband.

“Ethan, this is Mr. Mark Turner, Lily’s fiancé. Her parents will be by shortly.” Amily’s curt introduction told me she’d already been exposed to whatever unpleasantness this man was here to dish out. I didn’t for a second believe that Lily Bennet was happily engaged to this piece of work.

“Mr. Turner, it’s nice to meet you. I’ve looked over Lily’s file and—”

“Is she dying? Because no one has said a thing to me.” He crossed his arms over his chest and glared up at me.

“Sir, it’s important for you to remain calm. Lily will need your support and encouragement when she wakes up.” I tucked the tablet under my arm and watched her face contort. The angry energy in this room was waking her up and it made me frustrated with the man for being so upset and insensitive.

“Hey, what did I say?” he snapped at Amily. “We don’t need an ultrasound. That’s too expensive.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Who on earth wouldn’t want to know the condition of their unborn child? I backed up a step, feeling very frustrated by this man. The way Lily’s friend spoke about her made me feel so connected to her that I wanted to make this man leave.

“Sir, if you can’t stay calm, I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

He stood, squaring his shoulders. “Make me, tough guy.” Just as he turned toward me, I noticed Lily’s eyes blink open. I stepped around him and walked toward her, drawn in by the fear in her honey brown eyes. I’d never seen a more beautiful sight in my life than the earnest gaze she cast on me.

“My baby. Please, is my baby okay?” She reached for me the same time I reached for her, and all I could do was hold her hand and stare at her. It felt like my world was on hold because her world was. Amily started talking, but my heart was being actively knit together with Lily’s and I didn’t know anything about her. I didn’t believe in love at first sight until now, and now that I did, I wouldn’t rest until I knew she was better. I had a deep urge to get her away from all of this insanity and protect her. Especially from this man who called himself her fiancé.

The splitting pain in my head was so bad I could barely see. I looked up at the handsome doctor standing over me, deep, piercing blue eyes examining me. His hand was wrapped around mine gently and it calmed me slightly. “My baby. Is my baby okay?”

He muttered something to the nurse beside him, and I turned to see her with some sort of device in her hand. “Ma’am, we have to do an ultrasound, okay?” She had a nasally voice. I didn’t care for it.

“I will be right back,” the male doctor said, and as soon as his hand pulled away from mine, I felt lost, like he had tethered me to this world somehow, and now, I was floating in space.

Panic returned with a jolt of adrenaline so intense my chest hurt. The handsome blond doctor walked out of my room and his face was replaced by someone else’s. A new man took his place, dark hair and eyes that made me fearful. His full beard was unkempt, disheveled hair making him look frightful.

“Who are you?” I tried to pull my hand away when he took it, but he held it tightly.

“What do you mean, who am I? I’m your fiancé, Lily. Quit being ridiculous.”

Confusion gripped me as I stared up at him. There was no way I was engaged to him. I didn’t even remember who he was. I looked to the nurse, whose cold hands were touching my round stomach. The wand she had in her hand was cold

too, sliding across my skin and making it wet. She didn't look confused. She looked focused on the machine she was running.

"I'm not engaged," I mumbled, looking back at the man. "How is the baby? Please... I need to know." My pleading caused a sour look on the man's face, but the nurse offered a soft smile.

"Baby is doing well, Ms. Bennett. Everything is okay." She turned the monitor so I could see my little guy moving. Then she cranked up the volume and I heard the heartbeat. It made me let out a whimper of relief and tears flooded my eyes.

"She's okay..."

"Yes, and she's definitely a she." The nurse pointed to the screen and grinned. "Congratulations, Momma. Now, you need to rest because you've had a tough spill." She eyed the man hovering over me. "Please try to speak calmly to her from here on."

The nurse packed up her machine and wiped my stomach clean, all while the man leaned over me. He didn't seem to care that I was scared or confused, and all I wanted was for the kind doctor with the warm smile and compassionate eyes to return. I felt safe when he was here.

"I'll come back after a bit to help you get cleaned up and into a gown. We'll be keeping you at least overnight for observation, maybe longer." The nurse pushed her cart out into the hallway and left me with the strange man. I'd never felt more uncomfortable in my life and I didn't know why.

"We're really engaged?" I asked, trying to sit up. The IV in my arm was painful, making it difficult to move. Instead of helping me, the man stepped back and offered a dirty look while I struggled.

"Yeah, even though I should cut you loose after you cheated on me." He scoffed and crossed his arms over his chest. His words hit me like a ton of bricks. Me, cheat? I'd

never do that to him or anyone else, for that matter. It didn't make sense.

"I what?" I rubbed my head, feeling overwhelmed and confused. Then I pinched my eyes shut, trying to remember something, anything that would help me place this man in my life. I didn't even know his name. How could we be engaged?

"You cheated on me for months. There's no way that kid is mine, and you've been trying to pass it off as mine since you found out you're pregnant."

I covered my face and rested my elbows on my knees. Waking up in a hospital was shocking, but having no memory of someone who claimed to know me made this feel so surreal. I focused my thoughts on what I did know. My name was Lily Bennett. I was a high school English teacher at Lima Senior. I remembered my best friend Erin and that my parents helped me get through college. But this man? No recollection of him.

"Sir, I really don't remember you."

"Cut the crap, Lily. It's me, Mark. Our wedding is planned in six months. You're telling me you're going to fake not remembering me so you can get out of it?" Mark sounded angry. I couldn't even look up at him. The only thing I could do was try to stay calm. I did not feel safe with him, and his tone and the volume at which he spoke frightened me. How could I be in love with this guy?

"Oh, my God, baby..." The sound of my mom's voice filled my ears and made tears come to my eyes instantly, and I dropped my hands to see my parents walk into the room.

"Mom," I whined and opened my arms for her as she approached for a hug. This made sense. My parents' faces brought a sense of grounding to my overwhelmed thoughts. "God, I'm so scared."

"I'm here, baby," she cooed and hugged me. I watched through teary eyes as Dad shook hands with the man—Mark—who called himself my fiancé. They knew each other? But how? And why didn't I remember it at all?

“Mom, I don’t know what happened. Everything is foggy. I don’t remember things, and—”

Mark scoffed again. The angry expression on his face made me cower and pull away from Mom. She sat back and started fussing over me, using a makeup wipe from her purse to wipe my face clean.

“The doctors said you hit your head, honey.” Dad’s voice was warm. It contrasted with the anger in Mark’s voice as he spoke.

“She doesn’t remember me, conveniently.” He shook his head and pursed his lips. “Doesn’t remember cheating on me either, do you, Lily?”

If I weren’t already in so much pain, his words would have hurt me deeply. Mom gasped and Dad’s brow furrowed. “You what?” Mom asked.

“That’s not true.” Dad shook his head, not willing to believe Mark either.

“What? No, I didn’t. I couldn’t. You don’t believe that, do you?” I looked into my mother’s eyes which were filled with tears. “I don’t even know who that man is.” I pointed at Mark and heard the emotion in my own voice as it raised a pitch. It was ludicrous for my parents to believe that I’d do that.

“Mark, are you saying Lily had an affair?” Mom looked from my growing abdomen to Mark’s stormy face. He nodded and scowled.

“I’m not just saying it. It’s the truth.” He jammed his hands into his pockets and his expression softened when he looked up at my father. “I tried to be patient with her, to love her. I’d take the baby in as my own to this day if she’d just admit it and respect me.” He shrugged. “You know how bad it hurts to be betrayed like that?”

I opened my mouth to protest but Mom cut me off. “Lillian Marie Bennett, I’m ashamed of you.” Her tone wasn’t angry or harsh, but she did sound hurt. Like when I was a kid and she was disappointed in me. Other kids got a smack on the rump

or their phone taken away. All she had to do was look at me the way she was right now.

“Mom, I...”

“Lily, how could you do something so... so... immoral?” Dad’s question hurt my heart more than the accusation of cheating.

“What? Dad, I swear... I don’t even know who he is.” It hurt to think, and I just wanted comfort. “You have to believe me.”

“When you told us you were having a baby, we were upset. A woman shouldn’t have a baby out of wedlock, but you and Mark are engaged.” Mom shook her head as she spoke, but the pain in her eyes relayed how upset she really was with me. I was an adult. How could she lecture me like I was a child? “We agreed not to be upset with you or take it out on you because it’s hard to remain celibate when you’re in love.”

Mom smiled up at Mark, who walked over and took her hand. There was some sort of relationship there, but I didn’t know what or why. How could they side with someone I didn’t even know? I was in the hospital after some accident and my head wasn’t right. I looked into the eyes of the man who swore we were an item and saw nothing, no spark of recognition, nothing.

“Honey, this isn’t okay. To pass another man’s baby off as your fiancé’s just so your parents and family don’t find out? I thought we taught you so much better.” Dad patted Mark on the shoulder. “I’m sorry, Mark. It’s such an honorable thing for you to forgive her and care for the child.”

“God!” I shouted, ache flooding my heart. “I don’t remember any of this. I can’t do this. Please... I need you all to leave. I need my doctor. I can’t remember a thing.”

As if the heavens parted and God sent an angel, the blond doctor pulled the curtain back and appeared at the foot of my bed. The room stilled to silence as Mom and Dad looked up at him. Mom stood and clutched her purse to her stomach as I

relaxed back in bed, thankful for the lecture to be over and for my heart to feel some sense of comfort again.

“Mr. and Mrs. Bennett, my name is Dr. Ethan Lewis. I’m your daughter’s neurologist, and I am the man she cheated with. I’m the father of her baby.”

You could hear a pin drop as the news registered. He looked into my eyes with such desire and warmth that I felt transported to another place. A place where I was safe and comfortable, where everything made sense and I felt loved. There was more recognition in that gaze than in any of the other people’s in this room, and something in my heart told me I was safe now.

Mark stormed out of the room, and all I could do was stare at those heavenly blue eyes, praying he was telling the truth.

I had no clue why I blurted that out except that I couldn't just stand there and listen to these three people lecture this poor woman after she'd just had a horrible accident. I was never more thankful than when Amily ran that ultrasound machine and I heard the whirring of the baby's heartbeat from the hallway. Something just happened to me when that man started in on her, and I needed to remove myself from the room so I didn't say something I'd regret.

But I ended up saying something anyway.

Mr. Turner left the room with an angry expression on his face, and I lingered by the foot of the bed as Lily's parents exchanged awkward glances. Lily looked relieved that they weren't lecturing her any longer, but they said nothing to me. She lay back on the bed and pulled the blanket up over her chest higher, and I tried to stay calm. I didn't dare confess to the lie with them in the room, but I knew I had to once they left. It was very unethical and definitely just as immoral as any supposed cheating.

The thing was, an amnesia patient could forget a lot of things about their life and their circumstances, but they rarely forgot what sort of person they were. Lily's insistence that she hadn't cheated on her fiancé felt genuine to me, and as a doctor, I would have told her parents that she was being sincere, not trying to avoid their anger. Forgetting part of your identity just wasn't a thing, at least not when the patient remembered their parents.

“Excuse us,” her father said, wiggling his fingers at Lily’s mother. The woman grimaced and glanced at Lily before joining her husband and leaving the room.

The minute they were gone, Lily burst into tears, covering her face. It appeared someone had tried to clean her up a bit, and I felt my chest ache to help her. I walked toward her and took a paper towel from the counter and wet it before sitting on the side of her bed. Amily would certainly be around for a bath and a hospital gown before long. She was in the hallway making notes on Lily’s chart when I walked in.

“It’s all so much. I’m so sorry I don’t remember you at all. Nothing makes sense.” Lily’s tears were genuine, and I knew she’d never remember me at all. My goal right now, however, was to help her stay calm, not work her up even more. So I pulled her hands away from her face and used the wet towel to dab at her tender skin. Bits of glass had caused tiny cuts across her cheeks and forehead when the windshield shattered. I knew that over time, those bits of glass would work their way to the surface and she’d pick them out. For now, I tried to be as gentle as possible.

“Hey, you won’t remember it all right away. Slowly, over time, your mind will recall facts, and those facts that you don’t remember are just ones that your brain found too traumatic to place. Your brain has a way of protecting you like that.” It was true, too. In trauma, I’d seen plenty of patients who didn’t have memories of certain things. It was a neurological defense mechanism and doctors had studied it for eons.

“Oh, God, they hate me. I can’t believe my parents hate me. They just walked out and...”

“Hey... shh,” I coaxed, pinching her chin gently in my hand. “They don’t hate you. They’re shocked by what Mark said. That’s all.” Or maybe by what I said, but I couldn’t tell her that. I should, but just a glance at her blood pressure, and knowing she still had a brain bleed going on, and I didn’t dare risk it.

“Look, I’m going to tell the nurses that no one else may come in here tonight. You need to rest and sleep. If you don’t,

that concussion is only going to get worse.” I was her doctor and I knew these things, so against my better judgment, I decided that my little lie that saved her from a lecture was something she shouldn’t hear right at this moment. It would be difficult enough when I did fess up, or she remembered, and God, that moment would be humiliating, but it would come.

“Dr...?”

“Ethan,” I told her, wiping a tear from her cheek.

“Ethan, are we in love?” Her eyes searched mine, and I bit my tongue hard. What had I started?

I wanted to scream, *Yes! Emphatically, yes!* but I couldn’t. All I could do was hold back the emotion wanting to explode out of my chest. As I looked into her eyes, I knew without a shadow of a doubt that I was in love. So lost and helpless in love with this woman and her round cheeks and wavy hair. Every part of my soul longed to make her happy, to wipe her tears, to help her understand her worth, to protect her from anything life might throw at her. But she didn’t know me at all.

“I think we’ll let your brain rest and see what it remembers.” It was all I could tell her because I knew the truth. My love at first sight was unrequited love. And even if she eventually began to fall for me, she would learn I had lied. I wasn’t sorry I sent that monster of a man storming out of the room, but my guilty conscience wouldn’t allow me to make it worse by feeding her false memories.

“Yeah, I’m sort of tired,” she said, lying back again. I adjusted her bed and checked her IVs before returning to her side.

“Rest a bit, okay? I’m not letting anyone come back until tomorrow, and even then, you can decide who comes into your room. If you need more pain meds, tell the nurse when she comes in to clean you up and get you to a room. Okay?” I squeezed Lily’s hand gently, and she took it into both of hers.

“Ethan, you’re coming back, right? I mean, you’ll visit and take care of me?”

If she only knew how unethically I had acted, she'd never want to see me again, but how could I stay away knowing she felt safe with me here? That safety was something her brain needed. I had no choice.

“Of course. You rest now. I'll come back soon.”

I flicked the lights off as I let myself out of the room, and I hoped I could hide in my office to obsess over my self-imposed torment for a while, but Amily was there. Her glare and the way she had her arms crossed over her chest were hostile. We had history, and it wasn't a good one, but I'd never seen her get riled up like this at work.

“What?” I asked her, walking down the hallway. I saw the cart she had with stuff to clean Lily up. She deserted it to follow me.

“You slept with her? Now you're treating her?” she hissed, keeping her volume low. It felt like a thousand tiny daggers pierced the back of my neck, and I cringed and clenched my jaw.

“It's not what you think.” I ducked into a supply closet and pulled her in after me. No one on this floor could know the truth. She was out of line for calling me out in a public place.

“Then what? You lied? You don't even know her?” She tapped her toe and planted her hands on her hips. “You know how much trouble you'll get in?”

“Amily, seriously. Just because we dated for a few months doesn't give you the right to think you have open access to my personal life.” I scowled at her and shook my head. This cramped quarters with shelves of gloves and bedding supplies were suffocating, or maybe it was my own conscience hating me for being so incredibly stupid.

“This isn't about our past, and you know it. You are either treating a patient you legally cannot treat because you have a relationship with them, or you lied to her and her entire family. Which is it?” She stood between me and the door, and all I wanted to do was plow her over and run for safety.

I knew her. She was a dog with a bone and wouldn't give up until she chewed the thing to death. I was that bone, and her sharpened teeth dared me to try to escape. I hated that I was already in a compromising position, but the fact that someone else knew scared me. And the someone who knew was someone who would use it against me without thinking twice, all because we weren't compatible and I'd broken up with her.

"Please, just stay out of it. I'll fix it." I pushed past her and let the supply closet door close as I walked out. My thoughts were on overdrive, scatterbrained and ruminating on everything that had happened in the past hour or so. I walked down the hallway and past the family lounge. The door was open, and I noticed Lily's family there, and her fiancé—or ex-fiancé, who knew now?

It made me curious. I stopped just past the door and waited, listening to see if I could hear what they were talking about. They were the only ones in the small room and they weren't shy about their conversation.

"We're just so sorry, Mark. This is so unlike Lillian. She would never have done this if she hadn't pulled away from the family."

My heart wrenched in my chest. Lily didn't cheat. I knew it in my heart, but there was no way to convince them of that now. Not only had I overstepped my boundaries, but I'd made things for her worse. Her own parents believed it, and now her fiancé was going to milk it for everything it was worth.

"It just hurts so bad, you know? But I still love her. I will still take care of the baby. I'm sorry she pulled away. She pulled away from me too." I heard his emotion, and my gut told me he was faking those tears. No way he cared enough about her to care for someone else's kid. He was so hostile toward her before they walked in.

"It's alright, Mark. We'll get her counseling. It will all work out. You'll always be our son."

I shook my head and moved away from the door before I got tempted to go in there and tell them what that man was really like when they weren't around. I knew Lily deserved

better, and while I'd made such a huge mistake in lying to her and them, I couldn't allow her to go back to that situation. I had to come clean and I had to protect her in the process.

My heart wanted her more than anything, but even if I couldn't have her, there was no way I was ever letting her go back to him. I'd see to that.

My stomach churned even at the thought of food, so when Mark kept shoving bites into my mouth and my throat constricted, I had to push his hand away. Every time I tried to swallow, it felt like I was gagging. My throat was raw from throwing up so much stomach acid, and I thought I was past the morning sickness part of this pregnancy. The nurses explained that the concussion I had suffered was the cause of it, and perhaps the seatbelt bruising my chest and neck. I hated it. I wanted out of this place.

“Please, I can’t eat anything.” I held a hand up, blocking Mark from force-feeding me yet another bite of green beans.

“You haven’t eaten in days. You’re going to starve.” His tone was cold and demeaning, not comforting. I doubted he actually cared about whether I was starving. My gut told me he was trying to keep up appearances with the hospital staff after having been shown up by Ethan.

I turned my face away, pressing my lips together firmly. He’d been at this every time I woke up for the past forty-eight hours. I was in my own room now, but it felt more like a prison cell. The nurses left me with him, and I didn’t even know him. When I tried asking him questions about our relationship, how we met and what kinds of things we did together, he balked at it, telling me to stop putting on a show for everyone. He thought I was trying to get out of being his fiancée. Of course I was. I didn’t even know him.

“Take the bite, Lily. You don’t even care about your baby, do you?” His words stung my heart. Of course I cared about my baby. At this point, it was the only thing I cared about. How could I develop empathy or compassion for anyone or anything when I didn’t even know them?

“Mark, please stop.” The machine clicked on, and the blood pressure cuff started to inflate like it had done every thirty minutes for the past two days. I felt light-headed and tried to lie back to relax. I knew my pressure was high because I could feel it in my temples like a lead balloon inflating and pushing on my eyeballs. At times, it was even difficult to see. The nurses were watching it too. They said my stress level had to come down because the concussion would only get worse if my blood pressure stayed high.

“You’re being ridiculous. Why are you pretending you don’t know me? Now you won’t eat either? You think a hunger strike is going to impress Doctor Hotshot? I knew you were manipulative, but you have that guy around your finger. I can’t believe you slept with him.”

I looked up at him and scoffed, feeling my blood boiling. If I really did cheat on him with Ethan, then he had every right to be upset with me like this, but he didn’t have to treat me this way. Any emotionally mature person would have a rational talk with me. My parents, though, they confirmed what he was saying, that I was engaged to him. And if I was, that meant he and I shared something. It didn’t excuse his behavior, but I wanted too much to remember anything that would give me a piece of the life I had forgotten.

“I’m sorry, Mark.” I forced my tone to remain calm, and I took a deep breath and blew it out. “I’m honestly not faking anything. I really don’t remember.” I had to have made him so angry to act like this. Cheating would definitely do that, so if he was here still and willing to care for me, as nasty as his attitude was, then I needed to be patient.

He took a huge bite of the pork chop supplied as my dinner from the hospital cafeteria and held it out on the fork. I tried again, taking the bite, chewing meticulously, and attempting to swallow. But the only thing that happened was a huge pile of

vomit lurching up out of my stomach and landing on the floor next to the bed. My stomach cramped and I teared up. It hurt to even breathe.

“My god!” Mark snapped and jumped back. The curtain flung open, and Ethan walked in with a smile on his face that quickly soured when he saw the vomit and Mark being a jerk. “What is wrong with you?”

Ethan took one look at the monitor providing my blood pressure reading, now finished, and scowled. “Mr. Turner, what’s wrong?” He walked toward me, taking my wrist in his hand. His fingers pinched it tenderly as he looked up at the clock.

“I don’t even know what’s wrong with her.” Mark’s anger erupted on Ethan, and I knew why. He blamed Ethan for everything—the pregnancy, the issues between us, and of course, my accident. “She’s pretending she doesn’t know anything, refusing to eat. It’s all because of you.” He pointed a slender finger at Ethan’s chest.

“Wow, Lily, your pulse is too fast. We need to calm you down. Honey, can you lie on your right side, please?” Ethan pushed the recline button on the bed and it began to lower.

“Don’t ignore me. This is all an act.” Mark tried to push his way between Ethan and the bed, but Ethan squared off with him, making his shoulders wide and stiff.

“Mr. Turner, I’m going to have to ask you to leave. We need to keep Lily’s heart rate and blood pressure within normal range. Patients who have suffered a concussion need a calm environment to allow their brains time to heal.”

I felt suddenly calmer and more self-assured than I had all day. Ethan hadn’t been by and I’d been stuck with Mark. His fingers on my arm were a gentle reminder that his entire person seemed to jive with me more than Mark’s. I just wished I remembered why. Why would I do something so horrible as to cheat on my fiancé when I obviously had said yes to him? Why wouldn’t my parents tell me if something was off? Which meant nothing was off, or that I’d lied to everyone. I

just couldn't see myself doing that. All the obsessing over things hurt my head.

“You can't just walk in here and kick me out.”

Ethan released my hand and pushed the nurse call button on the side of my bed and held it down. “Prentice, we need security in room 3043.” The entire time he spoke, he stared Mark down. It made me cower.

Mark huffed and glanced at me, then stormed out yet again. His anger issues were all my fault, though. If I had just been faithful, none of this would have happened. I had some sort of duty to Mark that I didn't understand or even feel right about, but Ethan was another story. The instant he turned and faced me, I saw the love in his eyes.

“You're still nauseous? I thought we had you on anti-nausea meds for that.” He took my hand again and held it the same way, looking up at the clock. “We really need to lower your heart rate.”

“It's okay. I'm calm.” I took a deep breath and tried to relax. The impressively high numbers on my vitals did shock me, but I wasn't afraid now that Ethan was here. “And it wasn't nausea. I just can't swallow. It feels like I'm choking or gagging every time I do.”

“Hmm.” His hand left my wrist again, and he reached for the box of blue gloves on the wall.

“You don't need gloves,” I told him softly, and he stopped for a second then turned back to me.

“Alright.” His fingers gently touched my neck. “I just want to palpate your neck here, see if there may be any trauma from the seatbelt or airbag.” He pressed and touched every spot on my neck at least twice. “Any trouble breathing?”

“Only when I get emotional.” I winced when he touched the spot very low near my collar bone. “It's tender there.”

“I think you're fine. It's just some lingering swelling from the accident. Nothing structurally is wrong. Okay?” He pulled the chair up and sat down next to me, keeping his distance. I wanted to reach for him, but I felt like maybe he was distant

for a reason. Maybe he was upset with me too. “Maybe we’ll put you on soft foods for a few days to let the inflammation go down. How does that sound?”

I nodded and curled one arm under my head. “Ethan...”

His expression softened. “I like when you say my name.”

There was a warm exchange between us, and again, I felt safe in a way I couldn’t explain. “Tell me about us, about our relationship. What things do we like?”

Ethan had an odd expression, like panic. I wondered if he felt hurt that I didn’t remember him, but when I opened my mouth to ask him, he started talking.

“Well, you love hiking a lot, though no one can get you out to do any camping. The great outdoors isn’t as great to you as I think it is.” I smile at him, and he continues. My heart already feels closer to him. “You insist on being called Lily, because it’s like the flower. And you’re a hopeless romantic.”

I found it odd that he was telling me things about myself rather than our relationship, but he might just have a hard time articulating things. So I lay there listening intently as he continued, and I adored how well he knew me. This was a man who had taken time to really pay attention to me and appreciate me. Mark didn’t seem to do either of those things.

“You want to go to Paris, and even though you aren’t a world traveler, I might just get you to go there one day. It’s one of the places I’ve always wanted to go as well, and I think it would be perfect for a romantic trip.” His blue eyes sparkled, and I couldn’t help but reach for his hand. It was like he read my mind. I felt so full, so... in love. I loved him. I could feel it deep in my heart.

Except he didn’t reach back. He didn’t take my hand. He remained aloof, even sterile, like he was just my doctor. His forehead crinkled, and he pursed his lips into a frown before reaching out to take my hand.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, nothing,” he said, and in a flash his expression changed again. He softened and changed the subject. “Where

will you go when we discharge you?”

The question took me by surprise. I didn't know where I'd go. I assumed I lived with Mark, given that we were engaged, but I didn't feel safe with him or confident that he even wanted me anymore. We had a lot to work through too, and the way I felt about Ethan made it difficult for me to even think of being happy with Mark again.

“I don't know... I don't even remember anyone. My parents are less than supportive. They haven't been back to visit except once, and they only expressed their disappointment in my life choices. Mark is angry too. Really angry.”

“What about with you? Can I stay there? I mean...” I took a deep breath. “If I'm pregnant with your baby, it means we've done that... right?”

“Uh...” Ethan's eyes flicked nervously at the clock and then landed on my face. “Yeah... I think maybe your parents would be better.” He sounded uncertain.

“But I feel safe with you. Not them. And you said I need to stay calm. I think maybe with you is the best option until I remember things. Plus, you're a doctor.” It made sense to me, so why was he not so convinced?

“Alright... I will take you home with me.” He stood slowly, apprehension on his face. “I really care about you, Lily, and whatever happens, I need you to remember that. Okay?”

I chuckled and let go of his hand.

“Of course. I'll remember that. I hope... unless I get more amnesia.” I grinned at him, but he looked forlorn, not happy at all.

“I gotta run. Other patients... I'll send your nurse in to check that pressure again and give the food orders so you can eat something softer tonight.” He nodded at me one more time before walking out, and even though I felt a little confused, I felt safe.

Now, if going home with him didn't help me remember anything about Mark, maybe at least it would help me forget him.

I walked out of Lily's room feeling so angry with myself for lying to her that I almost turned around to confess. Then I saw Mark standing down the hallway speaking to an orderly about something. It looked like a heated discussion, and I wanted nothing to do with that man now or any other time. I also wanted Lily to have nothing to do with that man too. It gave me such a strong sense of ambivalence that I turned and walked down the hall away from both of them. As I did, I shot her nursing team a text message that she was not to have any visitors today until her attending came in because she needed rest. That would keep Mark away from her.

With my patient load easing up after a few discharges this morning, I decided I needed something to get my mind off things. I headed down to the cafeteria to grab a snack. All of the stress had taken my appetite, and I hadn't been eating much. When I had, it was a bag of chips or an unhealthy sugary treat, and I knew that was only making the stress and fatigue worse, which in turn made me feel physically poor to match the emotional trench I was in.

I selected a chicken wrap and some dried fruit and sat by myself in the corner of the large dining room. It was loud, but not loud enough to drown out my thoughts. Lily Bennett might well be the love of my life. She was funny and charming, and even though I didn't really know much about her other than what her friend had told me, I felt like I had known her my whole life. She was easy to talk to, beautiful, smart, and kind.

Kind enough to be patient with that jerk of a man who called himself her fiancé. He didn't deserve that. Neither did she.

Frustrated, I peeled the wax paper off my wrap and took a bite. It was cold and bland, but I knew it was healthy. I forced myself to choke down several bites before allowing myself a piece of dried fruit. My stomach wasn't handling it well. I had promised Lily she could come home with me to my house, which was a huge breach of doctor-patient standards. Not only that, but she would likely expect there to be some evidence of our relationship. I had no photos of her, nothing that belonged to her. I didn't even have her phone number or a message thread.

My brain hurt with the anxiety of having to make up a full fairy-tale life that we'd lived so far. I had to manufacture lies upon more lies, building a veritable castle of confabulation wherein I would suffocate and drown for sure. I had never made such a stupid choice in all my life. I just couldn't stand the thought of that man having her, not with how he treated her. I felt emasculated by my own poor choice, but every time I watched him say something nasty to her or be aggressive with her—like when he forced food into her mouth—I felt justified. It wasn't right, but someone had to defend her.

“Penny for your thoughts?”

I looked up to see Dr. Patterson smiling at me. His thick mustache and graying hair were well-groomed, but his coat was always a size too large. He was Lily's attending, probably here for his own lunch break after rounds. I offered a half-smile of confession.

“Rough day.”

“I understand. I lost a patient last week and it shook me. Only a child...” His eyes waxed with moisture and he patted my shoulder. “One day at a time, you'll move on.”

As he started to walk away, my stomach lurched with a question. Anxiety shot up into my chest like a stabbing pain and I turned over my shoulder. “Doc... Your patient, Lillian Bennett, when will you release her?” I knew it had to be soon. After my consult and my diagnosis of amnesia, he hadn't

asked me to give much more advice. I had no reason to keep visiting her other than personal things. She had no life-threatening injuries, and the concussion would heal on its own. If after therapy, Lily didn't remember things, they would bring her back for more tests, at which time I would be the one she came to. Which would definitely be a no-no.

He pushed his lips out and looked upward for a second, as if trying to recall the patient's case. "Ms. Bennett... Oh, yes. Concussion patient. She will go home tomorrow, likely. No need to keep her. She's already healing and she has a good support system with her fiancé."

I wanted to snap at him, tell him what a trash person Mark was and how Lily could not go with him. How her parents were inattentive and distant—probably because Mark was here so much they thought he was caring for her. They did care for her. I could tell that. But she needed so much more than they would give. They believed Mark and his manipulative sob story about Lily cheating.

"Yeah, that makes sense." I relented, unable to truly stand up for her because how would I explain any of this emotion I had pent up inside myself?

"Have a good day, Dr. Lewis." He walked away, and I stared down at my wrap. It no longer appealed to me at all, but I ate a few more bites so I could keep my strength up. Lily was such a wonderful and kind woman, she deserved for me to tell her the truth, but I knew one thing was for sure. If I told her the truth now in this state of amnesia, it would only hamper her efforts to remember anything. Any major emotional stress during the time of her brain healing could trigger a relapse or heighten her stress to the point that her brain's cortisol levels rose and prevented any new memories from being formed or remembered.

I was stuck. She had to remember things on her own now, which meant I had to choose every single word I said to her carefully. It meant no more lies as much as could be navigated, and it meant being humble and willing to be transparent and honest when she put things together. It was the best thing for

her healing, and I had sworn an oath to do no harm. I'd already done enough.

When I had enough, I tossed the rest of the wrap and finished my work. If Lily was coming to my house tomorrow, I had some work to do. I stopped by to see her before I left, but she was sleeping, so I made sure the nurses were very clear on my orders of no visitors and made sure they understood that even if Dr. Patterson reversed that order, I outranked him.

Then I headed home. The drive was heavy. I listened to sad love songs on the way because I was already mourning the loss of a relationship that I'd never had, the loss of her love that I hadn't tasted yet. And it was all my fault. I was to blame for the pain she would go through, and I had no idea how to stop it. I felt like a clairvoyant who had foreseen a trainwreck, but I was mute and had no hands to write or sign to anyone to warn them. I would watch this tragedy unfold in real time, and the pain I felt could never be expressed because I brought this on myself.

At home, I took every photo off my walls, removed the scrapbooks from the coffee table and TV stand. I took down artwork and tchotchkes, made it look like I had zero sense of how to decorate a room. It would be more believable than for Lily to walk into my home and see all sorts of pictures of everyone else but not her. I went to my closet and pulled out a box I had stored from college. In it, I had saved a pair of earrings from an old girlfriend. I meant to return them but never got the chance. I laid them on the nightstand.

Then I went to the bathroom and sorted through the vanity until I found the package holding a new toothbrush. I was a stickler for the new brush every six months rule. I always had one on standby. I got the bristles wet and used my thumb over them several times very roughly to make it look like it had been used. As I did, I felt tears welling up. I had screwed up so badly. Lily would never actually fall in love with me, let alone forgive me. I had built everything on a false premise and there was no way to get out of it.

The problem was that I was helplessly in love with her. So in love that if she chose to return to that horrible man and it

was really what she wanted, then I would let her. I wanted her to be happy. I wanted to support her and help her heal and chase her dreams—whatever they were. And for some ridiculous reason, all I could think about was being a father to her unborn child, to raise her and love her.

I put the toothbrush in the little cup next to the bathroom sink and sat on the toilet lid and let my tears fall. I had witnessed deaths in the hospital, seen my patients suffering and dying. I'd been operating on some who lost their eyesight or hearing because I just didn't get to them in time or their issues were too severe. But I'd never fallen in love with a patient and wanted so desperately to help them truly live. Not until Lily. Not until I saw how badly she needed me.

Reaching for some toilet paper, I blew my nose and flushed it, then looked at myself in the mirror. I gave myself a long, hard stare of disapproval. "Ethan Lewis, you are no better than Mark Turner. He may be outright a total jerk and treat her horribly, but you lied to her. You lied..."

My heart was a wasteland and that wasn't about to change. I needed Lily to remember, not because I needed to be absolved from my guilt but because I needed her to heal and to know the truth. If she could look past the lie, she'd see I never meant to hurt her, only to love her more deeply than she'd ever been loved. Could she ever see the truth for what it was, a mistake?

It was all so unfamiliar. As comfortable as I was with Ethan in the hospital, I still clung to Erin's hand as she walked with me up his sidewalk. He drove and we followed in Erin's car because she'd been the only other person besides my parents whom I remembered. Mark had kept her away at the hospital, but I requested that she come and help me settle in. Mom and Dad were, of course, upset with me because I wanted to stay with Ethan, but I honestly felt more comfortable with him than with Mark. Mark scared me at times.

"Are you seriously sure about this?" Erin whispered to me as we approached the door, held open by Ethan. He looked nervous too, like something was plaguing him, but when I met his gaze, he offered a reassuring smile.

"Stop," I hissed out the side of my mouth at her. "Thank you," I told Ethan as we passed.

His place was simple, a small ranch home with probably two bedrooms. I could tell as I walked in that he was a very neat person, something I liked. It was well furnished and orderly, but there were no pictures on the walls or decorations. I sort of expected that out of a bachelor pad. It didn't explain why he was single at the age he was, but then I was carrying his child, so maybe that explained part of it.

"Tiny place," Erin commented. "No pictures?" Her tone was accusing. She'd been trying to convince me that Ethan was making this whole thing up the entire day, that I hadn't

told her a single thing about him and that we tell each other everything. The only answer I had for her was that I was probably embarrassed. I wouldn't want anyone to find out if I did something like that.

“Uh, nah. I'm not much for decorating. Maybe Lily can help.” Ethan shut the door and dropped his keys on the table next to it. I hovered near the end of the couch, nervous but gaining in confidence. He had a nice flatscreen TV mounted to the wall above a glass entertainment stand. Matching coffee and end tables complimented the gray leather sofa and loveseat. The open-concept area was small, but large enough for a single man to live comfortably.

Everything was modern too, newer appliances and a beautiful checked backsplash that really made the kitchen pop. It was amazing how well put-together this entire space was without a single touch of personalization. I could imagine the walls covered in images of his family and some of life's adventures, or even artwork. But their plainness stared back at me with longing. Maybe I would help him add some touches here.

“Red flag,” Erin said under her breath, leaning in to make sure I heard it.

I scowled at her and turned to Ethan. “Do you want me to bring my bags in?” He hovered by the door as if uncomfortable in the room with us. It didn't make me feel any better about this, but I had to make the best of things.

“I'll get them.” Erin rolled her eyes and moved toward the door hastily, and Ethan let her by.

When we were alone, he walked up to me and took me by the arms and kissed my forehead. “Are you doing okay with this?” he asked softly. I breathed him in, wishing that scent would trigger a memory of us, but it didn't. When he stepped away, I felt the same as when he was close—cold and empty. But I wanted to feel more so desperately.

“It's a lot.” I shrugged, and he gestured toward the couch.

“Sit, okay? I'll get you some water.”

Ethan was so caring, thoughtful, and kind. I knew exactly why I'd been tempted away from Mark. Or maybe I was only seeing the rough parts of Mark because of what I'd done to him. He was hurt, and that hurt was coming out in pain and anger directed at me. I had to have something with him or I would never have agreed to marry him. Both of my parents were upset to hear that I'd been unfaithful, so they, too, had believed I was happy with him.

I sank onto the couch feeling so confused and overwhelmed. If this was what amnesia was like, I felt like I wasn't going to make it. It wasn't just as simple as not remembering. It was complex and draining. I had no memory of my past or my relationships, the way I felt about people, or even what I wanted for my future. I hated it. I wanted to remember things now so I could process the trauma of what happened in that car accident and move on.

Ethan slipped off to the kitchen, and Erin walked in with a bag Mark had brought to the hospital. I had asked the nurses not to show him in but to bring my things because I was already having a difficult enough time with the idea of going home to a place I didn't remember. I didn't need to be shouted at or belittled on top of it all.

She set the bag at the end of the couch and plopped down next to me again, leaning in conspiratorially. "Lily, there are no pictures of you in this place. No hint you've ever been here. Where is your phone? Where are the pictures of you and him together? The message thread or call history? You have to think you've communicated with him." She kept her voice low so Ethan couldn't hear her, but I was mildly irritated with her questioning him so much.

"My phone was smashed in the accident and I have no clue how to get it back. As for pictures, maybe he just doesn't decorate, Erin. You really think someone would make up an entire relationship and claim to be the father of my child, all while being a reputable doctor in such a small town?" It didn't make sense to me.

"Lima isn't that small, and St. Rita's isn't that reputable. It's not like it's Johns Hopkins." She rolled her eyes at me.

“You never said a word to me, Lil. You tell me everything.”

I wasn't sure if it was the fact that she didn't believe Ethan or if she was jealous because I had kept a secret from her. Either way, I was annoyed by it and getting a headache. I just wanted support and encouragement, not this constant badgering of questions. In fact, I wanted to ask her to leave, but I didn't want to be rude.

Ethan returned with water for me and sat on the loveseat after he gave it to me. I sipped the water and tried to stay calm. I knew Erin only meant well. She had been my best friend since high school. If anyone had my back, it was her. I didn't think I could even count on my parents right now with their level of disappointment in me.

“So, what's next? How will she remember? Is there like a drug or something?” Erin's tone as she questioned Ethan was edgy. I nudged her with my elbow, but she stared at him and narrowed her eyes. Ethan, however, seemed to take it in stride.

“Well, she's suffered a traumatic brain injury. She needs a lot of rest, which I will make sure she gets.” He turned to me. “I've taken a leave of absence for at least a week with open availability to take more as needed.” He looked back at Erin and continued. “And she needs the help of a therapist specifically trained to help folks recover memories like the ones Lily lost. So we'll get her set up in a few weeks.”

“Why not now?” Erin snapped. “How about tomorrow?” I sighed. She was going to go at it with him until she demanded I leave with her, and I was tired already.

“Well, now isn't a great idea. Before her brain can recover memories, it needs to be physically healed. She still has a concussion. We should let her rest a while until the physical cells are restored. Then we can worry about how her neural cortex responds to talk therapy and maybe hypnotherapy.”

Erin scoffed and started to speak, but the expression on her face upset me. I grabbed her wrist and stopped her. “Thank you, Ethan, for explaining that. I think Erin was just getting ready to go home.” I gave her a stern look, and she scowled then shook her head at me.

“Yeah. I’m going now. I’ll come by tomorrow.” She stood, and I let her arm go, but I could tell she was upset when she walked to the door. I loved that she fiercely defended me like this, but I could do it myself. I felt safe with Ethan.

“I’ll be getting a new phone soon. If not, I’m sure Ethan will let me call you on his phone.” I glanced at his uneasy expression and then back to her. He was probably feeling awkward with Erin’s strong reactions, but he said nothing.

“Fine. I’ll see you later, Lil.” She offered one more hurt expression before letting herself out, and then Ethan and I were alone. It was late, past dinner time before they let me out of the hospital, probably because Ethan had to do rounds. But I was tired.

I glanced around the room and felt unsure what to say. Ethan stared at his hands, which he folded and unfolded. It must have been painful for him too, my not remembering him. How desperately I wanted to remember, to have that familiar feeling of knowing when I looked into his eyes. But there was nothing there. Devilishly handsome as he was, the baby blues and blond waves didn’t ring a bell at all.

“So, I’m sort of tired.” I set the glass on the coffee table and clasped my hands to my stomach.

“That’s normal. You’ll be tired a lot for a few more days, maybe a week.” Ethan stood. “You can have my bed. I know how uncomfortable it must be to not remember any of this. I’ll sleep on the couch so you don’t have to feel awkward.” He took my suitcase and carried it down the hall, and I rose and followed him. The idea of coming to his house had intimidated me at first, but then I warmed to it.

The only person who had made me feel comfortable in the hospital was right in front of me. I knew if I were at Mark’s house, I’d be very uncomfortable right now, and despite my slight unease from not remembering things, I felt at home with Ethan. I didn’t want to change what we had simply because I didn’t remember, but I didn’t remember what we had to begin with. That fact made me more upset than my own best friend questioning my integrity.

“Uh... I’ll change,” I told him, reaching for my bag.

“Of course.” He let me take it, and I nodded at him as I dragged it to the bathroom and shut the door.

I didn’t think I would ever remember if someone or something didn’t help me trigger the memories. I stared at my reflection in the mirror and sighed. I would never be able to articulate to anyone how upsetting it was to have my whole life gone in a matter of minutes. I pulled out some shorts and a T-shirt and changed, leaving my dirty clothes in Ethan’s hamper. Then I noticed the toothbrushes in the little cup by the sink. It made me smile, because even if I didn’t remember, there were trinkets of my presence that proved I wasn’t insane. That emboldened me to push for memories to come back.

I opened the door, leaving the suitcase in the bathroom, and padded into the room. Ethan had turned on the light and turned down the bed. He looked serious and focused as he opened a dresser drawer and avoided eye contact. The way he wanted me to have space to remember on my own was very sweet, but I didn’t think that was going to help.

“So, how do patients usually remember things? I mean, in your experience.” He was a neurologist. Certainly, he’d seen this before. He stopped, holding a clean outfit in hand.

“Well, something usually triggers a memory.” I noticed the sudden shift from uncomfortable personal life to professional doctor persona in a split second. He was really good at what he did.

“So, something like a kiss could trigger the memory of a kiss?” I asked him, stepping closer. I desperately wanted to remember, so badly that I’d throw myself at my own baby-daddy to do so.

“Lily, I don’t—”

He protested as I draped my arms around his neck and rose up on my tiptoes. Our lips brushed lightly, and I hoped for the best. I felt his hand on my side, and his lips parted to let me search his mouth with my tongue. The kiss was exquisite, passionate and deep. I started to feel like something was

coming to me, the sense of kissing someone I loved deeply niggling at my conscience, but he pulled away a second later.

“Stop... Lily, I...”

I stared up at him, confused. I didn't know what was wrong.

I had to stop. I couldn't keep kissing her because I knew it was wrong. So very wrong, in fact, that I felt like I should confess everything right then. I just knew that would send her into a tailspin and her brain might never recover genuine memories. She trusted me. She felt safe with me, and that meant her brain was at rest, good hormones flowing through her brain. To learn right now in this second that I was lying to her about everything—the way her friend accused me—would only send her cortisol levels spiking and maybe thwart any attempts at real memory recovery.

“Lily...”

“What?” She tried to kiss me again, but I gently put my hands on her thin hips and pressed them until she was standing flat-footed on the ground and unable to press her lips to mine. “What’s wrong? I want to remember, Ethan. Please help me.” The pleading look in her eyes physically pained me.

“I just think you should take it slower. Let things come naturally.” My hormones didn't quite align with my rational thought, though, and I felt my dick starting to swell. She was so beautiful and everything I wanted at this moment. The more I got to know her, the more I realized she was everything I wanted all the time. “I'm your doctor.”

“You're my...” Her eyes searched my face. “Well, you're the father of my baby. Which means we've had sex. And if that's the case, then maybe doing something we've obviously done together at least once might help me remember the act of

doing it.” She took my hand and pressed it against her side harder. I let my thumb wander, brushing the edge of her slightly rounded belly. How incredible it would be if that were actually my child growing in her. But I knew the truth.

Still, this was morally reprehensible and I was no better than the man who treated her like trash. I wanted her, and it felt so right, but I couldn’t do it. “I can’t, Lily.”

“Ethan,” she cooed, moving my hand closer to her center. I felt the heat radiating between us. Her pregnant belly brushed over mine and I almost pulled away. “Please. Help me remember?”

Lily pulled the waistband of her shorts away from her body and forced my hand into her panties. I swallowed so hard I thought my Adam’s apple went down with my guilt. She was so eager, so insistent, and I was up against a wall. How would it look to her if I brought her here because we had this relationship and then refused to actually engage with her in the way she thought of me?

I wanted to pull my hand out of her panties and confess it all because I felt so guilty, but the heat of her body had me uncurling my fingers in curiosity. I couldn’t help myself. It was too tempting, too arousing, because for the past three days, I’d spent every waking moment imagining her in my house, being with me.

“Ethan, touch me. Why are you hesitating?” Lily’s voice made my heart hurt. She didn’t understand at all why I was so reluctant, and she couldn’t because I had lied.

“I’m just...”

“You love me?”

I was caving, and only because I couldn’t bear to leave her feeling unworthy or unwanted. The thought of my getting pleasure from her body was gone. I was rock-hard, yes, but all I could think of is how horrible it would be for me to leave her lying on this bed, probably crying, lonely, afraid, and feeling rejected. I dipped my fingers into her slick folds and found the sensitive nub there.

“I love you more than you will ever be able to understand, I’m afraid.” And I did. I just couldn’t explain how or why.

“Then help me remember your body, your lips, and your hands, and maybe I’ll remember you.” Lily rose up on her toes again and kissed me, and I found myself so overwhelmed by her insistence that I could no longer restrain myself at all.

I wanted to pleasure her well and so deeply that somehow, her brain really would remember me. I knew it was impossible as I backed her toward the bed, shucking her shorts and panties like they were nothing. But I had to please her. I had to make her heart feel something. I peeled her shirt off over her head then returned my hands to her soft, creamy flesh.

“It’s going to work. I know it.” She kissed me again as she lifted her leg behind her and started crawling on the bed. She moved slowly, and for good reason. Her body was probably stiff and sore from being jerked around in that car, so I wrapped an arm around her and helped her relax back onto the mattress, and she took the initiative to undo my pants.

I felt a stab of guilt pierce my heart, but I crawled over her anyway. If this was what she wanted, this was what she’d get. “God, you are so amazing,” I growled as I claimed her mouth again, tangling my tongue around hers and biting her lower lip. It was effortless. I didn’t even have to teach her what I liked or how to kiss. She just did it as if she knew me, as if we’d been doing this for years.

“Mmm, I want you in me, Ethan.” Her pelvis ground upward against my body, and my cock twitched with desire. She had no idea how badly I wanted to be in her too, but this was about her. I brushed the hair back from her face and kissed her forehead.

“I’m gonna make this so good for you, baby.”

Her hands moved to my shoulders, and she rubbed her thumbs over them. “I don’t doubt that for a second. You always do.” I smiled to myself, kissing her neck and then her shoulders and then her cleavage. I took my time, kissing her everywhere except the places she needed me most. It was

intentional. I was trying to memorize her and imprint this moment of me on her brain and her body.

“You are so beautiful.” I lost all sense of self-control as I covered her mouth with mine. From the moment I’d laid eyes on her in that hospital, I knew I loved her and that I wanted her forever.

She whimpered and clawed at my back through my shirt, and my mouth worked its way down to her belly button and back up again. She was breathing heavily, her hands in my hair and her hips moving against me. I took a nipple into my mouth and flicked it with my tongue. She moaned, and I growled, “I want you to remember this. I want you to remember that you want me.” I moved to the other breast and sucked it into my mouth. “Remember me, Lily.”

Oh, God, how I wished it worked that way, that she could somehow remember things that had never existed. That we’d have a happily ever after and not a disaster waiting to happen. I wanted to imprint myself on her in the most intimate, sensual way possible. I moved slowly down her body, kissing her and licking her and biting her, and she moaned for me. I loved her moans. I loved her sounds. I loved her everything. I took my time, savoring every inch of her, until she wiggled underneath me. When I looked up, her eyes were closed and she was biting her lip.

I was so turned on, so ready to take her, that I almost forgot what I was doing. I was here for her pleasure only. And judging by the way moisture pooled between her legs, she wanted as much moisture as I could give her.

I kissed her belly button and then her mound, letting my nose rub against her sensitive parts. She let out a loud moan and I smiled. “Do you like that?” I asked her, rubbing my nose against her again.

“Oh, yeah,” she said breathlessly. “More.” I inhaled her scent and my cock twitched in response. I wanted to bury myself inside her and I wanted to watch her come. I wanted to bring her to climax and I wanted to hear her scream my name.

I wanted to hear her tell me that she loved me and I wanted to tell her the same thing.

“God, I have to taste you.” I blew on her wet flesh, and she squirmed. She was so ready for me, so I used my tongue to taste her sweet, smooth skin. “Oh, God,” she whispered. I touched my tongue to her again, this time flicking it across her clit. She tasted like summer and balmy nights and heat. I gently ran my tongue down her slit to her entrance and she let out a low, deep moan. I pressed my lips against her and she spread her legs farther. I gave her a long, slow lick, dragging my tongue from her entrance up to her clit.

She lifted her hips to me, and I buried my face in her pussy. I loved how wet she was, and I knew it was because of me. I licked her from her entrance up to her clit and then sucked her into my mouth. Her soft nub hardened between my lips as I sucked her harder.

“Mmm, yes... like that.” Lily worked her fingers into my hair and ground her hips against me. I wished I could see the look on her face, but her protruding belly blocked my view. Still, the moans she let out were enough to tell me she was enjoying it, so I pushed a few fingers through her slit and she groaned loudly. “Oh, God, please!” she begged me.

I added a third finger and rubbed my tongue against her, pressing my fingers inside her as far as they would go. She went wild, bucking her hips and moaning for me. Her body clenched around my fingers, so I kept going until she was screaming and gasping and coming for me. I loved how tight she was, how wet she was, how much she liked what I was doing.

All of this, the lying and feeling guilty, it was all worth it the moment she gasped, “Ethan... yes.” Hearing my name on her lips when she was in the throes of pleasure drove me wild.

After she came, I slowly pulled my fingers out of her and then kissed my way up her stomach. I brushed a few tendrils of hair out of her face and looked into her beautiful cerulean eyes. I pushed myself up on my knees and quickly undid my pants. I pulled my cock out and groaned at the sight of her wet

pussy. Her juices glistened on her folds and her pink color was slightly redder from all the friction I'd just put on it.

She watched as I shoved my slacks down and kicked them off, then tugged my shirt over my head in one swift pull. I took her hand and kissed it, then wrapped it around my dick. Her cool skin felt good on my burning shaft. She rubbed me slowly, sliding her hand from the base of my cock to the tip and back. Then she tightened her grip on me slightly and slid her hand back down again. I pulled her hand away and leaned over her until our lips were almost touching.

"Is this what you really want?" I asked, hesitating because my guilt ate away at my conscience.

"More than anything," she whispered, rocking her hips up to meet me. I kissed her, gently at first, and then I deepened the kiss, my tongue sliding into her mouth. I was so hard, there was no denying the way she made me feel. I pushed my head between her soft folds, and she spread her thighs for me. I kissed her harder, and she moaned into my mouth as I sank into her.

I slid in slowly, inch by inch, until I was buried deep inside her. Then I kissed down her neck and then nipped at her collarbone. I started to pull out, but she wrapped her legs around my waist and her arms around my neck, keeping me to her.

"Don't," she panted.

I groaned and sank myself into her again, deeper this time, kissing her again and again, lost in the moment. She arched her back, and I thrust into her, hard. She cried out, and I moaned, kissing her neck again. I curved my hips so I could hit her G-spot, and she gasped. "Yes, please," she whispered.

Each movement of my hips was mirrored by hers, and we found a natural rhythm. It was good, so good that I was on the edge after only a few thrusts, but I gritted my teeth and tried to control myself. I wanted her to come around me, feel my girth and remember how this moment felt for days to come.

"Lily..." I moaned, and she panted.

“I’m so close...” Her voice was a soft whisper.

“Me too, baby,” I said. I kissed her, and her fingers tightened in my hair.

“I’m going to come,” she said, and I kissed her again.

“Come for me,” I said, and she rocked her hips against me. I growled and felt my own orgasm building in my body.

I felt the walls of her pussy spasm around me and kissed her hard. She kissed me back, her tongue sliding in my mouth. I thrust into her one last time, hard, and then felt my cum rushing up my shaft. I moaned into her mouth as her orgasm pulsed around me. A few more thrusts and I was coming too, shooting my hot seed deep inside her.

When I started to come down from my orgasm, I kissed her, gently this time, and she kissed me back. I leaned down and pressed my lips against her neck. We stayed like that for a long time, just kissing and holding each other. No matter how much I wanted her to remember me, I knew she never would. I rolled to the side and pulled out and cradled her in my arms. I didn’t know if staying with her was the right thing because all of this was so messed up that none of it was the right thing.

But when I tried to climb out of bed, she clung to me. “Stay,” she whispered, so I did. And so did my stained conscience. I was only making things worse and I knew it. There was no way she’d ever forgive me now.

My head throbbed and my eyes hurt. I rubbed them and rolled over. Lying completely naked beneath the sheets, I stretched and yawned. The scent of bacon cooking was probably what awakened me but not what made my heart pound so hard in my chest. That was the horrible dream I'd had. Mark was striking me over and over, calling me a cheater. It was terrifying and so real it made my pulse race.

I tried to calm myself by taking a deep breath and rubbing my face again, but it was so vivid, like it was more of a memory than a dream. But it was while I was sleeping. It couldn't have been a memory at all, and I was freaking myself out. Besides, my night with Ethan was actually pretty amazing. I remembered every single second of it, the way he touched me, the way he made me feel. It was the most I remembered since I woke up, outside of childhood and my parents.

I still didn't have any other memories of Ethan, however, which wasn't so concerning today as it was a few days ago. He said they'd be slow in coming back and that I'd have to see a therapist for that. When Erin insisted that I do it right away, I sort of agreed with her. The sooner I remembered things, the better, because I really wanted to remember things. But if Ethan was right and my brain needed to heal physically first, I didn't want to do more damage to it.

I also didn't want to lie here alone feeling creeped out by that horrible dream about Mark, so I folded the blanket back

and sat up. My panties lay on the carpet, so I picked them up and put them on. I knew my suitcase was in the bathroom, so I could grab some clothes, but there was just something about the way Ethan made me feel so at home and comfortable, I wanted to feel closer to him. I snatched his T-shirt, discarded last night, and pulled it on. It was baggy, covering my panties just barely in the back and stretching over my pregnant belly.

After I relieved my bladder and washed my hands, I trekked out to the kitchen where Ethan stood with his back to the room, cooking. He whistled and swayed to the tune, and I sat on a kitchen chair and watched him with a grin on my face. I loved that he was goofy and free-spirited. I wondered if it was something that had drawn me to him in the first place or if I was only seeing this side of him now. I knew I was falling for him, though. It was becoming clearer to me why I'd cheat on Mark with this man.

I cleared my throat, which made Ethan jump, and he spun around with surprise scrawled across his face, holding a spatula in the air. "Uh, I didn't know you were awake yet." His cheeks warmed to a dark pink, and I chuckled at him.

"You're a great whistler. Can you sing too?"

His embarrassment dissolved into a smile and he ducked his head. "I don't know." He shrugged. "Hungry? How'd you sleep?"

He turned back to his cooking and I sighed. I didn't want to tell him about the bad dream, so I brushed over that part and focused on the good parts. "Well, I had a pretty incredible guy hold me all night, so that was good. And I feel rested, though I do have a bit of a headache." I wondered if telling him about the dream was something I should do. I didn't remember anything about Mark, and I highly doubted he was the abusive type. He was frustrated with me, yes, but there was no way I'd be engaged to a man who struck me.

Besides, Ethan would be more interested in real memories, not dreams that upset me. So I held my chin high when he glanced at me with a smile. He plated some eggs and bacon and set them in front of me, along with a fork and a napkin. It

smelled delicious, though my stomach was still a bit unsettled. The nurses told me the nausea could continue a little while even after being discharged. Having a concussion sucked.

“Want some orange juice?” he asked, holding a tumbler and resting his hand on the fridge door handle.

“Sure.” I smiled and picked up the fork, digging into the eggs. They were perfect, sunny side up and runny, just the way I loved them. He knew me so well, and it hurt that I knew nothing about him. As I ate, he finished cooking and then joined me. He was well mannered but ate fast. His plate was almost gone before I’d even eaten one egg and a strip of bacon, so I decided to strike up a conversation so he’d stay longer.

“Uh, so I am going to need a phone. Maybe we can talk to my parents, see if they know who I have my service through, at least. That will help us decide what cellular service to contact. Since I remember nothing, I’m sure I’ll have bills to track down and such.” I nibbled at the second slice of bacon and watched Ethan’s expression shift. *He’s so focused on me. I love it.*

“Of course. We’ll get that done this afternoon. I have the day off, and every day for at least a week, so we can do whatever you want. Whatever you think might help you feel comfortable and remember things.” Even though I got the feeling he was still acting a bit too professional, I was comforted by his concern and compassion. I reached out and touched his hand.

“Tell me about us, Ethan. About what we like to do together, how we met.” My thumb brushed the back of his hand softly as he munched on a bite of food, and I thought I saw him look upset briefly. He looked down and swallowed, then his eyes rose back to meet mine.

“Well, we actually met in the hospital.” He shrugged with one shoulder then broke eye contact. I got the feeling that being deeply intimate for him was a chore. Maybe he had some childhood trauma or unresolved emotional wound that made it uncomfortable for him to speak to me like this. So I

was patient as he continued. “Uh, I think we both like the park and also hiking. I know we both love great literature and classical music.”

“Ah, yes, I love the symphony, and I do love going outdoors.” My heart felt so connected to his. It was the only thing that made sense to me at all right now, trusting my memories to his caring heart. “Go on.”

“And one thing I know for sure is that you are a fantastic teacher. Your students really love you a lot. I know you care about them a lot too.”

Even though that sentiment wasn't about us, it rang true. I thought about teaching and how much passion I had for it, which made me think about my classroom last year and the students I taught. I remembered some smiling faces, though I couldn't place names with them, and I remembered attending graduation and hugging several of the students from my class. The memory brought tears to my eyes and I covered my face.

“What is it? Did I say something wrong?” Ethan sounded panicked, as if he'd triggered me to have fear or pain, but I lowered my hands to reveal my tears and my smile.

“No, no.” I grabbed his hand and let the tears sluice down my cheeks. “I remembered something.” I grinned. “I am a teacher. I love teaching high school. The kids are so fun and talented and they just need a little respect. If you respect them, they'll respect you. Wow! It feels so good to have a memory.”

He laced his fingers through mine and smiled warmly. I felt so close to him. “That's incredible. I'm sure if you just keep at it, all of your memories will come back.” I detected a hint of sadness in his tone as he said it, but I was too happy to dwell on it. The one memory triggered an avalanche of thoughts, which brought more memories. We sat at the table long after the food was cold, chatting about my days teaching. Lima Senior was a challenging place at times, but I knew I loved it and I wanted to be there.

When I was all talked out, I pushed my plate away. “Thank you for making breakfast for me. Do you happen to have some pain meds? I need a shower.”

Ethan frowned and stood up, taking both of our dirty dishes to the sink. He set them there and reached into the cupboard and pulled out a bottle of pills and dispensed two of them. “Here, you’ll need to finish your orange juice too.” He nodded at the glass while he put the lid back on and returned the bottle to the cupboard. “Anything else hurting?”

“No, Doc, I’m all good.” I sipped the juice and the pills went down, and then I stood and placed the glass in the sink. “I think I’m going to have a shower... if you want to join me.”

For a moment, I read hesitation in his eyes, but I wagged my eyebrows and then I saw a lusty haze form in his gaze. I hooked my pinky around his and pulled him toward the bedroom. If just talking about my being a teacher was enough for me to remember so many things about my career, then I was certain that being close and intimate with him was the best way to trigger memories of us together, even if all we did was shower together.

Still, I felt discouraged that last night’s escapade hadn’t brought about the same tidal wave of memories. I wanted to remember so badly because it made perfect sense that I was head over heels for this man and having doubts about Mark. I knew I was in the right place to remember things. I doubted that if I were at Mark’s house, I’d remember anything at all. So I did exactly what I thought was going to wake up my brain and help me have my life back.

I opened the bedroom door, stripped out of the clothes I was wearing, and backed into the bathroom with a finger curling at Ethan. I was determined to remember, and I wanted to feel amazing again. I had no doubts he could help me do both.

My feet slapped the pavement hard as I took each step. Running used to be my self-care, but today it was anything but. It was a mere distraction from the agonizing situation I'd gotten myself into. Lily was incredible, fawning over me, talking to me. Even when we got her phone, she spent more time picking my brain and growing closer to me than anything else. She had her fiancé's number, her parents, even her best friend, but I was the one she wanted to be with.

That fact should have made me feel like the luckiest man on Earth, because I was. But it also made me feel like the worst piece of trash on the planet. I was lying to her with every breath now. I tried to keep things as honest as possible, avoiding direct questions about a past that we had and redirecting my focus on what I knew about her, but things had gotten out of control. I hated lying to her. Guilt was eating me alive.

When she insisted that she start therapy with a counselor to remember things, I protested. I knew she questioned why I would protest so much, and I was out of logical reasons why it was bad other than her brain needed healing. But without more scans to back me up—or prove me wrong—I had no footing. She felt like a burden on me because she remembered nothing, and I hated that I'd made her feel like that.

So Lily left and went to therapy with her friend Erin, and I hit the street for a run again.

The sun baked my skin through my shirt. I was soaked in sweat and stewing on my own frustrations. It was only a matter of time before this whole thing devolved into madness and I had to come clean. As it was, the only thing keeping me out of hot water at the hospital with my boss and the whole ethical dilemma was the fact that I wasn't there. Out of sight, out of mind, my mother used to say, and I was banking on that being true.

I turned toward downtown. My runs usually lasted about thirty minutes, but with the commute, Lily would take more than an hour. I had only been out for twenty minutes, and my heart felt crushed by the uneasiness of her attending therapy. If she remembered something about me, or nothing about me, or something about Mark... It was all too much. I'd never been a man to worry about the future until now, and it terrified me. I didn't want to hurt her at all, not even a little, but I knew the truth coming out would devastate her.

My overthinking had my heart rate elevated, and I felt faint, whether from slight dehydration or blood pressure, I didn't know. So I slowed to a walk, heaving and sucking in air. I used the hem of my shirt to dry a trickle of sweat from my forehead as I rounded the corner and turned toward home. The little smoothie shop I loved so much was just ahead, and I had a few dollars in my pocket in case I needed water. I decided to stop in and get something cold to help energize me for the walk home because I knew I wasn't up for more running.

The bell chimed as I walked in, all eyes behind the counter looking up at me at once. The blender churned up someone's drink, making it hard to hear the soft music playing, and I approached the register to place my order. The teen working the register raised her eyebrows and cocked her head at me when I cleared my throat.

"I'll take a banana smoothie with almond milk and sugar-free sweetener, thanks." I reached into my pocket and pulled out the cash and laid a few bucks on the counter. She made change and dropped it into my palm before turning to make the smoothie, and I stood waiting. It was a slow day at the little shop, but there were a few people I heard talking behind

me. I didn't look at them until I heard a voice call my name, and then I turned around.

“Ah, I thought that was you.” Amily stood holding a plastic cup with bright blue liquid in it, slurping it through the straw. She waved off a woman she was talking to and joined me at the counter, and my gut churned. We both loved this place. It used to be our go-to Saturday morning date. I didn't think she still came here, though, since she had moved to Ada, a few towns over.

She wore spandex and a thick headband to hold her wild curls back. It was different seeing her outside the hospital again after so long. Normally, I'd see her in scrubs and a lab coat, not casual clothes, and the thought of those scrubs made my body more tense. She knew my secret, and I had a feeling she was about to push on the thorn in my side and make me squirm.

“How's the time off treating you?” Her lips wrapped around the straw and her gaze chiseled away at my sense of composure. I glanced at the counter, but my drink was not yet prepared.

“Uh, it's okay.” If the woman would just make my drink and set it up there, I could excuse myself and avoid this whole situation. I shouldn't have come in here. I should have just kept walking and headed home. This entire place no longer appealed to me, even though I loved their smoothies. It just reminded me of my failure.

“Really?” she mewled in a snarky tone. “And how is the patient?” Amily's eyebrows tented in accusation, and I turned to watch the teen preparing my smoothy as slowly as she possibly could. I had an urge to hurry her, call out to see if she could go faster, but that would only give away my anxiety. So I clenched my jaw and turned back to Amily.

“What do you want, Amily?” I tried not to be too snarky with her considering the fact that I knew she had dirt on me. I also knew how sore she was about our breakup and I had to tread lightly.

She twisted at the waist, eyeing me the whole time while biting the straw. It exhausted me, having to deal with her, but I had no way out of it. It was play whatever stupid game she had in mind or just admit to the hospital board that I lied to my patient. Or worse, hold fast to that lie and get my license revoked for treating someone I had a relationship with.

“Ethan, I don’t want anything. I just want the world to see you the way you are.” She tossed her cup into the waste bin and scowled at me with hatred in her eyes. “No one believed me after we broke up that you were a horrible person. I got told a billion times how it was my fault. Except, I knew it wasn’t my fault. I tried really hard to make things work.”

Amily hardly tried to make things work. I broke up with her because she flirted with everything that had a penis and two legs. I bent over backward for her, treating her like a queen, being patient and loving. And in the end, I refused to tolerate her behavior because I wanted a woman who chose me over everyone else and respected that I had boundaries. One of them was *don’t flirt with other men*.

“That’s ancient history. Why are you bringing that back up now?” It had been ages since we separated, but some people just hold grudges.

“You understand that I’m turning you in for ethics violations and that this has nothing to do with our former relationship. I’m glad I never stuck around with you. I’d never date a liar.” She shrugged her shoulders and sighed. “This is about protecting the reputation of the hospital and reporting a coworker who is unethical. Nothing more.”

Amily turned and sauntered out just as my drink appeared on the counter. I took it and sulked out of the shop, headed home. I was so frustrated I almost went to the park to blow off some steam, but I knew Lily would be back at my place and would want to talk to me. So I went straight to my house.

When I got there, she was already busily cooking lunch. I felt gross. I wanted a shower, not to eat food, but at this point, my entire life had to be devoted to making sure everything about her life was perfect. My only chance of redeeming

myself in her eyes when she remembered would fall squarely on the relationship I built with her now. If I convinced her that I was a good guy who really loved her, maybe she'd overlook how I'd lied.

“Hey, how was your run? You were out there a long time.”

I sat down at the table and set my now empty cup in front of myself. She never turned to look at me, just kept stirring whatever it was she was cooking. It smelled like some sort of pasta dish, garlicky and buttery.

“It was hot.” I chuckled and squirmed uncomfortably. “How was your first session?” I bit my nail as I waited for her to respond. She stirred the pot and then her shoulders dropped. Every single time she attended therapy would give me this same apprehensive, anxious feeling. I'd never know when the bomb would go off and my entire story would be blown out of the water.

“Why were you my doctor at the hospital?” Lily's question was a fair one. Clearly, her therapist was an intelligent person and had pointed out the ethics of the situation. Maybe Erin's presence there with her had egged that on too. This was the type of question I hadn't even prepared myself to answer, but I scrambled to think one up as she turned to look me in the eye.

It meant another lie. Another shovel full of dirt on top of my coffin to bury my efforts toward truly loving her. “Well, I didn't know it was you when you came in. I started giving orders. They'd paged me to do a consult, and I only looked at your charts at first. Then when I saw it was you and I felt so conflicted because of how deeply I loved you, I just didn't turn your patient file over. I'm sorry. I swear I gave you all of the same care I give all of my patients.”

The concern on her forehead melted and she pinched her lips together and then smiled at me. “You risked your job to take care of me, Ethan. The therapist said that it's highly unusual and sort of illegal.”

I winced at her truth. “It is. And yes, I did. And it will never happen again.” I expected her to be upset or scold me. I needed her to. My guilt consumed me, and if she just lashed

out at me, got angry, told me off for being a dumb idiot, maybe then I'd feel better about myself. But she didn't.

"You mean," she said, setting her spoon down, "if I grow faint and collapse right here, you won't revive me?" She pressed the back of her hand to her forehead and swooned, spinning around and dropping onto my lap in an overly dramatic fashion as I caught her.

It should have made me chuckle, but I tensed and felt so horrible as she peeked at me out of one eye. "I'm passed out... I need mouth to mouth," she whispered, and then she pulled me down for a kiss. My heart was undone. I had to repress the overwhelming urge to tell her everything as I parted my lips and let our tongues writhe against each other.

"I think I love you, Ethan. Is that wrong?" she asked, staring into my eyes.

"It's not wrong. You are allowed to feel what you feel." And I was about as horrible of a monster as Mark with his angry and irrational behavior. I kissed her again, but shame was eating away at me. I didn't know how much longer I could keep this up.

After Ethan reassured me that his actions in the hospital were strictly because of how much he cared for and worried about me, I knew he was the type of man I would totally fall in love with. I served up lunch and sat across from him to eat. My head pounded—a side effect of the concussion. The nurses said I'd have lingering headaches, nausea, and maybe even personality changes. So I wasn't surprised I had a headache. I just felt bad that Ethan was here and all I was doing was staring at my food, taking tiny bites.

I was also stuck in my head. It wasn't just the fact that my counselor questioned Ethan's involvement in my care. As my lover, he shouldn't have been my physician, but I understood. What plagued me now was how she coaxed a few memories out of me about Mark. Despite my best efforts to remain conscious in the present with Ethan, it worried me what I had remembered. I couldn't get it out of my head.

“What would you like to do this afternoon?” Ethan wiped his mouth and set his fork in his empty bowl. I felt numb inside with all the thoughts racing through my mind. I honestly wanted to hide myself away with Ethan where I felt safe and in control. Especially after the therapy session and then the phone call from my mother.

I forced a smile and tried not to wince as I looked up at him. “I'm not sure.” Leaving things up to him felt like a better way to do things. I couldn't make decisions or be in charge of anything, not with the way I felt.

“Are you feeling okay?” Concern etched deep crevices on his forehead, and I could tell he was worried about me. I did just suffer a traumatic brain injury, and not telling my boyfriend-slash-doctor about the pain I was in seemed foolish. I just didn’t want him to worry. I didn’t want to upset him or trouble him at all. I wanted to wave a magic wand and make the past go away so I could be happy with him, because I was. Ethan made me truly happy.

“It was just a tough therapy session, that’s all.” I winced at the increasing pain in my head. I didn’t expect the residual headaches to be this bad. I’d already taken pain meds once this morning.

“I’m so sorry, Lily. I really meant what I said. I knew my feelings for you would come into question, but I couldn’t leave your side. Especially not when I saw the way that man treated you. I had to stay there.” He reached for my hand and I let him take it.

“Honestly, it’s not that.” I sighed and pressed my lips into a thin line. I didn’t know what to think about what I had remembered. “I remembered things.” I looked up at Ethan’s face to see his expression shift from concern to something different—fear, maybe? I hadn’t even told my best friend what happened to me. When I remembered Mark striking me and the therapist told me it was good that I remembered, Erin felt hurt that I hadn’t confided in her.

That only confirmed to me that I really didn’t tell her everything. It encouraged me that I was right. I was in love with Ethan and our love was strong—I just didn’t remember. I had to have hidden it from Erin because I was ashamed, just like the abuse I suffered at Mark’s hand. It also explained why I cheated on him. If he was hurting me, of course I’d look for love elsewhere. It all made sense to me. I just didn’t understand why my mother would push me to stay with Mark, especially when I told her what I remembered.

“What is it?” Ethan’s voice was small, withdrawn. His hand felt sweaty against mine.

“Mark abused me.” I let my head drop. “At least once, maybe more. I’m not sure. I only remembered it because of an exercise the counselor did with me. It was so vivid, too, like I was there. He was so angry, said I was worthless. Why would he say that? Why was I—am I—engaged to him?” I pulled my hand away and clasped my fingers together in my lap. “I feel afraid of what I’ve remembered. And then my mom called and told me I should be staying with Mark, not you.”

“Hey,” Ethan cooed, dropping to his knees by my side. He pulled me against his chest and I laid my head on his shoulder. “I know it’s scary, but it’s going to be okay. It was a memory, which means it’s in the past. I’m here now, and nothing bad is going to happen, okay?”

I felt like crying but my head hurt too badly. I let him hold me for a second. “Mom didn’t believe me when I said he struck me. She thinks it’s just a bad dream because of the accident, not a real memory. I don’t even know what to believe.”

Ethan smoothed my hair down my back and kissed my forehead. “Okay, well, based on your experiences with Mark since you had the accident, what do you feel is true?”

That was a very tough question to answer. Mark was upset because I cheated. I was pregnant with another man’s baby, and maybe that was what set him off that day. If I was engaged, I couldn’t see myself staying with a man who was regularly abusive to me. Maybe that was part of the personality change the nurses said could happen with an injury like this, but I really didn’t think so. I also didn’t think my parents would push me toward him if he really was that way.

Which meant I didn’t have the full picture. That memory had to have been from when I told him about the affair, who the father of my child was. It made sense that he’d then become an animal and lash out. I’d only really spent time with Ethan since the accident because I felt safe with him, and not with Mark, but that was because of the unresolved issue I had with him. Maybe Mom was right and I really needed to spend time with Mark to understand what was going on between us.

We might have something I was throwing away simply because he was angry about something I did.

“I don’t know what to think except that my head hurts really bad and that I feel calm and happy with you.” I straightened and looked into Ethan’s hazel eyes. They were where I felt safe.

“Let me draw you a warm bath, and you can relax while I clean up from lunch.” He stood and took my hand, guiding me to the bathroom. While he drew the bath water, complete with bubbles and a scented candle, I undressed and tied my hair up.

For whatever reason, I felt unreasonably safe and calm with him. Almost as if I had never felt this way in my life. Ethan was an anchor in this storm I was in, keeping me stable and afloat until the winds subsided and I was free again. It made my appreciation and respect for him swell. It made me love him deeply, in a way I thought I’d never experienced before.

I slipped into the bath water, feeling a bit dizzy, and clasped his hand for stability. When he stood to go, I clung to him. “Stay...”

“You should relax a bit. Let me clean up lunch.” He kissed my fingers one at a time and tried to escape my grip, but I felt overwhelming gratitude toward him for caring for me so deeply when he was just the ‘other man’. There was no promise of a ring on my finger from him, no commitment that if and when I remembered everything, I’d stay with him.

He stood by my side knowing I didn’t remember anything and that if I did remember and chose to go back to Mark, he would lose me. If that wasn’t love, I didn’t know what was. And I wanted him to feel it, really feel it in his soul, how much it meant to me.

I reached up to his pants and grabbed his waistband and pulled him down until he was on his knees by the bath.

“I would like to do something...” I fiddled with the string of his shorts, untying it.

“What’s that?” he asked, and I could hear the anxious energy in his tone.

“Well, you are so incredible to me, and I think the thing that will help me relax the most, the thing that will get rid of this headache, is to show my appreciation.” I reached into his shorts and found his dick. It was slightly swollen, but I began squeezing and stroking and it responded quickly.

“You should really just rest,” he protested, starting to rise, and as he did, I pulled the shorts down.

“Please, Ethan. Let me show you how thankful I am for you.” With his cock now almost fully erect, I stroked him generously. His shorts puddled around his ankles, boxers too, and he stared down at me with a conflicted expression. As my doctor, he probably wanted me to just rest, but I was a grown woman, capable of deciding what I thought would help me.

I coaxed him into the bath with me and washed him thoroughly with the bar of lavender soap in the soap dish. Then I rinsed him off. “Thank you for taking me in, for caring for me, and for being a man I can love and depend on.”

As I stroked him, he rose to his knees in front of me and I took him into my mouth. I didn’t think I’d ever felt as at home or comfortable with anyone in my life, but this man made my world seem whole and right, even in the midst of this chaos. And he was about to find out just exactly how much I liked that. I sucked and stroked, taking him deep into my throat. The swelling was gone, and I enjoyed the sensation of his cock stretching me.

His soft grunts and moans encouraged me, especially when he touched my head and pulled me toward him. His soft thrusts into my mouth were arousing. I felt my body tingling and responding to it. I wanted him too, but this was about him. I wanted him to feel good.

“God, Lily, wow....” His hands pressed the back of my head as I sped up my stroking and sucking. His hips matched my rhythm until his grunts and gasps became frenzied. My hand fondled his balls, and I felt them pulling up, his body preparing for release, and when he gasped my name again, it

came. His cock pumped hot cum into my throat and mouth, and I swallowed him down, feeling each pulse of his dick in my palm and against my lips.

He was so sensitive too, twitching and jerking as I continued to stroke him after his release was finished. He continued to smooth my hair back, the stray fly-aways that escaped my hair tie attempting to fall into my eyes. I looked up into his eyes and continued to stroke as his cock started to go down, and he never looked away. I felt so in love with him.

That was all I expected, to get him off and maybe for him to linger here with me a bit longer, but he took the lavender soap and lathered his hands, then lowered himself in the water to sit on his heels as his hands began to smooth across my body. He licked and nibbled at my shoulder, then flicked his tongue against my nipples. I felt his fingers between my legs as he stroked my thighs, then slid them up and down my slit as he washed me.

He brought his lips to mine, and our tongues moved together, teasing each other. I held his shoulders, not to steady myself but to bring him closer to me, my hands sliding up and down his neck, shoulders, and chest. I was surprised by how confident he was, hands knowing exactly where to touch me so I'd respond. It felt like we'd done this a million times, like he had mapped my body with his mind.

I let out a moan as he kissed me again then stood. His hands supported me as he lifted me around his hips. Then he stepped out of the tub and carefully set me down. I reached for a towel, but he took it first, caressing the soft fibers over every inch of my body and his. When his fingers met my mound, he pressed a bit harder, massaging and rubbing it.

Ethan led me into the bedroom and onto the bed. I sat at the side, and he knelt between my knees, eagerly pulling my hips toward him. "You don't have to do this. I wanted to do that for you."

"Then let me do this for you." He kissed me hard, squeezing my love handles. My belly got in the way a little, but he didn't seem to mind. In fact, when he kissed down

across my chest, flicked each nipple and kissed lower, he made sure to kiss my baby bump too. It was sweet and romantic. I ran my fingers through his hair as he lingered there with his lips pressed against my protruding stomach and spread my thighs.

His fingers spread my pussy lips, and his tongue slid down over my belly and across my clit. I moaned as he licked and sucked it. My fingers tightened in his hair as I pressed him harder against me. He licked all around my clit, then slid his tongue down and sucked my labia into his mouth, sucking and nibbling.

He took my hands and guided them to my breasts. I grabbed each one and began to squeeze and knead them for him. I rolled my nipples between my fingers, and he licked faster and faster. I moaned louder, and he slipped two fingers into my pussy, thrusting quickly. He knew just where to touch me, and from this angle, everything felt ten times better. The baby put pressure on my pelvic floor, giving him very little room to work and making my pussy feel so full it was like his fingers were the size of his cock.

I came on his tongue, and he continued to lap at me, continuing to thrust with his fingers as I shuddered and moaned. It stimulated a contraction which had me doubled over and clawing at his hair, but he didn't stop at all. The convulsions were wickedly powerful, like a vice grip making my pussy cling to his fingers, and he milked it for all it was worth, well after the waves of orgasm subsided. I twitched and groaned.

“Whoa...” I breathed, ready to collapse onto my side and enjoy the afterglow, but he wasn't finished.

“Hmm... on your knees, please.” He stood and offered me his hand, and I wobbled on my shaking legs but stood. Ethan turned me toward the bed and nudged me, lightly smacking my butt cheek. I giggled and crawled onto the bed, backside in the air, and Ethan was there, already burying his face in my pussy again.

“Ah!” I gasped, surprised that he was so eager to continue pleasuring me. “God... you’re an animal.”

“I can’t get enough. You just do this to me.” His fingers sank into my pussy, slapping at my skin as he thrust quickly. “You’re so wet and full.”

I was a quivering ball of nerves, spasming and twitching. I looked over my shoulder at him as he kept going, kissing my thighs and sucking my pussy lips. I reached around and grabbed my cheeks, spreading them for him.

“Oh, God, I’m going to come again.”

“That’s the idea,” he said, grinning as he watched me. His words set me off, and I cried out, shaking and jerking on the bed. My skin felt like it was on fire with its sensitivity, but he pressed his mouth against my pussy and sucked hard, still pumping his fingers in and out.

“Ohhhhhhh! Oh, my Goooooooood!” I grabbed a pillow and buried my face in it as I moaned into it, riding out the waves.

Ethan’s fingers slowed, then stopped altogether as I came down from that high. I felt his tongue slide up and down my labia, then circle my clit. He sucked it between his lips and made me gasp as the sensation seemed to magnify. My pussy was still twitching and spasming, but he was drawing out my orgasm with his tongue and hands.

“That’s so nice,” I mewled, legs quivering. “I’m sorry, it’s just so sensitive.”

“I like it,” he said as he crawled up next to me and pulled me down onto my side. Between the emotion of this morning, the head injury still playing with my body, the full belly from lunch, and those incredible orgasms, I felt drowsy. I let my eyes shut, and Ethan held me. I felt him cover me with a blanket, and the warmth of us cocooned beneath it only made me sleepier.

Now, if this was what being with him was like, I didn’t want to remember anything more about Mark at all. This was where I wanted to be. I just wished I could say with certainty that everything would be okay.

I just didn't know.

ETHAN

When my boss called me to ask me to come in for a meeting with him, I knew the reason, and he never had to say it. Amily reported me for ethics violations and it was time for me to face the music. My spur of the moment, rash decision to take the blame for Lily was coming back to bite me, and the only thing I could do was submit myself to the system and pray for the best. I had done everything I did with pure intentions, out of the best place in my heart, even though I knew it was wrong.

I sat just outside Dr. Baker's office in a chair, waiting for him to finish a conference call. As head of neurology, he was quite a busy man, and I hated that he had to take time away from his patients to deal with this. I also hated that he would have to explain to anyone at all why I had done what I had done and how that must frustrate and embarrass him.

The door clicked and then opened, and I braced myself for what would be the worst meeting of my career thus far. I'd had a few in the past, but never because of my failure to be professional. This was a new low for me.

"Ethan, would you like to come into my office?" Dr. Baker stood in the doorway with a calm expression. I didn't expect him to be smiling or happy, but I was grateful he wasn't scowling or looking upset.

"Yeah," I said, standing. I followed him in and shut the door behind me. His office was small but not tiny. There was a large window behind his desk overlooking the city, though

from where I sat opposite him, I could see nothing but the sky. The clouds outside were gloomy, much like my mood.

“Ethan, I was quite alarmed when Amily spoke to me about your behavior. I wanted to speak to you first before making any assumptions.” He tapped the end of his pen on a notepad lying on his desk. I was grateful that he didn’t jump to any conclusions or make assumptions. I knew Dr. Baker was an honest man and always gave people the benefit of the doubt. Unfortunately, this time, I truly didn’t deserve it. I had royally screwed up.

“I understand, sir.” I waited for him to continue because I didn’t know what she had said to him, and in order to protect myself—and Lily too—I thought not speaking was probably better right now.

“Would you like to explain what happened?” His forehead wrinkled and he narrowed his eyes, but again, I didn’t want to volunteer any information that wasn’t necessary. Instead, I stared at the blue carpet and shrugged.

“What did Amily say?” With such a sordid past, I knew it was likely she’d just told him everything. Even though I was upset and thought things could have been handled better—like allowing Lily to remember on her own—I knew Amily did the only thing she could do. She had done the right thing when I screwed up.

“Well, she explained how you have quite the ethical dilemma. Your patient Lillian Bennett is either carrying your child, or you lied to her family.” When his eyes narrowed on me further, I knew there was no getting out of any of it. I had to tell him everything and hope for the best. “Care to explain?”

I breathed deeply, inhaling the guilty air that surrounded me like a shroud. “Not really?” I joked, but he offered me an expression of compassion, and I exhaled and began my story. “When Ms. Bennett came into the ER after a severe accident and presented with a concussion, the attending sent for me. I went down for a consult and looked over her chart.” My chest hurt just thinking of how I’d handled things so poorly. “I found myself in the exam room, asking questions of a friend

who was at the scene and came in with her. I wanted to get to know the patient a little and at the same time keep the friend calm while I did my initial review.”

“And did you know Ms. Bennett at that time?”

Pausing to beat myself up a little, I shook my head. “No. I did not know Ms. Bennett at all. I’d never seen her in my life.” I looked down, no longer able to hold his gaze. “I didn’t know her, but I felt like I’d known her my entire life. I know you probably won’t believe me, but it was honestly love at first sight. I saw her and my entire world changed.”

“I see.” He sounded reserved. I couldn’t tell if he thought I was a fool or if he’d had a similar experience in his life. It didn’t honestly matter at this point. What was done was done and I had to take responsibility.

“I did my exam and left when her fiancé arrived.”

“So, she’s engaged?” he interrupted again, and it made me angry. Not because he interrupted but because his question only reminded me that Lily wasn’t actually mine.

“Yes,” I muttered, “she is. So I left them alone. Only, when he started berating her, accusing her of horrible things, talking down to her and treating her poorly, I couldn’t stand by. Even her parents weren’t being supportive or helpful. She was lying in that bed with a head injury, and all they cared about was whether she’d had an affair.”

No matter how I tried to suppress the anger, I couldn’t. It was such an outrage to me even now. Her parents seemed more supportive now, but I knew from what Lily told me that they still pressured her to go back to that monster. And after Lily confessed that he’d been abusive and she remembered it, I knew I couldn’t let that happen.

“So you did what?” Dr. Baker urged me on, wanting the rest of the details.

“I walked back into the room and told them I was the father of her child. That she had cheated on her fiancé with me. It was stupid and impulsive, but I wanted them to lay off. I thought if they knew who it was and saw that someone was

defending her, they'd back off." I looked up at him and scowled. "I was just trying to protect her."

"And what was their response?" He leaned back in his chair and folded his hands in his lap. This man had my entire future in his lap and I felt very vulnerable to his judgment. I searched his expression for any hint of sympathy, but I found nothing but a calmness I couldn't explain.

"Her fiancé rushed out and the parents followed. She seemed relieved, and I gave her some time to relax and rest. Since then, I've thought of telling her the truth a million times, but I fell helplessly in love with her. And then she recovered a few memories in therapy that prove the man is abusive and hurts her. How can I let her go back to that?" Emotion bubbled up, and I clenched my hands into fists.

Dr. Baker ran a hand down over his face and scratched his chin. "Wow, Ethan." He took a deep breath and sighed. "I can honestly say that's the first time I've ever heard of a doctor getting themselves into this position. And I can say that I have experienced a moment where I, too, wanted to break the boundaries of ethics to help a patient. I just used my self-control." He leaned forward and clasped his hands in front of himself.

"So, now what?" I felt like I was sitting on lava. Nothing would be right until this was all over and Lily knew the truth. "It's not like I can just spring this on her now. She needs to remember this on her own. It's actually what is best for her mental health and the recovery of her other memories." He knew I was telling the truth.

"Now we speak to the ethics review board. It's all we can do. Amily's first accusation is that you slept with your patient and treated someone you were in a relationship with. If I pass that part off to the board, they will bring you in. They will question you, and hopefully, when you tell them that isn't true, they will leave it at that. If they press for the truth, Ethan, you will have to answer for it, and Ms. Bennett will be questioned as well."

I rubbed the back of my neck and let my heart sink to my feet. That was no way for Lily to find out the truth. I couldn't let that happen. "Thanks, Dr. Baker. I appreciate your leadership here."

"Look, Ethan, I've seen doctors get into worse situations and come out fine. Just be honest with her." He nodded at me, and I stood to leave.

On my way out, I ran into Amily. I was angry, but only at myself. I couldn't be angry with her. She'd done the right thing. So, despite the challenge I faced, I thanked her for being ethical and headed home to see Lily, unsure how I would tell her the truth.

When I walked through the door to my house, Lily was stringing Christmas lights from a tree erected in the corner of the room. It smelled like gingerbread and cinnamon. It made me smile to see her so happy and engaged. It felt like since she was in such a good mood, it might be the time to tell her. After all, if the ethics committee called her in, it would be too big of a shock.

"Hey, beautiful," I said, dropping my keys on the table by the door and moving toward her. The decorations looked amazing, though I wasn't sure how she'd managed to get the tree in the stand until I heard a voice from behind it. It was male, and I froze in place.

"The bolt was still loose. It should be straight now." Lily's father rose and stood behind the tree, helping string the lights as she turned to smile at me.

"Hey, bud, I'm glad you're home. Dad is helping me put the lights up." She walked over to me and pecked me on the cheek and then reached past me. I spun around to see her mother handing her another strand of lights. They were all stored in a tub on the shelf in my pantry, and I had no idea how she'd found them. Lily had been snooping in my home?

I stood there speechless as they chatted. Her mom hummed a Christmas carol. her father—ignoring me and avoiding eye contact—complained about the tree stand and the loose bolt. I had come home ready to sit with Lily and have an honest

discussion, coaching her through the process of remembering that I wasn't a part of her life before the accident, but I wasn't about to do that with her parents here.

“Uh, what's all this?” I asked, gesturing. Of course, I knew what it was. I just didn't know why her parents were at our house and she was putting up my decorations. I was the type of person to put my tree up a week before and take it down the day after. Lily was clearly not that type.

“Your house is sorely lacking in holiday spirit.” Lily's mother, whose name I still did not know, patted my arm and smiled. At least she was being polite with me, unlike her father. “Gus, the tree is still crooked.”

“What do you want me to do, Peggy? I don't have my tools. The darn thing is broken.” He dropped to his knees and worked beneath the low-hanging branches of the tree, and I ran a hand through my hair. This wasn't so bad. If her parents were here, it meant that we might be moving the right direction for a real relationship—that is, assuming she never remembered her past that well.

God, what was I thinking?

“Uh, Lily, can I speak to you?” I stepped back, and she joined me as her mother unraveled the strand of lights and began hanging them. “What's going on?”

“Mom and Dad wanted to come for dinner. I ordered pizza. It should be here any minute.” She smiled and patted my arm. “My therapist said interacting with people from my past is one way to trigger memories. I think it's important. Don't you?”

She had me there. I didn't think it was important. I knew it was important. Very important. Unfortunately, I also knew how dangerous it was for me and my predicament. “Yes, you're right.”

“Good, then you won't mind that I invited Mark too. He's bringing the food.” Lily rushed off to help with the tree, opening a box of glass ornaments to hang on it. It looked good in the corner of the room there next to the TV. Normally, I put it in front of the picture window so passersby could see it.

However, her keen ability to fluff a home didn't distract me from the tension I felt churning in my gut. *She invited Mark?*

Before I had time to process things, the doorbell rang and Gus opened it to invite Mark in. He carried two large pizzas and a bouquet of flowers. Her parents would have thought me judgmental if they knew my thoughts, but my gut reaction was that the man was playing some sort of game. I didn't believe for a second that he was in love with Lily. Flowers were a base form of affection.

"Come on in, Son." Gus slapped Mark's shoulder and welcomed him into my home, and I felt frustration make my shoulders tight. The man scowled at me, but the instant Lily turned around, he smiled patiently.

"Hey, beautiful. I brought you some flowers—your favorite." Mark kissed her cheek, and she took the flower arrangement from his hand. Orange lilies were meant to send the message that you wished someone was dying, or at least that you hate them. Mark was clueless at best or hostile toward her at worst, and I wasn't even that smart of a man when it came to romance.

"Uh, you can set the food on the island," I told him, nodding in that direction. He narrowed his eyes at me and moved through the living room to set the food down. It was the beginning of a challenging night.

Everyone took a break from decorating, but each time Peggy or Gus asked me a question, Mark glared at me. Each time Lily smiled at me, I felt daggers from his direction. He doted on her, lavishing compliments and—for all intents and purposes—insincere praise. I remained as calm as I could be under the circumstances. When we were almost finished with dinner, Mark turned to Lily and asked a question I knew was coming. I could feel it in my gut.

"Babe, I think it's time for you to come home. Give up this charade of being in love with this guy. I'm willing to forgive you and take you back and raise our baby. I just want you to be with me."

The table fell silent, and the only movement was that of Gus wiping his mouth. They held their tongues, though based on how they'd been pressuring Lily for days now—four, to be exact—I knew they had much to say about this. They'd probably encouraged him to ask the question.

I looked down at my plate with a stray pizza crust lying on it. If she chose to leave, that was that. I couldn't control her or ask her to give up the things she remembered with them. I wasn't sure if she remembered anything at all. She hadn't said a word to anyone. This little exercise the therapist ordered might not have worked at all, or it might have shown her everything she needed to know about him. He was faking it so well, I even started to believe I had misread him.

“Mark, this whole night has been amazing. Mom, Dad, I appreciate your coming to help with the tree. It looks great. And thank you, Mark, for bringing the pizza. I just...” Lily paused, and I looked up and met her gaze. “I feel comfortable here. Ethan is a good doctor, and I'm still having some side effects. I am working with the therapist to remember, but I just don't.” She bit her lip and looked back at him, and I felt a tinge of happiness at the tiny victory. I had to stifle a smile. I wanted to rub it in, but I knew that wasn't the right thing.

“You can't be serious. You're still pretending you don't remember?” And there it was, the harsh attitude and tone this man was known for, at least by me. He scowled and tossed his napkin onto his plate.

“Mark, now...” Peggy chided calmly. “We have to let her remember in her own time.” She glanced at me with an uncomfortable smile and acknowledged my presence again. Gus still scowled at his plate. “The doctor here is taking good care of her. She's healthy and so is the baby. It will only be a matter of time before she remembers.”

Peggy and Lily both joined Gus in staring at their plates, but Mark glared at me with a hatred I'd never witnessed. I didn't back down. My gut knew this man was bad news. Lily remembered him abusing her, so no matter how much he poured on the charm now, that one memory was enough to make her more comfortable here with me. There may be other

memories that popped up in the future, but for now, she was staying with me.

“I think I should go.” Mark stood with lips pursed and said, “Thank you for the invitation, Lily. I will call you tomorrow.” He nodded his head at first Peggy then Gus as they looked up at him. “It was nice spending time with you both.”

When he walked out, it was without a single word to me. I wasn't even a little upset that he was gone, either. I was, however, still carrying crushing guilt over how to tell Lily everything she was experiencing was a lie. I didn't want it to be a lie, and maybe some of it was real on her part, but it was based on a lie—one I couldn't take back.

After a few moments of very uncomfortable conversation, we showed Peggy and Gus out, and Lily clung to me. “I couldn't go with him, Ethan. I feel safe with you. Is that alright?”

“Yes, Lil. You are not a burden. I care about you so much. I want you here.” I patted her back and gritted my teeth. I had to carry the guilt a little longer. I just hoped I could unload it before the ethics board did their review and called her in. The truth should come from me, not a third party.

Squirming a little at how much pressure I felt to remember things, I wrung my hands and blew out a sigh. The therapist was good at her job. I just wished my brain would work faster. It felt like I was failing. Every time she asked a question, I had no answer or it was a negative answer. The therapy felt futile, and I really wanted to just go sit with Ethan and feel comforted.

“It’s okay, Lily. Take your time.” Erin rested a hand on my knee. She came along to be some support during the session, as she had been doing for the past few sessions. Seven days after being released from the hospital, I remembered almost nothing. I had flashes of scary things about Mark. I remembered my classroom and how much I loved teaching. And I remembered lots of things with my family and Erin, but still nothing else about Mark, except that nasty argument and the way he hit me.

“I’m so sorry. I just can’t remember.” She had asked me about what triggered Mark to strike me that day, if I remembered what happened before he did it. “I don’t even know if I want to know that.” It was an honest reflection. Whatever happened, the result had been something bad. Why would I want to remember what I did that triggered that?

“That’s okay. That’s an honest assessment. Look, why don’t we take a break? We can come back to this tomorrow or the next day. You need a break.” The therapist rose and handed me a tissue, though I wasn’t crying. Maybe I looked like I was crying, I wasn’t sure.

Erin and I stood too, and I shook the therapist's hand. "Thank you for taking time for me today. I'll try hard to do the exercises and see what I remember." The exercises included trying to imagine the scene I'd remembered and ask myself in that moment what was I feeling, thinking, and seeing. It seemed sort of dumb to me, but if it worked, I'd try it.

We left the office and headed for the mall. Erin drove because I still hadn't been cleared for that yet. I had to have another CT scan and an eye exam first. It frustrated me because I felt fine, but doctors got to make the rules, apparently. I stayed quiet until we ordered some food and sat across from each other at the food court in the mall. They had a Christmas choir singing carols so loudly it hurt my ears.

"I'm sorry today was a rough session." Erin popped a French fry in her mouth and shrugged. "I tried to help."

"That's just the thing. You can tell me a million times the things that I've said or done in the past, but I don't remember any of them. They just become more things that I have to try to remember or make sense of in my mind." Erin would never understand the frustration I was having. No one would, though Ethan made it seem like he did.

Erin looked down at her phone, thumbs flying over the screen. I felt annoyed that she seemed to be carrying on a conversation with someone else for the past ten minutes, but I had so much on my mind that I wasn't very good company anyway.

"Who's that?"

"Your parents." She smiled at me and set her phone to the side. "They're worried about you, Lil. I'm worried about you. You're living with a complete stranger, someone none of us know anything about."

I felt immediately defensive. Ethan wasn't a total stranger. He was the father of my child and a very amazing man. I loved him. How could she say something like that? My face screwed up into a scowl, and she sighed again, this time heavily.

“I know you think this all makes sense, but no one knows him. Not even you. You don’t even remember him. You don’t think that’s strange? I mean, where is the paternity test? You should think about that.” Erin picked up her soda and slurped it through the straw, and I stared at the calzone I had ordered. I wasn’t hungry. I was angry. None of my life was within my control, and people were questioning every decision I made as if I were unable to make good choices.

I felt like my life wasn’t even my own. Ethan was the only one who put the power back into my hands. If it were up to my parents, they’d likely have me committed somewhere until I remembered, only because they didn’t know parts of my life, which I clearly hid from them because I was ashamed or afraid.

“What if Mark abused me and threatened to kill me or hurt them if I told?” I knew that was a method of some abusers. Convince the victim they’ll hurt them or loved ones to keep them silent. Erin knew it too, because the therapist agreed with me yesterday that it could be a reason I’d never said anything to anyone. “What if I felt so ashamed that I loved another man who wasn’t my abusive fiancé that I didn’t tell you?” I emphasized abusive because he was. I remembered it clearly.

“There were never any hospital reports or doctor’s charts that indicated he abused you. You could have been imagining things.” Erin’s voice was small and timid. I knew she meant well, but it hurt that she didn’t believe me.

“I know what I remembered, Erin.” I sat there completely at her mercy. I couldn’t get home unless she took me, and she wanted to sit and brow beat me. It masqueraded as concern, but it was just another way to make me feel crazy. I wasn’t having it. I wasn’t crazy. I just had a head injury.

Erin’s eyes widened, and she sat straighter, looking over my head at something behind me. I started to turn to see what she was looking at, but a pair of hands covered my eyes and a familiar, but not welcome, voice said, “Guess who?”

I felt goosebumps rise on my arms and I shuddered. I just didn’t know why I was having such a strong response. I knew

it was Mark. I recognized his voice instinctively. That was something the therapist told me to pay attention to, things my body and brain knew that my conscious sense of logic couldn't process. My gut said, "This is Mark, be afraid." But in keeping with other things she told me—namely, exposing myself to people from my past as a means of allowing memories to surface organically—I pushed the fear away and tried to relax.

"Mark. What are you doing here?" As I said his name, he pulled his hands away and sat next to me, resting a hand on my thigh. I looked at it and cringed, though I didn't let him see my face. How did he find out we were here?

"Your parents told me you were out Christmas shopping, and I wanted your opinion on what to get them. Is that okay?" He sounded pleasant, had a nice tone and a goofy smile. He was dressed in a bright red sweater with his black jacket over top, Dockers and Keds to complete his look. It appeared he left work to rush over to the mall just to intercept me.

"Uh... sure?" I glanced at Erin, who didn't seem the least bit concerned. "Mind if he joins us?"

Erin sat straighter and cocked her head. "I was hoping we'd—"

"You can have the afternoon off, Erin. I'll show her around and make sure she gets home safe." Mark's firm insistence irritated me again. He had no right to control the situation, and it didn't exactly make me feel comfortable.

"But..." Erin's protest was met with more resistance.

"It's fine. Peg and Gus know I'm with her. I'll get her home fine." He said the word "home" as if it meant his home, and I grimaced.

"I want Erin to stay."

"Erin has to go." Mark didn't look at me, but the expression he gave Erin was stern. I found myself squirming for the second time today, and I wished I could get up and leave. Instead, Erin stood and grabbed her soda and offered an expression of reluctant acceptance.

"See ya..." she mumbled as she walked away.

I didn't know what to think or feel. Mark was being kind, but it kind of creeped me out a little. Erin had told my parents where we were and they told him, so he swooped in to do what? Convince me I had to go with him? That was the definition of kidnapping, right?

"Now, would you like to accompany me to the department store so we can pick a nice sweater for your mom?" He stood and held out his arm, and I couldn't protest. So I joined him, resting my hand on his elbow to follow along. He guided me out of the food court, leaving my untouched meal on the table. I didn't know what to expect, but I didn't feel afraid, at least.

"I thought you didn't know what to get them."

He chuckled at my comment and patted my hand. "I don't know what sort of sweater, but I did decide a sweater is what I want to get your mom. She seems to love them."

It made me smile to know that he knew her that well. She really did love sweaters. It was what I hoped to get her for Christmas too, but now, I'd have to find her something more personal. I didn't want to rain on Mark's parade.

"What?" he asked, looking at my smile.

"Nothing, I just think it's sweet that you know Mom so well."

Mark's head dropped and he nodded. "I know you don't believe we're engaged, or remember, or whatever." He took a deep breath and blew it out. "We've been together for a few years, Lily. I know so much about you and your family. I am looking forward to marrying you and raising our child." He rested his hand on my stomach, and as if on command, the baby kicked and it lit up his face.

It was a bittersweet moment because I knew the baby belonged to Ethan. That was something I was confident about, and I was worried that if I asserted my confidence in that fact, Mark would be upset with me again. I didn't want to trigger his anger. I'd seen enough of that already, and he was being kind and sweet today. So I changed the subject.

“You are in a good mood today.” I politely removed his hand from my belly and we continued walking. He even walked at a slower pace. I felt like I was waddling, what with only six weeks or so until my due date. My back chronically hurt, and Ethan assured me it was normal, not an effect of the accident. And it was hard to get comfortable at night to sleep, too. I needed a foot rub so badly.

“This is the mood I’m always in...” He was so confident, head held high, chin upright. It was like he was a different person, and I liked this person.

“I like this mood.” I couldn’t help but contrast his behavior and actions in the emergency room and my hospital room with this man. Maybe he was scared of losing me and that came out in bad ways, or maybe it really was that he was angry at my infidelity. “So, you’re not still angry about...?”

I let the words hang in the air and hoped he understood. His jaw tightened, and he stared straight ahead and then he responded. “Everyone makes mistakes. I’m willing to overlook your cheating on me. I just want my family together again.”

There was a cold edge to his tone, but it shifted back to his calm happiness again when we got to the store and started comparing sweaters. Mark treated me with such kindness and respect, I didn’t know what to do or how to feel. In fact, it felt like the most natural thing in the world that I should be in love with him, not Ethan. I began to wonder why I’d cheated on this amazing man, why anyone would.

By late evening, I was growing exhausted and I wanted to get off my feet. Mark insisted on bringing me home, so I accepted his gesture of kindness. I was surprised when he didn’t even pressure me to go to his house. He brought me straight to Ethan’s and even walked me to the door. I felt like it was a first date, and as far as dates go, I had no complaints. He tried to kiss me goodnight, but I offered him my cheek. I didn’t know how to feel about that.

Ethan and I had made love more than once. That was spontaneous and felt right. This—well, it was uncomfortable

and felt forced, and I told him no. But I did thank him for a good evening and promised to call later this week.

Inside, Ethan was stewing. I shut the door behind me and dropped my purse on the table, only to see him pacing the carpet. He chewed a fingernail and had mussed hair. His eyes snapped to meet my gaze and he furrowed his brow. “My God, where were you? I was so worried.” He moved toward me in haste, and instead of moving toward him, I felt averse to touching him. His tone sounded angry, not concerned at all.

“I was out shopping with Mark.” I folded my arms over my chest, coat still intact. I hadn’t even been in the house a minute and I felt like maybe I’d made the wrong choice this evening. Mark wasn’t the one who had made me feel that way this time, either.

“Mark?” he asked, stopping a foot from me. His arms stopped reaching, his face contorted briefly into a scowl then resolved. “How is he?”

Ethan’s question sounded forced, but I appreciated that he wasn’t snapping at me. Still, he made me feel like I had done something wrong by spending time with Mark. I was, after all, still engaged to the man. I hadn’t broken it off, and neither had he. I was carrying Ethan’s baby, and yes, we had sex, but I still remembered nothing more. Not even after all the time I spent with Mark today.

“He’s good. We bought gifts for Mom and Dad.” Starting to get warm, I slipped out of the coat and hung it on the coat tree then rubbed my forehead. I just wanted to rest, not play twenty questions about where I’d been. “I’m tired, okay? I’m going to lie down.”

Ethan backed away one step and dropped his chin. “Uh, yeah. That’s okay. I can come in if you want.” He looked like a lost puppy needing a belly rub, but after his knee-jerk reaction to my being with Mark this afternoon, I wasn’t sure I wanted to have him in there.

It was his house, but I wasn’t his possession. What I was, though, was confused and exhausted. Having him hold me would feel nice, but I wanted the man who was supportive and

understanding to hold me, not the man who was jealous. I spent time with a person who could help me understand my life better. I had zero memories of Ethan, but I had one of Mark, even if it was negative.

“I’d rather be alone. Okay?” I didn’t wait for a response. I walked down the hallway into the bedroom and shut the door quietly.

Why was I so confused? And how would I figure this out if I didn’t start remembering things? What if I made the wrong choice? This was all too much.

ETHAN

I laid the hot toast on the plate and set the plate on the tray next to the glass of milk and jar of jam. It wasn't much of a breakfast, but I'd learned over the past week with Lily here that she wasn't a huge breakfast eater. I knew she'd appreciate the toast and jam, though, so I carried the tray into the bedroom carefully.

I slept on the couch last night after she came home and seemed upset with me for my reaction. She'd been out with her fiancé, which should have been the most normal thing in the world. I had no right to interfere with her life any more than I already had, and I felt horribly guilty. But when I came to apologize, she was already sleeping. I let myself out and just used the spare blanket from the linen closet to cover myself. My back hurt and my heart was heavy too.

Lily was sleeping when I tiptoed in, but I knew she would want to be awake. I used my elbow to flip on the light, and she stirred, so I stood near the door until she rubbed her eyes and looked up at me.

"I brought you breakfast." I held the tray out hesitantly. I hoped she wasn't still mad about my jealousy last night. I didn't want to do anything to push her toward Mark at all, but I knew if anything would do that, it was my reaction to her spending time with him.

Lily sat up slowly, yawning and stretching. She had a serious look on her face, but I didn't know if it was because she was just still sleepy or if she was upset. I hovered by her

bedside until she had propped herself up with a pillow then lowered the tray to her lap. She accepted it with a smile.

“Thank you, this looks delicious. Is it that raspberry jam again?” Picking up the knife, she slathered jam on one slice of toast and had a bite as I sat gingerly on the edge of the mattress.

“It is. I know you like it.” I learned that a few days ago when she nearly ate a whole jar by herself as a mid-morning snack. I enjoyed watching her devour it, especially after she’d had such a small appetite for days following the accident. It was a good sign that she was getting back on track. “I wanted to say I’m sorry for last night.” I sighed hard and stared at my hands folded on my lap.

“What exactly are you sorry for?”

“Well, for being jealous.” Thoughtful for a moment, I waited, but she said nothing so I continued. “I really do want you to remember everything you can, and I just got insecure that you would remember things about Mark that would make you want to go back to him, and I know how immature that sounds, but I’m being honest with you and I am sorry.”

I sat there for several minutes in silence, listening to the sound of her chewing. She smeared more jam on the second slice of toast and ate it, then downed the glass of milk, all without my even sneaking a peek at her. I was a total idiot for the way I acted, and she deserved to be mad at me, but she set the tray to the side and rose up on her knees and wrapped her arms around me. She wore nothing but her panties and one of my T-shirts, evidence that she’d missed me last night.

“I forgive you, okay? Stop beating yourself up. I want to have a good day with you.” Lily kissed my cheek, and I felt a world of relief flood me. I smiled and wrapped an arm around her, catching her by surprise. I pulled her around to my lap, and she snickered as she draped her body over mine. “I think there is a thing going on at the library today. They’re doing holiday crafts and reading *A Christmas Carol*. Do you want to go with me?”

Her face lit up. “I absolutely adore Christmas. I would love to go with you.” Her grin was priceless, and so was the way she sat up quickly and kissed me. She climbed off the bed, though, and darted to the bathroom. “But first I have to pee.”

I chuckled as she shut the door and hid herself away to relieve her bladder. I was glad she wasn’t upset with me anymore, but I knew the more she remembered, the more I’d be found out. I was a fraud, and it pained me to admit it to myself. Only time would tell how badly I’d hurt her. For now, I wanted to make every day special.

So when she was dressed and ready, we headed out. We stopped by the mall to catch the carolers singing on the stage. I bought her a hot cocoa and a candy cane at one of the food vendors. We snacked on Christmas cookies and even took a carriage ride around the fairgrounds, and when it was time, we stopped by the library to listen to one of the librarians reading *A Christmas Carol*.

We sat in an oversized bean bag chair, Lily so close nearly every inch of her body was touching mine. There were only a few of them, and I was fortunate enough to spot the comfortable spot before anyone else. Otherwise, we’d have been in one of the metal folding chairs lined up for the reading. Lily didn’t seem to mind. She had her arms wrapped around me and I soaked up the attention.

The librarian, a middle-aged woman with her hair drawn up into a tight bun and reading glasses perched on the tip of her narrow nose, began reading. Lily was enthralled, hanging on every word of the story as if it were the first time she’d heard it. But I was distracted, watching Lily’s facial expressions and thinking about how perfect she was in every way. It was like I’d known her my whole life, but I learned something new about her every day.

The way her nose rounded at the end, her lips full and pouty, the waves in her hair, nothing escaped my eye. I couldn’t take my eyes off her, or my hands. I held her tightly against my body as she sat on my lap. I’d never felt this way about any person before in my whole life. I loved her so deeply, I was willing to let her love someone else if that was

what made her happy, and that's how I knew it was real love. Because love isn't selfish at all.

"Ethan..." she said, and I snapped out of my trance. "The story is over." She touched the tip of my nose with a finger and smiled. "Should we go?"

"Mmm, but I'm enjoying this." I relaxed my hold on her so she could get up if she wanted, but she remained on my lap.

"I am too. This was a great day. Thank you for everything. It's nice to do something different that doesn't have to do with counseling or trying to remember things." I had a feeling if we were alone, she'd have kissed me, but in such a public place and with the other listeners now dispersing, she bit her lip and remained aloof.

"When did you know you loved reading so much?" My thumb brushed up and down over her hip bone beneath the warm red sweater she wore. She stared up at the twinkling Christmas tree in the corner of the children's room and smiled.

"I think I've always loved it, but how did you know?" Her grin faded quickly and then she said, "Sorry. Dumb question."

"No, I never knew. You never said a thing to me about it. I just realized it when you were mouthing the words with the librarian as she read the story." I snickered. "I had no idea you had this memorized."

Lily blushed and shrugged. "Do you like reading?" she asked, starting to climb off my lap. I rose with her, taking her hand.

"Uh, I like reading medical journals, and don't laugh at me. They're interesting." Despite my chiding her, she laughed anyway. I followed her across the library to the craft room where they were making snowmen and Santa crafts, and the whole time, I couldn't help but feel overwhelmed with how I felt about her. I knew the closer I got to her, the closer I also got to losing her.

Every moment was bittersweet, and I had to treasure them because I never knew which one would be my last.

After the amazing time at the library with Ethan, I was on cloud nine. I called my mother to see what they were doing, hoping they would come to Ethan's house—with his permission this time—for dinner. That's how I got roped into the St. Rose church Christmas bazaar. Mom insisted I come with her to the annual event where people from the church set up booths with crafts and other wares to sell. I remembered coming here as a kid with her at times, though back then, I loved it.

Now, I did it not out of obligation but out of desire to remember more, to spend time with my mother, and to enjoy the fact that Ethan reminded me of how much I loved Christmas. With only a few weeks until Thanksgiving left, it was the perfect time to get a jump on shopping. Unfortunately, I had very little idea what to buy the people in my life this year. Part of me felt that buying material things was so futile and that just spending time with people I loved would feel so much better.

My back hurt, though, especially after having been out and about all day so far. I had a quick bite before leaving, and my stomach rumbled for food too. I rested my hand on my protruding stomach as I looked through the booth full of crocheted hats and blankets. One of the older women in the church spent the entire year creating these fanciful items, and what didn't sell, she donated to St. Rita's birthing unit for newborns. It was a very honorable thing, so I selected a little

pink hat with a blanket made of the same yarn and Mom volunteered to pay for it.

“Oh, Ms. Lillian, it’s been such a long time since we’ve seen you.” Mom’s friend Gladys took the money for my items and tucked them into the apron pocket at her waist. “How is Mark doing?”

It was just like Mom and her friends to get a bit nosy. From my mother, I could tolerate it, but when it came to strangers—or strangers to me, at least—I thought it a tad rude. Still, I was bonding with my mom tonight so I forced a smile and answered as politely as I could.

“Mark is good. He’s probably enjoying a football game or something tonight.” I hadn’t spoken to Mark much, actually. Except yesterday, when he absconded with me. His sudden shift in demeanor had left me dazzled but not yet ready to fall back into his arms, not when Ethan was so amazing. Plus, the abuse I endured at Mark’s hands still haunted me. The memory was too vivid to forget, but I hadn’t even thought to ask him about it.

“Well, that’s nice. I’m surprised you don’t know what he’s doing. Aren’t you engaged?” Gladys’s eyes locked on my hand where my ring should be, but it wasn’t there. I took it off when I was in the hospital and I didn’t even know where it was. My fingers had been scraped up in the accident and they were swollen. For all I knew, it was still there in the lost and found.

“Uh... well...” I stuttered, but Mom helped me out by making me look a bit foolish.

“She’s living with her doctor friend.” I was certain she didn’t mean to make me out to be a hussy or anything, but she didn’t qualify that with any explanation. Gladys’s eyes widened, and she looked at Mom with a conspiratorial gaze.

“The...” she whispered, as if Mom had previously told her everything and now I was in for a lecture. I knew there was an ulterior motive to her invitation to this event. Mom nodded, and Gladys turned directly to me. “You need to get a paternity test, Lillian.” Her eyes narrowed. “You know the Lord wants

you to have a leader for your family, that baby's father." Gladys clicked her tongue. "You know, Ephesians 5:33 tells us that a woman should respect her husband, and well, I know you're not married yet, but you are pregnant with his child, and that means the two have become one flesh, dear."

I couldn't believe the nerve of this lady, telling me how to live my life. She knew nothing about me or my situation. Not a single thing that didn't come from my mother, which only made me frustrated further because I wondered what Mom had said. She was a good mom, kind and patient, but she didn't know how to just let me be an adult and make my own choices.

I walked away without saying a word. I was too angry. I didn't want to embarrass Mom in front of her church friends, but that was out of line. I didn't need to hear other folks badgering me like I was in my mom's echo chamber.

"Lily, please..." Mom chased after me, bringing the full force of her emotions with her. "Baby, please, wait. Talk to me. Gladys just—"

"What, Mom?" I tapped my toe on the floor, and Mom glanced around nervously as other people started watching us. I couldn't do this here. I took my phone out and texted Erin to come and get me since I had no car and I still had not been cleared to drive. I didn't want to bother Ethan with it. It had been such a good day. I wanted to go back to the warmth of our connection and not mess that up again tonight.

When we were out in the hallway away from most of the crowd, Mom stopped me and sighed. "While I agree with Gladys that you should have a paternity test, I don't agree with her using scripture to badger you. I'm so sorry I didn't stand up for you, Lily." I let her take my hand though I was still upset. "You know I love you, baby. I just think that things are happening so quickly."

"I'm an adult, Mom. I know I had a head injury, but you don't get to push me toward one man or the other. I need to remember things on my own, and I need time to do that." And I wanted to point out that Mark had been less than godly with

the way he'd knocked me around, but I couldn't say anything now. It would only sound like Ethan was feeding me lines to say or that I was trying to manipulate her.

“But you should be with the baby's father.”

“I should be with the man I love, Mom. The right one. The one who makes my heart soar.” I tried to put it into a perspective she could appreciate. “If you were married to someone who didn't make your heart come alive, would you be happy?”

“Well, no, but—”

“Let me remember on my own, Mom.” I squeezed her hand. “I know you love me, but I need space.”

Mom would never understand how confusing this was for me. She might have a point about paternity, but unless the two men involved fought about it, I didn't care. I was content to let my brain come alive on its own and remember. Until then, I would believe Ethan and the fact that he said the baby was his. Mark had done very little to show that he wanted the baby. He seemed intent on winning me back, though I didn't know how I'd move past the thought of him hurting me without having deep discussion and maybe counseling.

I walked toward the front of the church. My heart felt so torn in two. If I were making a decision based on how I felt now, the choice would be easy. I loved Ethan and I felt nothing for Mark. But in two months, if I made that choice now and I remembered later that Mark was my everything, would I regret it?

I stood on the top step outside the church doors and waited for Erin. Why couldn't I remember anything about Ethan? Why were all my memories coming back with Mark in them? And why were they all negative?

Instead of Erin coming to get me, Mark showed up. Even my best friend was conspiring against me to push me toward this man whom they swore I loved. But during the entire ride, I felt uncomfortable. His breath smelled like alcohol. I should

never have gotten into the car with him, and I was upset that I was being manhandled by everyone in my life except Ethan.

“I’m sorry you had a rough night with your mother.” Mark reached out to take my hand, but I shied away. I didn’t ask him to come get me. I wanted Erin. I had no intention of cozying up to Mark right now. Ethan either, for that matter. I needed time to think. But Mark reached and took my hand by force, pushing his fingers between mine, even when I resisted.

“Uh, Mark... I’m uncomfortable.” I again pulled my hand away, but his grasp was firm. He drew my hand to his lips and kissed my fingers.

“I know you don’t remember, but you love this. Trust me.” He kept driving, singing along to a Christmas carol on the radio. I squirmed, but he didn’t get the point and it was a huge red flag. Ethan would never have done this, forced me to hold his hand against my will. When I even hinted at getting off his lap today, he loosened his grip on me.

And that was the problem. I didn’t trust Mark at all. My only memories of him were not of his being sweet and kind, the way he was the last two times we were together. They were of his being angry and hurtful, saying horrible things, physically striking me. It made my hand feel sweaty and my tongue dry. I rubbed the back of my neck with my free hand and tried to stay calm.

He drove me to Ethan’s house and still refused to let me go. I didn’t care that everyone in my life was pushing me toward him. Even if a paternity test told me he was the father, I wasn’t certain I could move past the things I’d remembered without a lot of therapy.

“Uh... I have to go now,” I told him, prying my hand away, but he snatched my other wrist and yanked me closer to him. His breath was hot and musty. I hated it. “Mark, let me go, please.”

He stared into my eyes and smiled at me, then kissed my cheek softly. “It’s okay that you don’t remember yet. I’ll be patient. But you belong to me, Lily. Remember that.” His tone was calm, but there was something sinister about the look in

his eye. It wasn't love or romance. It was scary. He let me go, and I opened the door and got out. Even the crisp thirty-degree air felt better than sitting in that car with him.

I walked up the sidewalk to Ethan's front door and let my heart feel for the first time exactly what it wanted, without anyone pushing me in any direction. It leaned toward Ethan. I knew it did. I could never hurt him by going back to Mark, never. So why did I feel like I'd have no issue with Mark being upset if I chose Ethan? Was that how I was supposed to know what to do?

Would I never remember anything about Ethan?

Holding the phone to my ear, I sat on the couch regretting so many decisions over the past twelve days, most of them falling in those first two days where Lily was still in the hospital. Dr. Baker's voice had always been a reasonable comfort in my job, encouraging me and instructing me. But because of my own decisions, it had become a harbinger of doom, stirring shame and guilt beyond what I was capable of concealing.

I knew my posture, body language, and facial expression showed how upset I was, but with the review board breathing down my neck, I wasn't sure how to just snap out of it. It was a huge thing to face and could spell significant changes for me... or repercussions.

"So, you'll meet with them on Wednesday morning," Dr. Baker continued. "The only accusation that has been brought forth is of your having a sexual relationship with a woman who later became your patient and you did not recuse yourself, though Amily did talk about revealing the lie you told to your patient. I'm prone to believe you will work that portion out without involving the hospital in a lawsuit, but I can't step in or affect anything from here out. The board will do what they do."

I got myself into this mess, and I had to deal with the fallout. There was no point being upset with him or Amily. None of this would have happened if I hadn't made a bad choice. They were merely doing their job, a job I'd do if I were in those same shoes and noticed a coworker headed

down a wrong path. This probably looked like a wakeup call to them, though I knew I didn't need one. I knew the instant those words left my tongue that it was wrong.

"Thank you, Dr. Baker. I'll make sure I'm on time."

"I'm really disappointed that you have to go through this, but I'll try to help you and support you as much as I can. We're in this together, Ethan." He said his goodbyes and hung up, and I shoved my phone in my pocket and lay back on the couch in frustration. I didn't even know Lily had walked into the room until I felt the couch shake. I looked over at her, but I couldn't mask my feelings.

"Everything okay?" She grimaced and scooted closer, taking my hand into her lap and holding it. What I wouldn't have given at that moment to just confess everything and unburden myself, but she didn't deserve that pain, not like that. She had to remember it on her own.

I sighed hard and closed my eyes, and before I could think up yet another lie to tell her about why I was so upset, she interrupted me. "It's that coworker making trouble again?" Her fingers squeezed between mine, and my heart fluttered strangely. How was this most amazing, incredible, and perfect woman so out of reach for me, yet right on my couch? What man wouldn't love a woman who would attempt to comfort him and stand by his side this way?

"Yeah..." I blinked my eyes open and squeezed her hand back. "I have a review board on Wednesday."

"Then, I'll go. I'll tell them you were a perfectly professional doctor." Her bravery and confidence cheered my heart up a little, but that could never happen. Too many questions would be asked.

"It doesn't work like that." I rubbed my thumb over her hand and smiled. It was sweet that she wanted to care for me and stand up for me like that, but this was obviously something I had to do on my own.

I couldn't help but feel grateful for Lily's presence. Her warm smile and gentle touch managed to soothe my troubled

mind. I cleared my throat, trying to focus on something else.

“Are you okay?” she asked softly.

I nodded, feeling a lump form in my throat. “I just... I don’t know what to do,” I confessed, feeling vulnerable in front of her. She disarmed me completely. If she asked me to tell her the truth about what was bothering me, I might just do it.

She scooted closer, her body warm against mine. “You don’t have to have all the answers, you know,” she said, her voice soothing. “Sometimes, it’s okay to just let things be and see where they go.”

As much as I wanted to relax and believe that, I couldn’t. I knew where things were going to go. I knew it looked like a train wreck, so I tightened my grip on everything mentally, which was exhausting me and making me depressed.

“How can I get your mind off it? What normally cheers you up?” It broke my heart that she had to ask that because our relationship was a total lie. Of course she’d have no way of knowing what cheered me up. She didn’t know me, though she struggled against her amnesia to remember anything at all. She’d never be able to remember. Those memories didn’t exist.

“Uh, I don’t know. Sometimes, a walk in the park does, but it’s cold.” I sighed and put an arm around her, and she toyed with a button on my shirt.

“How about we get some peppermint hot cocoa and take a walk in the park? It’ll be a little chilly, but we could bundle up and enjoy the scenery. Maybe it’ll help take your mind off things,” Lily suggested, a small smile on her lips.

I couldn’t believe how understanding she was, how thoughtful. She didn’t even know me, yet she was willing to go out of her way to make me feel better. She was the sort of woman my heart longed for, which only confirmed again how destined I felt we were for each other. Love at first sight had struck, and fate ordained it so perfectly. If only it weren’t a total sham.

“That sounds really nice, Lily. Thank you.” I leaned in and kissed her forehead, feeling a sense of warmth spread through me. Maybe this walk would be just what I needed to clear my head.

We made our way over to the food truck that served peppermint hot cocoa and Christmas cookies. The aromas of cinnamon and chocolate wafted through the air, and my stomach growled in response. Lily giggled and grabbed my hand, leading me over to the truck. Colorful lights danced on every surface, candy canes and reindeer dangling in the window. It was all decked out for the holiday.

“Two cups of peppermint hot cocoa, please,” she said to the vendor, who smiled and handed us two steaming cups of hot cocoa. His gloved hands looked warm, making me regret the fact that neither of us had dressed as warmly as we should have. It was a Midwesterner thing—wearing a light jacket until the first snow, then complaining it was too cold out. I chuckled at the thought, and Lily leaned on my shoulder. The air was cold, but the warmth of the cocoa and Lily’s presence made it bearable.

We walked over to a bench and sat down, sipping our hot cocoa and admiring the Christmas decorations in the park. The twinkling lights on the trees and the giant Christmas tree in the center of the park made the whole scene look like something out of a fairytale. They had erected a small building that looked more like a shed than anything else, but I knew that was where Santa would visit in a few weeks’ time. Kids from the city would line up day and night to tell him what they wanted. I wondered if Lily’s child would come here one day, and that thought made me feel sad. I wanted a child to bring here.

“Thank you for suggesting this, Lily. It’s really nice,” I said, feeling a sense of peace wash over me at her smile. She could make anything better.

“I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself. You deserve to take a break and relax.” Her eyes sparkled as she sipped her steaming cocoa, and I noticed across the lawn, there was a group of people who seemed to be celebrating. They filed out of one of

the many buildings on the property, all with balloons in hand. Half of the balloons were pink, the other half blue, and it made me again feel distanced from Lily.

“Looks like they’re having a gender reveal party,” Lily said, following my gaze. “I’ve always wanted to have one of those.”

I nodded, still unable to speak. The thought of Lily having a child with someone else made my stomach churn. Mark didn’t deserve her at all, though I didn’t either. Still, it bothered me to know she wasn’t having the pregnancy she wanted. Maybe she should have her own gender reveal, but then I’d have to put up with Mark, and I was certain with the stress I was under, I wouldn’t handle that interaction well.

My eyes scanned the park again, but I couldn’t help but notice that something was off about Lily. She seemed distracted, lost in thought, and her hand shook slightly as she lifted the cup to her lips. I put my hand on hers, trying to offer some comfort, but she pulled away, her eyes darting around the park.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, concerned.

“I don’t know,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “I just feel... weird. Like something’s not right.”

I didn’t know what to say, but I knew I had to do something to help her. I stood up, holding out my hand. “Let’s take a walk. Maybe some fresh air will help.”

Lily took my hand, and we started walking through the park. The lights blurred together as we walked, and I tried to keep my eyes on Lily, who seemed to be getting more and more agitated with each passing moment.

“What’s going on, Lily?” I asked, squeezing her hand.

“It’s nothing,” she said, trying to pull away. “I just need to rest for a bit.”

I wasn’t buying it, but I didn’t want to push her too hard. Instead, I led her over to a bench and sat down next to her.

“Talk to me, Lily,” I said softly. “Whatever it is, we can work through it together.”

Lily took a deep breath and looked up at me, her eyes full of tears.

“I remembered something about Mark,” she whispered, barely audible. My heart dropped as I heard her confession. I didn’t know how to react because I didn’t know what she remembered or what had triggered the new memory.

“What happened?” I asked, trying to keep my voice steady.

“We were fighting, and he was so angry,” she said, her voice shaking.

I didn’t know what to say. I wanted to comfort her, but at the same time, I was terrified and feeling guilty. The only reason she believed that was because I’d lied to her.

“I can’t believe I did it,” she said, wiping away her tears. “I feel so guilty and ashamed. That’s what happened right before he hit me. That’s why he was angry, because he thought I cheated.”

I put my arm around her, pulling her close. “It’s okay, Lily,” I said, trying to comfort her, but she pulled away from me and swiped at her eyes.

“Can we go home? I just need to think.”

I nodded, understanding her desire to be alone with her thoughts. We walked in silence, the only sound being the rustling of leaves under our feet. When we got back to my house, she immediately went into the bathroom and locked the door. I could hear her sobbing on the other side, but I knew better than to try to force my way in. Instead, I walked to the kitchen and poured myself a glass of water, trying to come up with a plan of action. It was wrong of me to keep allowing Lily to believe she had cheated on him.

Somehow, I had to get her real memories to surface, and it wasn’t even about relieving my guilt now. I loved her so much I’d push her back at Mark if it meant she got relief from her own guilt. I knew all too well how that felt, and I hated that I made her feel it.

If shooting myself in the foot was the only way, I had to figure out how to do it quickly in the least painful way possible—for Lily's sake.

I hid in the bathroom for more than forty-five minutes, sobbing. I couldn't face Ethan when I felt like this because nothing added up. I continued to gain new memories of Mark all the time, albeit they were all negative, but I was remembering him. However, I still had yet to remember a single shred of my past with Ethan. I felt so many things, too—hurt that my brain wouldn't let me remember him, sad that the only things I remembered were abuse and anger from Mark, scared that I'd never remember anything happy.

When I finally came out of the bathroom, Ethan was dressed in running clothes, shorts and a hoodie, an oversized sock hat on his head. He had headphones in and held his phone in his hand, staring at it. I understood that running was something that helped calm him, but I was upset that he had listened to me crying that long and decided leaving me to battle this emotion by myself was a good idea. He probably would have left the house and not even told me about it if I hadn't come out just now.

"Where are you going?" I asked, crossing my arms over my chest. He looked up at me and knit his brow.

"I was going for a run. I thought you wanted some space, so I..." He narrowed his eyes and pursed his lips. "I was wrong, and I'll stay here."

I sighed hard. Now he wanted to stay? After he'd obviously upset me and made a poor decision? Why was I

feeling so irrationally upset with him? I huffed and reeled around on my heel, heading to the kitchen for a glass of water.

“Hey, Lily, I’ll stay. I’m sorry.”

I didn’t know how to respond to him at all. My mind was a cyclone of feelings and thoughts. I didn’t mean to lash out at him, because I wasn’t feeling angry with him. I was feeling scared and alone, and I felt guilty that I couldn’t change any of it, or remember any of it.

“Look, I am struggling. Everything I remember about Mark is bad. I’m scared and upset and hurt, and then I remember that the whole reason we had that argument and he hit me was because he thought I’d cheated. I remember vehemently denying any infidelity, and he struck me.” I turned to look Ethan in the eye. “I told him I hadn’t cheated.” I rested my hand on my belly.

“Lily... I...”

“But I had. I cheated with you.” I felt the glare on my face even though it was myself I was angry at. I’d ruined what I had with Mark for Ethan, because of Ethan. I didn’t even know what I had with Mark and I wondered if I’d ever know.

“How can I help you?” His genuine concern and compassion made my eyes well up.

“I need space,” I told him, holding out a hand. I didn’t want space. I wanted him to pick me up and hold me like a little child who needed comfort.

“Alright... I’ll give you whatever space you need. I’ll go for my run and be back shortly.” He backed away slowly, and I didn’t stop him. Maybe a bit of time really was what I needed. When he shut the door, I did the only thing I thought might help.

I walked straight to the shower and turned it on as hot as I could get it. I stripped my clothes off and climbed in, and the water comforted me instantly. I felt like a fool. This whole thing had started over Ethan’s upsetting call with his boss about the review board. I was supposed to comfort him, and

I'd ended up making it about me because of that memory. I was angry with myself then, but I took it out on him.

Everything that had happened since I woke up told me Ethan was the most amazing, wonderful man I'd ever met. I was head over heels in love with him, and Mark was the monster of my nightmarish memories. They weren't even just dreams. It really happened. He really physically abused me, but I felt obligated to him somehow because of a promise I'd made that I didn't even remember making.

Still, the therapist had made so many good points about Ethan. He lied to his coworkers, took risks at his job, and I still had yet to find any evidence of me in his life before my accident other than a toothbrush in the bathroom and a pair of earrings.

I plunged my head under the water and sighed, letting some tears escape. Ethan and I were perfect for each other. I could tell he deeply loved me, and I knew he was the one I wanted, even if Mark was the father of this baby. Mom and the pressure for the paternity test did little to change my mind about that. It was true, I was sleeping with both of them, so the likelihood of the baby being Mark's was about the same as it was Ethan's.

I heard the door click and pulled the shower curtain back to see Ethan walk in, tearing his clothes off. I didn't say a word. His back was to me, but the reflection I saw in the mirror made me melt. He looked pained, like his feelings on his sleeve were screaming to me that he wanted to make it right. I stepped back into the water and waited as he climbed into the shower.

"I thought you were running."

"I can't, Lily. You are hurting and I need to comfort you." He pulled me against his body. His hands were like ice, and I squealed, but he didn't pull away.

"I'm so sorry, Ethan. I was supposed to be comforting you. You have that review board and—"

“And nonsense. I am in love with you. None of that matters if you’re hurting. I’m so sorry you had that memory, but I’m not leaving you alone to deal with it.”

I reached my arms up around his neck and pulled him down, kissing him hard. Ethan’s hands roamed my curves as we kissed, his fingers trailing over my wet skin. I could feel the heat building between us as our bodies pressed together under the hot water. It was like nothing else existed in that moment but him and me.

He broke the kiss and pressed his forehead against mine. “I love you, Lily. You’re everything to me.”

I smiled at him, feeling a warmth spread through my body. “I love you too, Ethan. More than anything.”

He kissed me again, his hands sliding down to my waist. I moaned into his mouth as he lifted me up and pressed me against the shower wall.

“I’m sorry I snapped at you.” I kissed his neck and bit his skin gently and felt his cock swelling between my legs.

“Shh, Lily, it’s okay.”

I slid down the wall, letting my toes touch the floor of the shower. “I want you.” I whispered in his ear and felt his cock throbbing against my sex. He held my hips tightly and pinned me against the wall, and his hand found my core, massaging my clit.

“Yeah?” I panted, not able to get enough of him. I was starving, craving the feeling of being one with him. It was the only thing that felt right in all of this. When he was in me, filling me, I felt at home and at peace. “Take me, then,” I whispered, clawing at his shoulders.

Ethan thrust a few fingers into me and rubbed, the heel of his hand grinding against my clit while he massaged my G-spot. I whimpered and shuddered. It was amazing. I clung to him, my fingers digging into his skin. I could feel the tingle in my stomach and my toes curled.

“Ethan, please!” I begged him.

“Come for me, Lily.” He pushed his fingers into me all the way and sucked on my neck. “Come all over my hand.”

I shuddered and moaned, coming almost instantly. My walls clenched around him, gripping him tightly and not letting go. I clung to his shoulders, panting for breath as the pleasure pulsed through me. He kissed me passionately as he moved his fingers inside me, thrusting deep in a slow rhythm that was both gentle and passionate at the same time. He increased his pace, faster each time until he was completely lost in the pleasure of our lovemaking. I moaned, and the sound of it echoed off the shower walls. I could feel his cock twitching against me, throbbing against my thigh.

My body began to calm, and his massaging became less intense, but his dick was so hard against me as he ground his hips into my thigh it almost hurt. I felt drunk on hormones, my legs weak and my body heaving for breath. If he weren't holding me up, I would have collapsed. The sensations were incredible, and the weight of relaxation in my body was intoxicating.

“God, you are so good at that,” I mewled, leaving my eyes shut. I felt him slide his cock along my slit, and it made me twitch each time it brushed over my clit. I wanted him inside me.

“And you're amazing. I want you so bad.”

“Then take me,” I pleaded.

“You're an animal,” he muttered.

“You make me that way.” I moaned as his hand pulled out of me and snuck between us to hold my breast. It felt good, having him touch me. I wanted him to.

He pressed the head of his cock into me and I cried out. “You feel so good, Ethan,” I moaned. He grabbed my backside and lifted me, propping me against the wall. I wrapped my legs around him, and he sank even deeper inside me.

I felt his lips at my ear. “God, you feel so good. I could stay inside you for days.”

He pulled out slowly, my walls gripping him tightly and trying to hold him inside me. He pushed back into me slowly, and I felt him go deeper than before.

“Mmm, Ethan.” I kissed his neck and his jaw, panting into his ear. I felt another orgasm start to build inside me. I could feel it tingling in my stomach and the pleasure almost blinded me.

He pounded into me quickly, my moans growing louder with every thrust. I could feel his cock twitching inside me and I knew he was about to come.

“I’m so close,” I panted.

I could feel it building inside me. The pleasure was intense, and it was all-consuming. I felt like I was floating on a cloud, happiness and fulfillment mixing together to make one feeling. “Ethan, I’m coming.” I moaned. “Oh, my God, I’m coming.”

I felt my walls tighten around him, my body shaking and my mind going blank with pleasure. He moaned and moved his mouth to my breast, sucking on it and rolling his tongue over my nipple, sending more pleasure coursing through my body. He moved his mouth to my neck, and I felt him bite down on me, just hard enough to be painful and erotic, and then I felt him explode. His cum filled me, warming my body.

We breathed and moaned together, our bodies shaking with pleasure and the aftershock of what we had just experienced. He pulled out of me slowly and slid me down the wall, kissing my neck and my lips.

“That was amazing,” I said, my voice half-whispering. I felt weightless, floating.

“It was,” he said, kissing my neck.

My skin was still sensitive from my orgasm, and his kisses felt amazing. I felt like I was in heaven.

“I love you,” he said. I loved hearing that come out of his mouth. I loved saying it too.

“I love you too.” I smiled and kissed him, wrapping my arms around his neck and pressing my body against his. It didn’t matter that I didn’t remember him at all. I was so in love with him, and I stood there under the water as it started to run cold, holding him, so thankful that my past self had chosen him.

I knew he was my future.

ETHAN

Waking with Lily cradled in my arms wasn't something I took for granted. Especially not this morning as I woke up with the review meeting looming over my head like a gray cloud. She felt so incredible, I didn't even want to get up, but I knew I had to. To not show up would be an admission of guilt or at the very least be highly unprofessional. So I dragged my lazy body out of bed and shuffled off to the shower.

The water did little to console me, nor did the way I scrubbed my body until my skin was bright red. I didn't sleep well, nightmares all night about Lily finding out the truth and being so hurt she never spoke to me again. There were others too, but none quite so disturbing, even the one where I lost my job and had to become a janitor. I'd do it if it meant I got to keep Lily.

When I was clean, I shut the water off and dried off, taking a moment to clean up my beard a little so I looked presentable. With so many days off work, I'd hardly thought about it. Spending all this time with Lily was so special, and I didn't want it to end. I wished I could whisk her off to a private island where nothing would ever disrupt us or come between us, as impractical as that sounded. Instead, I had to wake up and face the music of some very bad choices I'd made.

"Hey," I heard from the door as it creaked open. Sleepy-eyed Lily appeared in the door and leaned against the door jamb. She was fully dressed, gray hoodie, jeans, and sneakers.

Though, her makeup was not yet done and her hair looked like she'd just rolled out of bed.

“Hey?” I mumbled, confused. “What’s up?” I rinsed my razor and tapped it on the sink, then laid it down as I reached for the towel to dry my face. My bath towel draped around my waist, I waited for her to answer.

“I’m ready.” She laid her head against the jamb and yawned, then smiled at me. “I can’t let you go alone. You’ve been so upset. You need the moral support.”

My head dropped and I had to steady myself. All sorts of emotions leapt up into my throat, but I refused to give them voice. I opened the door farther and walked past her into the dark bedroom, flipping on the light. “You shouldn’t. You should stay here. I’ll call you when I know what’s going on.” I headed straight for my dresser and opened the drawer. A week ago, I’d have been embarrassed to strip off and change clothes right in front of her because we were perfect strangers. But now, after twelve days of her living with me, I felt completely comfortable. Never mind the fact that I had to get out the door soon.

“What do you mean?” she asked, turning around and walking back into the bedroom. “You’ve been so upset. Don’t push me away, Ethan. Let me be there for you.”

I jammed my feet through the leg holes of a pair of boxers and pulled them up, then grabbed my black slacks and sat on the foot of the bed to put them on.

“What do you mean I shouldn’t?”

“You can’t,” I said hastily. Yet another lie to add to the pile of lies I’d been amassing. Every doctor who came under review was permitted one person to speak on their behalf. I had no one. I’d have selected a coworker if I thought they’d vouch for me, but this was all on me. I had to face it alone, and besides, if Lily went with me, the nuclear explosion that had been building for weeks now would just detonate and I’d lose the battle.

“Which is it?” she asked, now frowning. “I shouldn’t, or I can’t?” Her tone changed. She sounded hurt, which was the last thing I was intending to do. My shoulders dropped, but I stood to pull the slacks up and button them.

“I mean, you can’t. You’d just have to sit down the hall anyway. You may as well wait here where you’re comfortable.” More lies—I couldn’t get away from them. Tell one lie and then fifty more to cover it up. I walked over to her, gripped her by the biceps, and kissed her forehead. “I’m sorry. Thank you for wanting to be there for me.”

Brushing past her, I opened the door of my closet and pulled out a button-down shirt and put it on. She silently left the bedroom as I buttoned it up, and I felt like a royal piece of trash. Lily’s heart was about as pure as a heart could get, and all my lying was tainting her, making her cower and retreat into herself. I hated myself for being this way, but what else was I to do?

I finished getting ready, brushing my teeth and doing my hair, then I grabbed my coat and walked into the living room where she waited. She had a cup of coffee in hand and a frown on her face.

“I made this,” she said, offering the mug.

“Thank you, that’s sweet of you.” I took the coffee and felt more guilt welling up as she pecked me on the cheek.

“Call me.”

“I will,” I told her, turning to go. The twinkling Christmas tree caught my attention, and I felt simultaneously comforted and ashamed by it. Lily had done nothing to warrant any of the pain that was coming her way because of me, and there was no stopping the train now that it had left the station.

I climbed in my car and drove across town to the hospital. It felt strange walking back into this place after such an extended absence, but I was greeted with warmth and kindness by all the nurses and doctors who saw me. They had no clue I was here to undergo disciplinary review, and I said nothing. I was sure Amily would make sure to inform everyone of how

unethical I was once the review board handed out their decision.

On the third floor, standing outside the conference room, waiting for the board to call me in, I paced. My heart was racing as I thought about the potential consequences of what was about to happen. I couldn't believe that it had come to this. The thought of losing my job, my reputation, and my livelihood made me feel sick to my stomach. I took a deep breath and tried to calm myself down, but it was no use. The anxiety was too much to bear.

Finally, the door to the conference room opened and a stern-looking man in a suit motioned for me to come inside. I walked in, feeling like a criminal on trial. The room was filled with people, all of them staring at me with cold, disapproving eyes.

"Dr. Lewis," the man in the suit said, "please take a seat." I glanced around the room, seeing Dr. Baker and Amily both seated in the corner of the room. I knew they'd give testimony at some point. Hopefully, at least Dr. Baker would speak for me.

I sat down, feeling like I was about to be interrogated. The questions came fast and furious, and I did my best to answer them truthfully. But it was clear that the review board was not on my side.

"Is it true that you took Ms. Bennett as a patient, knowing full well that you were having an affair with her?" The woman who spoke, one of twelve board members questioning me, looked down her pointy nose where her glasses perched.

"Uh, that is only partially correct." I cleared my throat and continued. "I was not having an affair with her."

The board members exchanged glances, clearly not buying my explanation. The man in the suit leaned forward and spoke. "Dr. Lewis, we have testimony from Ms. Collins herself that suggests otherwise. She claims you spoke to the patient's family that day in the emergency department and claimed you were the father of her child."

I fidgeted and glanced at Amily, who had a snide scowl on her face. She'd been waiting a long time to get back at me for whatever hurt I'd caused her when we broke up. This was a long time coming, and I brought it on myself. My heart sank. I felt betrayed and angry, but I knew I couldn't let my emotions show. "I can assure you that I would never abuse my power as a doctor in such a manner. My relationship with Ms. Bennett was consensual and began after she was no longer my patient."

"So you are in a relationship with the patient now?" The woman's eyebrows rose, and she looked surprised that I'd confess the truth to them.

I had two choices, lie and keep the charade up or come clean and face the consequences. The choice was obvious. I had to tell the truth because the future of my career depended on it. "I—" I opened my mouth to speak, but the gentleman cut me off.

"Ms. Collins, did you say that Dr. Lewis is now living with this patient?"

"She's not a patient anymore," I snapped, but the man's sharp glare made me stop.

Amily cleared her throat and said, "Yes, Dr. Lewis is living with her now. And I have reason to believe that he's been manipulating her into staying with him."

My heart raced as I tried to come up with a response. It was true that I had been doing everything in my power to make sure that Lily stayed with me, but it wasn't manipulation. It was love. "Sir, please—"

"Dr. Lewis, you lied to your patient about fathering her child?" His eyes narrowed on me, and I felt so foolish and guilty. There was no way they would ever understand why I had made that decision, even if I spelled it out for them.

"I care about Lily deeply," I said, my voice shaking. "And I would never do anything to hurt her. Our relationship is consensual and based on mutual feelings of love and respect."

"And it's based on a lie that you fathered her child." The woman sat back in her chair and took her glasses off. "Your

patient has clinical amnesia and you've taken advantage of that fact."

The board members exchanged glances, and I could see the disappointment in their eyes. It was clear that they had already made up their minds about me. "Dr. Lewis," the man in the suit said, "we have heard enough. Your behavior is completely unacceptable, and we cannot allow it to continue." He sat forward and shuffled some papers. "We will call Ms. Bennett in for questioning to determine how badly this lie you've told has affected her. If I were you, I would tell her the truth before she comes before this board."

He stood, and the woman tapped her pen on the table in front of her. She glared at me, then Emily and Dr. Baker—who remained strangely quiet the whole time. "You are dismissed, Dr. Lewis."

I stood, trying to hold back my tears, and walked out of the room with my head down. I knew that my career was over and that my reputation was ruined. But more importantly, I knew that I had hurt the woman I loved most in the world. I couldn't help but feel a sense of dread. The guilt of what I had done had finally caught up with me. I had lied to Lily about fathering her child, and now everyone knew the truth. I could only imagine how hurt she would be when she found out.

I got into my car and just sat there for a moment, trying to process everything that had just happened. They would call Lily in and she would be told the truth, or at the very least, she'd figure it out. I was losing her and she didn't know it yet. I couldn't even go home and face her.

What the heck was I going to do now?

Despite winter really biting down way before Thanksgiving, the little café was warm. Erin sat across from me slurping her hot soup, and I hugged a mug of cocoa. It was cozy, with paper snowflakes dangling from fishing line strung about the dining room. Children in local schools had crafted them and donated them to make the little place feel festive. I loved it. It reminded me of my classroom and how I was eager to get back to it.

“I’m just telling you, Erin, he’s incredible.” The song *It’s Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas* played over the speakers, offering a festive backdrop for our conversation. Erin seemed withdrawn and sullen. I knew she didn’t understand how I felt about Ethan because she had told me a dozen times.

“How can you go on and on about him now?” She set her bowl down and wiped her mouth, giving me the evil eye. For a best friend, she felt overbearing at times. I needed someone to relax and hang out with, not someone who was going to lecture me like my mother. “You barely know him.”

“Erin...” I set my mug down and stared up at one particular snowflake that reminded me of the decorations hanging from Ethan’s Christmas tree. It felt like home the day I decorated it with my parents, waiting on him to get home. I smiled to myself, feeling overwhelmed by the memory.

“What?” she asked, now using a spoon to take bites of the noodles in the bowl in front of her.

“I love all the little things about Ethan,” I said, feeling my face flush with warmth. “The way he always laughs at my jokes even when they’re not funny. The way his eyes light up when he talks about something he’s passionate about. The way he can make me feel so loved just by looking into my eyes.”

“Yeah, he’s a real charmer, but Mark—”

“And he makes me breakfast in bed, rubs my feet when they’re sore. Oh, and you should see the way he kisses me,” I interrupted, unable to contain my excitement. “It’s like the world stops spinning and everything fades away.”

My friend rolled her eyes and chuckled. “Okay, okay, I get it. You’re head over heels for him.”

I nodded, taking a sip of my hot cocoa. “Erin, I’m telling you it’s like a Christmas miracle.” This time of year always got to me, the cheer and festivities, but this year felt even more special. I couldn’t believe I had found someone like him, someone who made me feel so alive and happy. Mark didn’t make me feel any of this. If so, I’d have remembered it. “He’s so different from anyone I’ve ever been with,” I continued, relishing in the memories of our time together. “He’s patient, kind, and understanding. He listens to me, really listens, and he loves me.”

“This!” Erin exclaims with joy on her face for the first time today. “This is the Lily I know and love. This woman who gushes on and on about the guy she’s dating because she can’t contain it.”

For a moment, I’m happy that she’s happy for me... until her face screws up into a scowl and I feel like I’m about to be lectured again. “What?” I ask, cowering.

“This is how I know Ethan is nothing but a fake. There is no way you’d feel this way about him and not tell me, Lil. We’re besties. We’ve known each other our whole lives.” Erin’s concern etched her brow, but all that proved to do was deflate my mood. My shoulders dropped and I stared down at my hands.

“Why can’t you be happy for me?” I looked back up at her but she looked away.

“I want what’s best for you, Lily. I’m scared this guy isn’t all he’s cracked up to be.”

“And the memory I had of Mark beating me? You want that for me?” I stood, putting my purse strap on my shoulder. I’d walk home if I had to.

“No, babe. That’s not what I said.” She reached for me but I backed away.

“I’m going to go. Okay?” I shook my head. “I’ll call you.” Walking away, I sank further and further into myself until I stood on the curb waiting for an Uber hailed by the app on my phone. The driver had the music cranked up, which was for the good. I wasn’t in the mood for small talk. I just wanted to get home where I could unwind.

By the time I got there, I had worked myself up into a frenzy again, fearing that Erin was right and Ethan was really just manipulating me. I did tell her everything, and I didn’t remember a thing about him at all, not after ten therapy sessions that were pretty intense. It didn’t add up to me.

So when I let myself in and heard the water running in the shower, I sat on the edge of the bed, waiting. I was going to confront Ethan—until I saw his phone lying on his nightstand. I took off my shoes and coat, hung them by the door, then crawled into bed and picked up his phone. He was singing in the shower, some Christmas tune, but I had to know the truth.

I tried opening his phone only to find it locked, which made sense. Everyone put a passcode on their phone these days. If not and it got stolen, it would be easy to reset and steal. I was frustrated, to say the least. I hoped to find pictures of us or a message history from a previous number. Now, I’d never know unless I directly asked him, which would only prove I didn’t trust him.

Again, I felt the crushing weight of disappointment and let my confidence fall. The water shut off in the room adjacent to the bedroom, so I replaced his phone where it was. Then I

shrugged out of my Christmas sweater and leggings and pulled a T-shirt and pajama pants out of the drawer. I barely had the shirt on when Ethan came into the room, towel around his waist, drying his ear with the corner of it.

“I didn’t realize you were home. How was dinner and shopping with Erin?” Ethan didn’t have to say that Erin was one of his least favorite people in the world. She had made a scene more than once insisting I wasn’t thinking clearly around him. But the sadness in his eyes wasn’t about that. I knew that much.

“Eh, not important,” I said, sitting on the foot of the bed. “How did the review go?” Ethan never came home after the board this morning, and I had no clue where he went or what he was doing. I had to leave a note for him that I was going out with Erin.

I watched as he picked his own sleepwear out and then joined me in sitting on the foot of the bed. “Well, let’s just say I’ll have a bit more time off.”

“That bad?” The way he sat slouched over made my heart hurt for him. I was so busy wondering if he was the man he’d said he was that I never stopped to think about how he felt in all of this. His job was on the line because he treated me, and I was acting ungrateful. I placed a hand on the center of his back and rubbed it.

“I don’t really have the emotional energy to talk about it today. Is that alright?” He looked up at me, and I couldn’t protest. He didn’t deserve this because he was such an amazing man.

“I know just what to do...” I turned and crawled around behind him, gripping both of his shoulders in my hands. I massaged and kneaded his damp muscles, working out the tension and hearing him groan as the muscles relaxed.

“You’re really good at this.”

“I’m good at other things too.” I leaned down and kissed the top of one of his shoulders. “Want me to show you?”

Before he could even answer, I pushed my panties down to my knees and moved to the side.

As Ethan lay back on the bed, scooting up to the headboard, I worked my panties off and tossed them, then leaned over him and undid the towel around his waist. His dick was already swelling, eager to see how I could help him relax. He pushed some strands of chestnut hair out of my face as I bent to flick his cock with my tongue. It twitched and he hissed.

“You’re good at this too?” he asked, pushing more hair out of my face.

“I think so? But you be the judge...” I wanted nothing more than to help him feel better, to relax and sleep well. Life was stressful enough without all this nonsense about a review board. I knew that I could help him.

I lifted his cock up and took it into my mouth, sucking and stroking him greedily. He groaned in enjoyment when I took him deep into my throat. His hand ran down the side of my body to the hem of the T-shirt I wore. He pushed it up and found my tit, squeezing it as I sucked him. His grunts grew louder and louder, and then he pushed me away, forcing my mouth off his cock.

“I’m going to come.”

“That’s sort of the point.” I snickered, but he shook his head.

“Nah, not that way.” Ethan greedily pulled at me, tugging on the shirt until he had it over my head and me straddling him. “I’m going to come inside you.” He grinned and lifted me up, helping me to position myself over him. He grabbed the lube and slicked himself up, then slid me down over his dick.

I gasped as he entered me, stretching my pussy wide. He was huge, and I moaned as he filled me up. I leaned forward, resting my hands on his chest, and he wrapped his arms around me. He pulled me down to kiss him, our tongues dancing as I rode him. Ethan’s hands moved down to my hips,

helping me move faster. But then his thrusts slowed and I whimpered.

“Sit on my face,” he said gruffly.

“I was so close.” I whined and squirmed, grinding on him, but he jerked his chin upward.

“Do it.”

I hesitated for a moment, but I had initiated this to make him feel better. If this was what he wanted, then I’d give it to him. I crawled forward, letting his dick slide out of me, then nestled my pussy over his face. His arms reached up and pulled me down, and I felt his tongue searching my slit.

“Oh, God, Ethan!” I squealed as he licked me. He explored me with his tongue, lapping at my juices. I squirmed on his face, trying to stay balanced as he licked up and down my slit. The feeling was amazing, and I couldn’t help but grind my hips against his mouth.

I pulled his hands up and placed them on my tits, squeezing my nipples. He squeezed them between his fingers, rolling them back and forth as I rocked against him. I wasn’t going to be able to hold back much longer. Climax was building quickly. I rocked against him, grabbing the headboard for balance as he licked and sucked on my pussy. I felt the familiar tingle begin in my toes, and I whimpered, rocking faster and faster, my orgasm overtaking me.

“Ethan!” I groaned, and my entire body tensed, quivering against him. He held me tightly against him, refusing to let me move. I gasped as he kept licking, dragging out my orgasm. My head fell back, and I felt dizzy and disoriented as wave after wave of pleasure washed through my body.

I looked down, struggling to focus on his face. I could see him licking me, his tongue exploring me. I shivered in delight, shuddering as I tried to catch my breath. His movements slowed, and he nipped at my clit gently, making me jolt and shake. Then he pushed my hips, and I backed slowly down his body to where his hard cock was waiting. He slid into me as I sprawled out on top of him, then he started thrusting.

“Ride me,” he grunted. I rolled my hips, grinding on him. It was incredible. I wanted to help him, and all he could do was focus on my pleasure. The harder he drove upward, the more my body tensed toward another orgasm. I grabbed his hip bones and brought my feet forward, leaning hard on his frame as I rose and fell on him.

“Oh, God, yes,” I panted the instant his thumb touched my sensitive clit. He massaged me, and I grunted, grinding my hips as I rocked.

“Come,” he grunted.

“Yes!” I cried out, my body shivering as another orgasm hit me. All I could do was keep bouncing on him. He held me tight, his cock swelling before I felt him explode inside me. I could feel his cum filling me and I shivered, grinding my pussy on his twitching shaft.

When it passed, I folded my legs beneath me and draped myself across his chest. I had let Erin get in my head yet again and threaten to ruin what Ethan and I had. I resolved in my heart then and there, as his arms wrapped around me, that I was meant to be with him, no matter what. My parents, Mark, and Erin would all have to understand that. Ethan was my partner now.

ETHAN

I sat on the sofa in Lily's parents' house after a tense discussion on the car ride over. Lily insisted her parents' dinner plans were more important than our desire to stay home and cuddle and watch a Christmas movie. I was irritated by that but only because my guilt over this whole situation had been eating me alive for a few days. The review board on Wednesday made it clear they were going to contact her for her side of the story. Now Saturday, I had no idea if they had done that yet or what to expect when they did.

Lily gripped my knee to keep me from bouncing on my toes. It was a nervous habit I had, though I'd mostly bested it in high school before the intense days of my college experience and residency. But with everything happening how it had, it had come back with a vengeance, especially when Gus walked into the room smoking his pipe and staring at me.

"So, Ethan, this baby is yours, right? Do you plan to marry my daughter, then?" Gus puffed on his pipe, and the sickly-sweet aroma of tobacco flooded the room. It wasn't an altogether horrible scent, but mixed with my anxiety, it made me nauseous. Besides the fact that the pressure they were putting on me was intense. Lily smiled up at me, and I felt like I would vomit.

"Of course, I'm going to marry her," I blurted out, but I knew in my gut that would never happen. Once this review board meeting happened, she'd learn the truth and she'd never forgive me. It would be over. I'd be lucky if she just broke it off and never spoke to me again. If things went horribly

wrong, she'd file a lawsuit or press criminal charges. My brain raced with fearful obsessions the likes of which I'd never experienced.

"You look ill, son. Does the idea of marriage scare you?" Gus puffed again and leaned forward to eye me more sternly. I wanted to sink into the pink floral couch and disappear, but I couldn't. This wasn't a normal "meet the parents" scenario. I was a bold-faced liar and it felt like they were sussing me out.

"Uh, sir?" I cleared my throat and used a finger to pull the collar of my polo away from my neck.

"Marriage... does that intimidate you?"

"Oh, Gus," Peggy cooed, swatting a hand at her husband. Lily clung to my side, gripping my bicep. It was a small comfort, but in only a few days' time, that, too, would be taken from me. "What Gus is trying to ask is, do you believe that marriage is a covenant? We take things seriously here. When you say 'I do', it means you will—forever."

Peggy's reassurance was anything but. I'd love nothing more than to marry Lily and make her the happiest woman alive. I just knew too much to be happy about that.

"I believe that, Ms. Bennett." I kissed Lily on the forehead, more for my own comfort than hers, and she patted my knee when the bell rang. Gus and Peggy stood and walked toward the door, just out of earshot.

"Oh, good. Mark's here." Lily squeezed my bicep harder and looked up at me.

"Why is Mark here?" I asked, glancing at the door to see Mark walk in with two bouquets of flowers. Why did he have to show up to every single family event as if he was part of the family? I understood that Lily was technically engaged to him, but she barely talked to him. She remembered very negative things about him, and on top of that, she was living with me.

"The doctor said it will be good for me to remember things." She stood, and I followed abruptly, almost knocking her over. "What?"

I glanced at Mark again and took Lily by the elbow, guiding her around the corner out of view. “I get that you need to remember things, and I’m the one supporting you the most in that.” I bit my cheek. I knew I was crossing a line, but I lost control of my tongue and scowled as I said, “I just don’t see how remembering more of his abuse is going to help you.”

Lily backed away, a hurt expression on her face. “I was hoping something one of you said might trigger a memory I have of you.” Deep creases formed on her forehead and she frowned, picking at her fingernails.

“I’m sorry, Lily.” I huffed out a sigh. There was no way I could sit across from that monster and not lose my cool. I was out of control and I knew it. The best thing for me to do was to leave.

“Oh, there you are!” Mark’s voice right behind my shoulder shook me. I jumped and then swallowed hard as I regained my composure and stepped aside. He kissed her on the cheek and handed her the flowers. “Hi, Ethan,” he said in a sing-song voice. It was so fake I could have gagged. I rolled my eyes at him and caught Lily’s gaze.

“I’m just going to go,” I told her, backing away. I didn’t even tell Gus or Peggy I was leaving. I just walked to the front door and grabbed my coat off the coat tree on the way. Their family dinner would have been stressful enough without facing that jerk. I knew it would lead to no good, even if he was on his best behavior. Or putting on his best show yet.

Before I even got to my car, I heard the front door shut. I looked back to see Mark walking toward me. He had a smirk on his face I wanted to punch off it. “That’s right, run away. You know you’ll be kicked to the curb soon enough. Gus and Peggy don’t want anything to do with you.”

I whipped around, fists clenched, and glared at him. “They asked me if we were getting married, so maybe you’re wrong.” I didn’t even feel the chill of the air though I knew it was below zero. I was too angry with him.

“What did you say?” he asked, stepping so close I could smell the whiskey on his breath.

“I said, they asked me if I was planning to wed her, and I am. So you’ll be the one saying goodbye soon enough.” My jaw tightened, and I realized what I was doing. I was facing off with him for no other reason than I hated him. I was jealous that he had her attention for any reason whatsoever, even the positive one of remembering. And I was angry that I hadn’t met her sooner and that I had lied to her.

“You’d better watch yourself, Lewis.”

“Or what?” I stepped forward, pressing my chest against his. I thought for a split second about hammering this jerk. It would serve him right for touching Lily even once. But I couldn’t. It would make her think less of me, and that was something I didn’t need.

“Or you’re going to regret the day you lied about Lily.” His nostrils flared, and he looked up at me. He was easily six inches shorter, way weaker, and I could take him if I wanted. “You think I don’t know you lied? You never slept with her once. She doesn’t remember you at all. You’re going down, Doc, and I don’t even have to do anything. You’re sinking your own ship.”

I backed away before I did something I would regret. “Oh, and Doc? I’ll bring her home—if she wants to go back to that hole you call a house.”

I resisted the urge to peel out as I pulled away, but God, did I want to. I had enough of an uphill battle to keep Lily with all the lies I’d told. I couldn’t add emotionally immature reactions into the mix. I just prayed she’d come home so I could tell her the truth now.

It was nearly ten p.m. by the time I got back to Ethan's place. Mark drove me home, against my better judgment, but it was that or have my dad out this time of night, and I knew he normally went to bed before nine most nights. I couldn't put that burden on him, so instead, I accepted the ride with Mark even though dinner had proven one thing to me—I didn't belong with him at all.

Ethan sat on the couch, feet propped up on the coffee table. There were four empty beer bottles next to his feet, one in his hand almost full, glistening with condensation. I dropped the key on the table by the door and took off my coat and hung it with my purse on the coat tree next to the door. He said nothing as I shucked my boots and slunk over to the sofa. I didn't understand why he had been so irritated with Mark's arrival at first, but the longer dinner went on, I understood.

My parents clearly favored Mark, probably because he'd been a part of my life they knew about. I'd kept Ethan a secret from everyone, including my best friend, which had been driven, no doubt, by fear and shame. Then, I hadn't told them about Mark's abuse either, which I knew in my gut had happened more than just the one time I remembered.

"Hey," he grunted, still halfway glowering as he stared at the muted television. An old black and white version of *Miracle on Twenty-Fourth Street* was on. It was the time of year we should have been cuddling and watching Bing Crosby, but something had happened between us tonight that I knew we needed to talk about. Ethan got jealous, and while I loved

that he cared enough to fear my leaving him, it wasn't a good look on him at all.

"Hi," I responded, resting my head on the back of the couch facing him. I sat with one knee drawn up, leaving room for my ever-growing belly to expand. I'd eaten too much and needed the added space. At least my pants were just leggings—which I practically lived in anymore—so they weren't too tight. I rested my hand on my belly and felt the baby move, so I took his hand and put it there.

Ethan didn't respond the way I thought. I hoped it would make him smile or reach for me. But he frowned deeply and pulled his hand away. I snatched it back quickly, lacing my fingers through his. I knew he was upset with me and I didn't know how to start the conversation. Luckily for me, he did.

"Why didn't you tell me he was coming ahead of time?" There was so much hurt in his eyes. Part of me wanted to be upset with him for not just supporting me, but I loved him too much to be upset. I knew it affected his emotions too.

"I didn't think." I raised his hand to my lips and kissed his knuckles. "I should have said something. The therapist recommended my being in situations with him that were safe. You know, where he couldn't hurt me. In ways that might reveal his true nature. I saw the way he followed you to the car and I saw the interaction. I couldn't hear what he said, but I got the point. He threatened you, didn't he?"

Ethan shrugged. He was too kind of a person to talk badly about Mark. I'd learned that much. He wanted me to understand on my own and make my own choice.

"Why'd you come back here, anyway?" Again, he tried to pull his hand away, but I kept hold of it.

"Because I came to the conclusion that Mark is not what I want." I looked down at my finger where I knew a ring was at some point. Hearing my father ask Ethan if he was going to marry me cemented it for me. "I don't want him, Ethan. He makes me uncomfortable and nervous. I don't feel at ease with him." I looked back up at his eyes which were brimming with tears. "I want you. I want us."

“What?” He blinked, and a few tears cascaded down his cheeks.

“I am in love with you and I want to marry you.” I stopped short but then decided to explain. “I know what you said to Dad wasn’t a proposal, but if it had been, I’d have said emphatically, yes!” I smiled and kissed his knuckles again.

Ethan looked conflicted and in pain, but he pulled me toward himself. I scooted along the couch and leaned in for a kiss. As I pressed my lips against his, I felt a tingle run down my spine. Ethan’s hands wrapped around my waist, pulling me closer to him. I could feel his hard body against mine, and a moan escaped my lips.

“You love me?” he asked, panting between kisses.

“Yes, bud. I really do.” I found myself being guided onto his lap where my belly prevented us from really being close. I tried to lean over and kiss him, but it made it hard to breathe. Then the baby kicked and I snickered. “Looks like someone doesn’t want me to kiss you.”

“Hmm, well, do you want to kiss me?”

“Heck yes, I do.” I grinned at him and tried again to kiss him, only to receive another kick to my ribs. I smiled against his mouth and it was his turn to snicker.

“I have an idea...” Ethan started to stand, so I slid off his lap and took his hand. He led me to the bedroom and took my hips, parking me by the corner of the bed.

“What’s this?” I asked as he pulled his shirt off. I could tell he was a little buzzed. His movements were a bit slow and clumsy. But when he tugged his jeans off, then turned to pull my leggings down, I got the point. “Ah... So you want to do more than kiss...”

“I want to eat you until you can’t stand.” Ethan dropped to his knees, pulling my panties down. I stepped out of them and grabbed the corner post of the bed behind me for balance as he lifted one of my legs up.

“Oh, God. You expect me to balance?”

“Here,” he said, draping my leg over his shoulder before attacking my pussy with kisses and licking me. My fingers dug into the post in the headboard as he licked and sucked my clit.

“Ethan...” I said, shuddering. “God... I can’t even think... You have to... Slow down...”

He looked up at me and smiled before sinking two fingers inside me, curling them upward. I gasped, and my pussy clenched down on his fingers as he made a scissoring motion, pushing in and pulling out. He curled them downward again, hitting a sweet spot deep inside me. It was difficult to see him with my belly in the way, so I just shut my eyes and enjoyed it. Whatever had come over him, I was loving it.

“Oh, God... Ethan... I’m going to...” I didn’t even finish the sentence when I came apart on his tongue. My legs shook, and I dropped my hand from the bedpost to his head, holding him against my pussy as I rode out the orgasm. My body jolted and shuddered. I barely kept myself upright. The orgasm created hard contractions in my stomach that only made the sensations more pleasurable as his fingers thrust into me.

When it slowed, I assumed he’d want to have his turn, but he insisted on continuing to suck me. “God, that was amazing,” I said, pushing him away, but he eagerly forced his face between my legs and kept eating me.

“Mmm,” he growled, and the vibration shook my core.

“Ethan...” I tried to say, but it came out as a moan. My legs shook and I looked down at him. The way his head bobbed and dipped into me was erotic, and he looked like he was enjoying himself. I had to admit, I was loving it too. I couldn’t take my eyes off him. I was so turned on by the back of his head emerging then disappearing from view. I writhed and twisted, but he held on to me with his free hand, holding me steady against his mouth. I had a second orgasm, even more intense than the first. My pussy clenched around his fingers, and I threw my head back. I was panting and gasping and trying to catch my breath when he finally pulled his fingers out.

“God... Ethan...” I put my other leg over his shoulder, and he went to town on my pussy, licking and sucking. My arms barely held me up, but he bore up under the weight and kept eating me. I didn't know how much more of this I could take. It was incredible.

I was seriously weak in the knees when he gently took one leg, then the other, and set my feet back on the ground. My body jittered and shook. I had a stupid grin on my face, and I looked down at him. He was really good at this.

“G od, you taste good,” I murmured as I licked my lips and looked up at Lily, the smile on my face widening as I saw her expression. She looked drunk, lust haze over her eyes as her head bobbed. “I love making you come.” I took her hand and slowly stood up with her help. She crawled over the bed—the only way sex would be possible at this point. Her growing belly made it difficult any other way.

Her voice was husky when she whispered, “Come here.” She moved her hands to spread herself even wider, the motion sending shivers down my spine. I stroked myself as I leaned forward and kissed her backside. She was so hot I could jack off just looking at her, but I spread her wider with my hands and licked up her slit again. Her whole body jolted and moaned in response, and all I could think about was how ready she was for me.

“Please...” she groaned.

“Patience,” I whispered against her skin, kissing her thigh. “I’m going to make you come again.”

I lapped at her slit. She trembled and whimpered as I flicked my tongue around and caressed her clit. I could feel her growing ever wetter, and I wanted nothing more than to plunge deep inside her. I pulled away with great reluctance and stood, easing myself between her thighs. I slowly pushed in, taking care to keep it gentle for the both of us. Her gasps of pleasure filled the room as I thrust deeper and deeper, our bodies becoming one.

“Please...” she whimpered. I watched her fingers claw at the comforter, squeezing it, so turned on that she couldn’t stand it anymore. I thrust harder, harder. I could feel her tightening around me, and I knew she was close.

“Wow, I want to do this to you every day of my life,” I moaned. Her hips were the perfect handles, round and full. I pulled her back as I thrust forward and listened to her whimpers of pleasure grow louder and more intense. “Did you like when I was eating you?”

“God, yes,” she mewled. “I love when you eat me.”

“You’re a good girl, aren’t you?”

“I’m a good girl,” she whimpered, and I thrust harder.

“Say it again. Say you’re a good girl.”

“Oh, God, I’m a good girl.” Her body tensed, her breaths as guttural gasps, and she clenched around me hard.

“You feel so amazing...” I groaned. My balls tightened as I continued thrusting, and my orgasm was close. It was so close to exploding inside her. She let out a long, low moan of pleasure, and I followed her over the edge, my orgasm shattering throughout my entire body.

I held on to her as she bucked against me and cried out. She probably said, “Oh, my God,” a hundred times, and by the time our orgasms had passed, I was exhausted and covered in sweat. We collapsed onto the bed, and I pulled her into my chest as she heaved to catch her breath. I hated how I’d left things at her parents’ house and I never even expected her to come back. So when she did, I felt relieved and panicked at the same time.

“I’m so in love with you, Lily.” I kissed the back of her head as she pushed some hair out of her face. Then she clung to my hands and nestled back into me farther.

“I mean what I said, Ethan. I love you. I want to marry you, not Mark.”

My gut roiled, and I almost pulled away from her. I wanted to marry her so badly, but things were so messed up. The

review board was going to make sure I never got what I wanted, and it would destroy everything between us. But I had to let things play out. Continuing this lie was killing me inside.

Lily yawned and snuggled down onto the bed, and I was relieved when I heard soft snoring. I wanted to lie here and hold her longer, but guilt was eating me alive. I pulled away slowly, pausing when I felt like she might be stirring, then shoved my body into a pair of shorts and a T-shirt. I covered her with a blanket and let myself out. I'd initiated sex when I was buzzed, but the knowledge of what I'd done to her now that I was fully sober made me want to hide.

It was unbearable. I couldn't do it anymore. Even Mark had put his finger on the thorn in my side and pressed on it. Every second of every day felt like I was counting down to detonation and it was affecting my mental health. I sank onto the couch and opened another beer, chugging it. I needed someone to talk to, someone who knew what was going on and could knock some sense into me. But Emily would only gloat. Besides, I couldn't call her so late.

The only person I could speak with was Dr. Baker. Tim was a friend, albeit not my best or closest friend, but I had very few of them to begin with. My life was too cluttered with work to surround myself with people like that. I stared at my phone lying on the table for a few minutes before the urge to call him took over.

I dialed his number, but when it rang through I was disappointed by his greeting. "Davis, what the heck is wrong with you? Do you know what time it is?" He sounded sleepy, as if I'd awakened him. It was almost eleven p.m. but I didn't realize it until I heard his voice.

"Uh... Tim, I just wanted to talk to you about—"

"Look, kid, I know you're going through it, but I can't listen to you vent. The less I know, the better. Got it? If I were you, I'd focus on open communication with your patient before they call her in. You've got less than a week, the way I figure it. That's what you should be doing now. Go talk to her."

“Yeah...” I felt the wind sucked out of me.

“Goodnight, Ethan.”

I ended the call and locked my phone without even saying goodbye, then looked up at the bedroom door. Lily was already sleeping. Besides, after an encounter like that, I couldn't bring the crushing truth down on her. She loved me—she'd admitted as much. How could I hurt her like that again?

I set the empty beer bottle on the table and walked to the fridge, pulling out another six-pack. It seemed my only friends tonight were these six little beauties that would help me sleep. So, one after another, I chugged them as quickly as I could without making myself vomit. Then I pulled the blanket out of the closet and curled up on the couch. Sleeping next to her didn't feel right.

Nothing felt right anymore.

My phone chirping at me woke me up. At first I thought it was just the alarm going off, but the ringtone was wrong. I sat up and folded the covers back, noticing Ethan wasn't in bed. I didn't hear him in the shower, either. I reached for my phone and picked it up, recognizing the number as the hospital from all the calls back and forth with my therapist. I swiped across the screen and answered.

“Hello?” I was groggy, rubbing my eyes and yawning as I sat up to take the call. The woman on the other end of the line was altogether too chipper and happy for this time of morning, especially ten minutes before my alarm was set to wake me for my OB appointment.

“Good morning, Ms. Bennett. I'm Caroline Schuster from St. Rita's.” She paused as if I was supposed to say something, but in the dark room and just having woken up, I wasn't exactly thrilled to be on this call. “Uh, Ms. Bennett, I need to ask you to come to the hospital to speak with me and a few of my colleagues. We are a part of the ethics review board and we have a few questions about Dr. Lewis.”

I sat up and looked around the room. Ethan's sneakers were gone, as was his phone from his nightstand. He told me he'd take a run this morning, but I wanted him to go to my appointment today. It was ultrasound day and I wanted him there. I forgot to remind him last night, and with all this review board stuff on his mind, he probably just didn't remember.

“Uh, sure,” I mumbled mindlessly. I was distracted because I had to go alone now, which disappointed me. It was just a checkup, nothing special, but after talking about someday being married, I hoped Ethan would be excited about it.

“The meeting is set for Thursday afternoon. Can you make it around two p.m.?”

With nothing else on my schedule for the day, there was no good reason I couldn't. I agreed to the meeting knowing that whatever it was, Ethan needed my support, and we disconnected the call. He hadn't cleared anything up with me, though I'd asked him a few times. It had been almost three weeks since I left the hospital and moved in with him, but he didn't seem to want to open up about it despite our growing intimacy, even when I told him I wanted to marry him, not Mark.

I climbed out of bed and checked the living room to confirm my suspicion. Ethan wasn't home, which meant he was running. I had to be on time, though, so there was no way I could just wait around for him. If he wasn't here by the time I had to leave, I'd just have to go without him.

I showered and dressed, deciding to schedule an Uber to pick me up when he wasn't back by half-past nine. I knew my mother or Mark would have picked me up and taken me, but after being firm with Mark the other night and letting him know I didn't think it was going to work out, I knew it would only open a can of worms. Ethan was certain he was the father, but without a paternity test there was still a fifty-percent chance that Mark was the father. Besides, asking Mark to take me would anger Ethan, and asking my mother to take me would lead to more badgering about a paternity test, though Mom was lightening up on my wanting to be with Ethan.

The Uber driver honked the horn, and I snapped out of my obsessing about the ride issue. I snatched my coat and buttoned it up, shoving a hat on my head as I grabbed my purse and locked the house up. The walk was slippery from light precipitation overnight, and given how cold it was, everything was covered in a light layer of ice. I was careful as

I walked down the driveway and climbed in. The driver had Christmas carols blasting, which cheered me up as we headed across town.

There were so many things to be stressed or worried about this time of year, but Christmas cheer always made things better. Ethan had held me at arm's length over this ethics thing, but now I was being given the chance to support him and have his back. I knew if I told him, he'd just tell me not to worry about it, but he needed people to speak up for him, so I was happy to do it, and to not even tell him, either.

At the hospital, I climbed out of the Uber and turned my collar up against the biting wind. The air was so cold it hurt my face, but I wouldn't have it any other way. The changing of seasons in Ohio made summer and the warm sun overhead all the more enjoyable. Without the deep freeze, how would we know the kiss of the summer sun?

The waiting room was nearly full, but I managed to find a seat after I signed in. I'd seen several of these women multiple times before and remembered faces but not names. It niggled at my frustration over still not remembering Ethan despite remembering complete strangers in waiting rooms, but given the trauma I suffered, I wasn't surprised. Besides, the doctors, including Ethan, told me some memories may never come back and that I'd have to be okay with that.

"Lily?" a voice called, and I looked up to see a nurse holding a tablet in hand. She smiled and said, "We're ready for you."

I nodded and stood, glancing around at a few women who looked up at me. My stomach was so large now that it was obvious why I was here, though many of them had no such belly. I wondered why each of them were here, if they struggled with fertility or had just found out they were having a baby. I didn't remember the joy of learning I was pregnant or what Mark's reaction—or Ethan's reaction—might have been. There were still a lot of things that were foggy in my mind, not just my past with Ethan, and that gave me hope that I would still remember him.

I followed the nurse to an exam room where she had me put my things down and sit on the table and roll up my sleeve. She chatted happily as she took my blood pressure and listened to my heartbeat. Her hands were cold when she pressed the tool against my belly to listen to the baby's heartbeat and she grinned. "He's a strong one."

"It's a girl, actually," I corrected her. I pulled my shirt back over my stomach as she typed a few things into her tablet then smiled up at me.

"Dr. Anderson will be in soon. You can go ahead and lie down."

"Thank you." I waited until she stepped out before I lay down. The room was chilly. I wished I still had my coat on, but hopefully, it wouldn't take long. I had no clue what plans Ethan had for the day because he'd never told me, but I felt sad that he hadn't come with me. Given how moody he'd been for the past week or so, I decided to give him space. There was a Christmas village a few blocks away I'd thought about visiting. Maybe I'd do that when I was done here.

Dr. Anderson knocked before she walked in with a bright smile and my chart on the tablet in her hand. "Hey, Lily, how are you doing?" She set the tablet on the counter and pulled a pair of gloves out of a box and put them on.

"I'm okay. It's been a bit of a journey." Dr. Anderson was made aware of all the challenges of my amnesia, but she hadn't seen me since the accident. The doctor in the emergency department sent all my scans and files to her, though, so she knew everything.

"I can imagine. How is Mark? Why isn't he here today?"

I chewed the inside of my lip for a moment while trying to decide what to tell her. When I didn't answer, she moved on, picking up the paddle for the ultrasound machine and turning it on. I watched the screen light up and heard the fans whir to life. She focused on typing things into the machine and getting the settings correct, then she turned to me and set the paddle down.

“I want to feel a bit and see where our little gal’s head is. Is that okay?” She held her hands out in front of her, gloved and ready, and I nodded. I lifted my shirt up and exposed my belly, and she lowered the elastic of my leggings to expose more skin.

Her fingers lightly touched just above my belly button, and I looked away, fixing my gaze on the machine. She pushed harder, and I grimaced, finding it uncomfortable, and as my eyes shut, an image flashed into my mind. It was Mark grabbing my stomach and pushing me against a wall so hard it knocked my breath away. I swiped at him, shouting and kicking, and then I felt Dr. Anderson grabbing my wrists.

“Lily! Stop! Are you okay?” Her voice was loud, snapping me out of it, but I sat up like a light and covered my stomach.

“Oh, my God, I’m so sorry.” I lurched off the table and grabbed my coat and purse. “I’m so sorry, Dr. Anderson. I’ll reschedule, okay?”

I barely made it out of the office before I started crying profusely. I wandered down the hallway at the hospital, clutching my things in a tight bear hug. I was a complete wreck. The memory shocked me, but more than that, it terrified me. How could I have stayed with Mark that long if he was being abusive to me? I thought maybe I’d left him when he struck me and that was why he’d accused me of cheating on him, but this was a distinctly different situation.

I found a bench in the lobby and sat down. I could call Ethan, but he would only ask what was wrong, and with his review board situation, I didn’t want to bring him down. So despite having gotten into a disagreement with Erin, I dialed her number, because God knows, I needed someone now.

“Hey, Lil. I didn’t think you’d ever speak with me again.”

“Erin,” I sobbed, “I need you.”

“Hey, whoa. What’s wrong?”

I sniffled and looked around at a few people gawking at me who immediately looked away. “Can you meet me at the Christmas Village near the hospital?”

“Yeah, babe. I’ll be there in ten minutes. On the north side?” I could always count on Erin to be there for me even if we were in a disagreement.

“Yes. Thank you.” I hung up and put my coat on. I knew it would be a cold walk, but it was better than being stared at as I cried. I swiped at my eyes and sniffled again, then tugged my hat on and headed out of the hospital.

The crisp air froze my nostrils—literally—the mucus inside them clinging to my skin, making it hurt. My eyelashes formed frost, but I walked across the street into the stretch of property where tiny huts were lined with lights and ornaments. Vendors had set up food trucks and cocoa stands. A few craft merchants had racks of toys and handmade items for sale. I quickly got lost in the magic of the Christmas feel and was startled when Erin tapped on my shoulder.

“Hey,” she said, and I turned and wrapped my arms around her. “What happened? Is the baby okay? Did you have an appointment?”

Leave it to her to be everything I needed. I pushed away, and she shoved a tissue in my hand, so I blew my nose and I swore there were icicles in there.

“Uh, I had one, but I had this flashback and...”

“Here, let’s sit down.” She guided me to a bench, and we sat. There was a giant outdoor heater blasting warm air in our direction, so it was slightly more tolerable as I unloaded on her and told her all about the memory. Erin soured when she heard Mark had abused me more than questioned why I hadn’t told her.

I had no reason not to tell her, except for fear. Maybe he’d threatened me, or maybe I was ashamed for getting myself into that. But when she asked me about Ethan, I found myself defending him again.

“How can you trust Ethan if you don’t remember him? Lily, you don’t have to be with either of them. Come live with me. You’ll meet someone new.”

I turned away from her and sighed. She would never understand that there were other things I didn't remember either, which meant my memories were still coming back. I stared off into the village and watched a man and a woman with a toddler by one of the cocoa vendors. It made me wish Ethan were here, that this was our baby and we were having a family day—not this drama of remembering a bad memory.

“I love him...” I mumbled, craving my future with him so badly I could almost taste that cocoa that clung to the woman's upper lip as if I had drunk it myself.

“But how can you trust him? Lily, it's insane.”

Insane or not, I knew more than ever that things with Mark were over. Ethan and I just had to get through this review thing, and then he'd be more emotionally available to help me remember. That's all...

ETHAN

I stared at Amily with a very less-than-professional glare on my face. It wasn't even her fault. It was totally mine, but my frustrations had come to a head and there was no one to take it out on. I found myself shouting at her despite knowing how it would only make things worse.

"You made the choice, Ethan, now live with it." She shook her head at me and tapped her toe. "How can you tell me thank you for being ethical a few weeks ago, and now this?" Gesturing with her hand, she backed away.

"It's ruining my career and things with—"

"Ethan, can I see you, please?" Dr. Baker's voice stopped me mid-sentence. I turned to see him standing in his open doorway with a grumpy expression. When I turned back to Amily, she rolled her eyes and started to walk away.

I had no choice but to reluctantly retreat into his office with my shame and guilt wrapped around me yet again. Going off on Amily was the wrong choice, but what was done was done. I sat across from Dr. Baker and slouched in the chair. I'd been nothing but a nasty curmudgeon for days now. No matter what anyone said or did for me, I couldn't shake the funk.

"Ethan, the board called Ms. Bennett. Did you know that?"

My worst fear smacked me in the face. I looked up at him in shock and shook my head. My jaw hung slack, my hands instantly sweaty. Lily hadn't said a thing, though I'd been gone from the house all day yesterday and today so far. I was avoiding her because just looking at her made it worse. There

was nothing more in life that I wanted than to be with her and be happy, but every time I saw her face, I saw the end, a crashing, burning explosion of pain and suffering for her and everyone else involved.

“The meeting is tomorrow. She’s agreed to come in the afternoon and speak with the board. Have you spoken with her?” Dr. Baker was only trying to do his job and be a good friend. I couldn’t fault him or be angry with him either.

“Uh... no. I haven’t had a chance.” I fumbled with what to say because I knew what would come next. There was no explanation for my behavior.

“You realize that if she hears this news from them, it will be worse for you? And that as a doctor, you should do everything in your power to help her ease into the upsetting situation in a way that doesn’t shock her still-healing brain even more?”

My head dropped and I let the air escape my lungs. I knew he was right, but there was no way I could ever tell her. I couldn’t bear to see the pain in her eyes when she found out, knowing it was my fault. Dr. Baker went on, lecturing me for at least a half-hour, but my mind was so submerged in feeling sorry for myself that I heard very little of it. When he was finished, I got up and walked to my car feeling despondent. I drove home in the same manner, and when I pulled up outside the house, I almost didn’t go in.

It physically pained me to climb out of my car and head for the house.

When I opened the door, I saw her cooking at the stove. She glanced up at me and smiled. “Hey, bud, I’m glad you’re home. I haven’t seen you in a few days. I thought you were off work?” She stirred, and I shut the door, hanging my coat on the coat rack. The scent was heavenly, but it didn’t even make my mouth water. I had no appetite.

I sighed and walked over to her, wrapping my arms around her warm body. I kissed the top of her head and said, “Yeah, I had a few errands to run and some work meetings. It was all pretty tiring.” That wasn’t exactly a lie. I had been running

around town all day trying to keep my mind off things, but that still wasn't enough to fill up the time.

The truth was that I had been struggling internally for weeks now and it was starting to take its toll on me. Even though I wanted so badly to tell her what was going on inside my head, I just couldn't bring myself to do it. She deserved better than this. She deserved someone who could open up and talk about their feelings without fear or shame.

But Lily didn't complain. Instead, she just looked at me with her big, beautiful eyes and said, "It's okay. You don't have to tell me what's wrong if you don't want to. I'm here for you whenever you're ready to talk." Then she pulled me close and kissed my forehead.

The warmth of her embrace was so comforting that it felt like a balm for my soul and a knife through my heart all at once. I closed my eyes and breathed in the scent of her hair, feeling her body against mine. She held me tightly as if to remind me that I wasn't alone in this world, that no matter what happened, she would always be there for me. I just got overwhelmed with a sense that I had betrayed her and I pulled away.

I sat down to eat. She'd prepared chicken stir-fry and white rice. Any other night, I'd have devoured this, but I picked at it. She looked at me, a little concerned. "Honey, is everything okay? You're not eating much and you seem so quiet."

I just shook my head and said, "I'm fine." Even in the short few weeks we'd lived together, she'd gotten to know me well enough to know I was definitely not okay. I shoved more food in my mouth to avoid talking to her, and the rest of the meal was observed in silence.

"Ethan, I love you. You can tell me." I looked up at her, tears welling in my eyes. I wanted to tell her everything, but I just couldn't bring myself to do it. She saw the distress on my face and understanding crossed her features.

She reached out and touched my hand gently, squeezing it in reassurance before standing up. "Come on," she said softly,

taking me by the hand. We walked to the bedroom together and she followed me into the bathroom to shower.

It was the one place I always felt comforted, allowing the hot water to wash over my skin and scald me. It felt like even this place, however, had been tainted. There was no comfort for my soul. I was carrying the weight of her pain inside me and she hadn't even felt a drop of it yet.

We washed each other, but we didn't speak. It was a silent understanding that she would be there for me when I was ready to talk, no matter how long it took. We just stood in the shower, embracing each other until the water ran cold and then went back to the bedroom. She tried to seduce me, but I was too lost in my own thoughts. She kissed me and caressed my body, trying to get a reaction out of me, but all I could do was lie there like a dead man. I wanted to give in to her advances, but I just couldn't bring myself to do it.

She stopped and looked into my eyes with a sad expression on her face. "I'm here for you," she said softly. "Whenever you're ready, you can tell me what's wrong."

This woman was so incredible. I didn't deserve her at all. I pulled her against my chest and covered us both with the blanket. Having her in my arms was right. It was perfect and pure and everything I needed. But she wasn't mine, at least not until she made the conscious choice after having heard the truth, and that wasn't something I was betting on.

"Lily..." I kissed the back of her head, her hair still damp from the shower.

"Yes, bud?" She tried to turn and face me, but I held her firmly in place.

"If you learn things about me in the next few days, can you promise me something?" My heart was breaking, but it was the only way to communicate that she was about to be hurt in a bad way and I couldn't stop it.

"Of course, bud. Anything."

"Just know that I'm not a horrible person and that everything I have done, I've done because I truly and deeply

love you.” Tears welled up, but I blinked them back. “I would never, ever do anything to hurt you, and I only want you to be the happiest woman alive.”

“I don’t understand...” she said in a confused tone.

“Just promise me.”

“Okay, I promise.” She kissed my hand and sighed, and I felt even worse, but I lay there holding her until she was snoring.

Tomorrow was the day she’d walk out that door and never come back. I wanted to freeze time because I couldn’t lose her. I’d have nothing...

I sat waiting in a chair outside the door of the hospital conference room for thirty minutes. I was early, but they were running late anyway. Ethan's ethics review was as important to me as it was to him because I loved him and I wanted him to succeed. I didn't believe he had done anything wrong, and I was here to prove to the board that he was an incredible doctor.

At last, the door opened and I was ushered into the room. A long table filled the center of the room with a dozen people seated around it. Each one wore a stern expression as they looked up to meet my gaze. I was asked to take a seat at one end of the table and immediately felt intimidated by their presence.

The chair creaked beneath me as I settled in, and I felt my palms begin to sweat. It seemed like an eternity before someone finally spoke, but when they did, their words were direct and to the point "Ms. Bennet, welcome. We have some questions for you. Do you mind?"

I loosened my scarf and unbuttoned my coat and relaxed back. "Of course not. I'm here to answer anything you ask." The questions came quickly and without pause. They asked me about my care after the accident, the therapy I had gone through, how it had affected my life. I answered as honestly as I could. I thought things were going well too, and I didn't understand how Ethan could be so upset by all of this.

Until one particularly grumpy-looking older woman took her glasses off and folded her hands. She looked down her nose at me with narrowed eyes and asked, “Ms. Bennet, do you remember Ethan?”

The question felt like a punch in the gut, and I had to take a few moments to collect my thoughts before answering. I had indeed lost much of my memory from before the accident, but I did remember some things, and I was in love with him. He was kind and gentle, always there for me when I needed him. I took a deep breath and told them as much, admitting that while I remembered Ethan in general, I couldn’t recall specifics about him or our relationship before the accident.

The woman nodded slowly and then asked, “And he said the child you’re carrying belongs to him?”

My heart began to race and I felt like the room was spinning. I had no idea how to answer this question, and I could feel my face growing hot with embarrassment. I stammered out a few words before finally managing to say, “Yes, he believes it’s his.”

The room fell silent for what seemed like an eternity as they all looked at me with piercing eyes. I couldn’t help but feel concerned and fearful about their questions, wondering what would happen if they decided Ethan wasn’t fit to be a doctor after all. He had treated me as a patient against what is considered ethical.

“But he was perfectly professional while caring for me.” I wanted to protest more, but I didn’t want to make things worse for him. The door creaked open and then shut, and I saw my therapist walk in with a man about her age. I didn’t know who he was, but I felt more confident with the therapist here.

“Ms. Bennett, have you had a paternity test?” My heart sank, and I felt like I was going to faint. I’d told my mother no several times, and now the room was waiting for my answer. I shook my head no, unable to find the words to explain why. My palms were sweaty and my mouth felt dry. I thought I might throw up.

“Uh, Ms. Chairman, if you will, I think Ms. Bennett has answered enough questions. You can conclude your investigation now without her.” My therapist walked over to me and helped me stand. I felt a bit light-headed, but I followed her into the hallway.

Once we were outside, she put her arm around me and pulled me close. “It’s okay,” she said softly. “You did a great job in there. You can go home now and rest.” She smiled at me reassuringly, and I felt a sense of comfort wash over me.

“Thank you,” I said quietly, my voice barely above a whisper. She nodded and gave my shoulder one last squeeze before turning to leave. That ethics board was no joke. It was no wonder Ethan was so upset for weeks. He probably feared for his job. I wanted to get back to him and hold him close.

I bundled up and climbed into the car. It was the first time I’d driven since the accident, and my parents had let me borrow their car. I pulled into traffic and tried to focus on the road ahead. But my mind kept wandering back to that day when I had argued with Mark, and how it had led me here. I thought of all the pain and suffering I’d gone through and how far I’d come since then. But I knew Ethan was waiting for me at home, and I couldn’t wait to be in his arms again. He was the only one who could make me feel safe now, no matter what happened in the future.

When I turned down a side street, I lost focus. My mind began to wander, and I found myself remembering the argument with Mark. He had been so cruel, yelling and screaming at me that day. I remembered his angry accusations of cheating, how they had cut deep into my soul like a knife. His abuse was relentless, and he refused to listen to reason. Tears started streaming down my face as I remembered how scared I was as he struck me again and again.

Then it hit me. I would never have been upset with his accusations if I hadn’t been innocent. I slammed on the brakes and the car came to a stop. I looked up at the sky and let out a deep sob of pain. Ethan wasn’t the father of my baby. I knew it in my heart. In fact, Erin’s words rang out in my memory,

piercing me through. I pulled into a parking spot and cried so hard I couldn't see. She had been right all along.

I didn't remember Ethan because he hadn't been a part of my life before the accident. I wiped away my tears and took a deep breath, trying to calm down. I was confused and angry. Why would he lie to me? I felt like an idiot for not believing my best friend since childhood.

I remembered everything, months of abuse from Mark, threatening to make me miscarry my baby because he didn't want it. The angry, hateful words he spewed at me about my parents, and Erin too. It was no wonder I hadn't told her a thing. I was ashamed and terrified of him. I was planning to leave him, and he accused me of cheating. That was the last straw. I had fled his house and gotten into an accident the same day.

I called my mom, needing her comfort. I knew she'd understand and help me through this. There was no way I could handle it on my own. She answered the phone with a warm hello, and I just started crying. She listened patiently as I told her everything that had happened.

"It's ok, sweetheart," she said softly when I finished. "Where are you? Daddy and I will come get you."

I heard her grumble something about Mark but she had covered the receiver. They had good reason to doubt me about Ethan, but I knew she believed me about Mark. I fumbled out an address where they could pick me and the car up, and then I hung up and waited. I couldn't face Ethan again, at least not until I absorbed all of this.

I loved him so much and he had hurt me so badly. It was nothing but a lie—all of it... Or maybe not all of it. I loved him, and that much was real. I could tell by the way my heart felt shredded. Ethan was supposed to be my everything.

Now, what was he?

My feet slapped the pavement as I sucked in the biting cold air. I was sweating despite the wind chill of below ten degrees. It felt good to run off some of my frustration and anxiety. Lily seemed happy enough all morning, though I brooded around the house the entire time. When her mother called and asked her to have lunch, she kissed me goodbye, and I was alone with my thoughts. It was torture, so I went out for a run.

Now, more than two hours later, I sulked up my driveway. I wasn't training for a marathon, but anyone who had seen me on my runs the past few weeks would have thought that. I put in more than fifteen miles each time, looping around the neighborhood until I got bored of the scenery and then dashing through the park several times. I was thirsty and exhausted. My feet hurt, and if I didn't get out of the cold, I'd end up with severe frostbite, so I had to stop.

Back at my house, though, I was disappointed to see Lily's car wasn't here. It was nearing three p.m. and she'd left just after noon. I knew today was the review board where she was set to testify. Dr. Baker had given me that heads up, and it ate me up inside, which was the reason for most of my anxiety this morning. Even if they didn't tell her the truth, all of that was reason enough for her to have memories or flashbacks.

If she remembered good parts about Mark, I'd have competition, but if she remembered that she had never met me before, I'd have nothing. I knew in my gut that it would happen eventually, but I'd been praying that it would just be

one more day. One more interaction with her to cherish her smile and her warmth before she was just gone.

Today was that day.

I trudged into the empty house and shed my hoodie and hat. My shorts were damp from sweat and my T-shirt was soaked. I headed to the kitchen, desperate for a glass of water. I was surprised when I saw a piece of paper on the counter with my name on it.

I carefully unfolded the paper. It was from Lily, telling me that she would call me later. My heart roiled as I read her words over and over again, hoping this wasn't the end for us. The thought of losing her made my stomach churn with fear and dread, but I knew there was nothing else I could do. I had to wait for her call. I tried to distract myself. I turned on the TV, hoping to zone out to a mindless show, but my mind kept drifting back to Lily. The anxiety was building up inside me, and I couldn't take it anymore. I grabbed my phone and dialed Dr. Baker's number, but it went straight to voicemail. I hoped maybe he would have some news. Time was ticking past with no word from her.

The entire room was decorated for Christmas. She had hung glittering stars from the ceiling, and there were twinkling lights everywhere. There were even a few presents wrapped in red paper with golden ribbons beneath a tree that she must have put up in my absence. It all oozed with her presence, a presence that hadn't been here before she came. She was a smart lady. Why hadn't she figured that out yet?

I shook my head and tried to distract myself. I made myself a sandwich, trying to focus on the mundane task of slicing cheese, tomatoes, and lettuce. I sat there and forced myself to eat, but it was no use. Nothing I did could get my mind off the fact that everything was unraveling and I couldn't stop it. She probably knew everything now, which meant it was over. I was just waiting for the report of how badly it went—if I'd lose my job or be sued, or if I was just losing her.

I had to do something to get rid of this feeling. I turned off the kitchen light and made my way to the bathroom. I cranked

up the shower, letting it run until it was steaming hot. I stepped in and let the water cascade over me, feeling its warmth ease away some of my heartache. The droplets beat against my skin like tiny drums, lulling me into a trance-like state and washing away all of my worries. After what felt like hours under the shower's healing embrace, I emerged refreshed and renewed. I dried off with a soft towel and wrapped myself up in a warm robe before making my way back into the living room.

The tree was twinkling merrily in front of me, beckoning me closer with its soft glow. I grabbed one of Lily's presents from beneath it and held it close to my chest as if it were hugging me back, giving me hope that things would be alright. My phone buzzed suddenly on the table beside me—it was Lily's call!

I dropped the gift on the couch and picked up my phone, yanking the headphone cable out of the jack, but when I turned it over, I noticed it wasn't from Lily at all. It was Dr. Baker returning my call. My heart sank as I answered the call.

“Hello?”

“Ethan, I saw a missed a call from you. Are you sitting down?” Dr. Baker never spoke to me in this tone before and I didn't even want to know why he was now.

“Yes, I am. What is it?”

He sighed and said, “The review board has decided to put you on administrative leave for the time being until they can come to a decision on what to do about your case.”

My heart sank even further. “What does that mean?”

“It means you should take some time off and come back when they make their decision. Now, about Lily...”

I could feel my face grow hot with shame as I realized what had happened. “She knows,” I said softly.

Dr. Baker sighed sadly and continued, “Yes, she does. I'm sorry to say that she was very upset when she left here over an hour ago. She was in tears and quite shaken up. Her therapist tried to console her, but it didn't seem to do much good.”

I felt my stomach twist into knots as the reality of the situation settled in. Everything was slipping away from me and there was nothing I could do about it. All I could do now was wait and hope what I said to her last night meant something. I promised her I'd never hurt her.

“Thank you, Dr. Baker.”

“One last thing. The board will have their decision next week on Wednesday. I'll email you the details. Take care of yourself, Ethan.”

I hung up the phone and sat there in silence for a few minutes, trying to process what had just happened. I felt like I was in a fog and my heart was racing. I wanted to call Lily, but I knew it wouldn't do any good. She was probably too hurt and angry to even talk to me right now.

So instead, I got up and slowly trudged back into my bedroom, where I curled up on the bed with a pillow clutched tightly against my chest. The thought of her being so upset made me feel ashamed and embarrassed that this had happened in the first place. It was entirely my fault, and I should have stopped it before it started. I'd lost her now. She'd probably end up going back to that jerk of a man Mark, and I couldn't stand the thought of that.

I could go to her parents' house, but if she'd already told them, they'd hate me. I'd be lucky to get out of this without criminal charges now. It was over. Nothing left to do but await the consequences.

I drifted off to sleep and slept hard for the first time in weeks.

For the past three days, I'd sat around my parents' house agonizing over what to do. I didn't even tell Erin until yesterday, and she insisted—along with my parents—that a paternity test was in order. Dad offered to pay for it all, and knowing it was as simple as a blood test, I decided to do it. So last night, I texted Ethan and Mark and told them I was having it done. I didn't want to. I never wanted to, but the only way my parents and Mark would ever believe me was to have it.

For the past few weeks, I'd been fully convinced that my baby belonged to Ethan. That I'd cheated on Mark. None of it was true. Not a shred of it. I didn't need the paternity results at all to know this baby belonged to Mark, but after how many times I swore to my family that Ethan was being truthful, they doubted me. In fact, Mom was upset with me when I rejected the past thirty calls from Ethan's number. She'd tried to answer the phone, so I dropped it in water.

Luckily, it dried out and still worked, but I was upset, to say the least. So now, I sat in the waiting room with Erin beside me, waiting for Mark and Ethan to show up. I wasn't pleased about seeing either one of them. One had beaten me on more than one occasion, and the other had lied to my face for weeks about everything. I hugged my arms over my stomach and rocked. Erin's hand rubbed my back in a circle.

"It's going to be okay, Lily. You'll get back on track with Mark and—"

“You don’t get it, do you?” I wasn’t trying to snap at her, but she didn’t understand. Maybe she still thought I was making up the abuse or that I didn’t remember correctly, or that Ethan had planted those ideas in my mind.

“You don’t still think he hit you, do you?” Her tone shifted. She did doubt me.

“I remembered it, Erin.” I shrugged and sighed. There was no point trying to explain myself again. She had the same protest every single time—the one she used when she was trying to convince me that Ethan wasn’t being honest. It was true about him but not about this.

“Lily, you never said a word. You’d have told me. You tell me everything.” And there it was. I shook my head and rolled my eyes, and the door opened.

Mark walked through the door wearing a concerned expression on his face. Ethan followed close behind, looking nervous and fidgety. I shifted in my seat, avoiding eye contact. I was upset with both of them and they both knew why. I didn’t even have to say it.

“What’s going on, Lily? Why did you want us both here?” Mark asked, breaking the hug and holding me at arm’s length. I took a deep breath and looked up at him. “You know it’s mine and that guy’s a loser.” He crouched in front of me, and I looked away. Erin withdrew her hand, and I glowered at Ethan, who took a seat across the room, right where I was looking.

“It’s what the therapist suggested.” Now here, I was lying. I didn’t even know why I’d asked them both. Maybe I did want to see Ethan. Maybe I wanted to tell him how he’d hurt me. But I looked at him—head hanging, hands wringing in his lap—he was hurting too. It made my heart ache.

“Ms. Bennett, we’re ready for you and your party.” A nurse interrupted, and I was thankful. I stood, and Mark did too. Erin grasped my hand and walked with me, and the guys followed us back to the exam room. As we walked, I couldn’t help but feel a sense of dread wash over me. I didn’t want to

face this alone. Ethan was the last person I wanted to see right now, but I couldn't deny that I wanted him to be there too.

The doctor was kind and understanding. It was like she dealt with this a lot. I felt ashamed, though, because even though I hadn't cheated on Mark prior to the accident, after the fact, I was completely guilty of it. I had thrown myself at Ethan in an attempt to make myself remember, and he'd played into it so well I never doubted him. Anger bubbled in my chest at that thought.

"We're ready to draw some blood. Could each of you roll up your shirt sleeve?" The doctor donned some blue gloves and sat on her stool. She had three blood-draw kits arranged on the table. I glanced at Erin nervously, and she let go of my hand.

"Uh, how soon will we get the results?" I asked her, realizing it sounded stupid as soon as I said it.

The doctor smiled sympathetically. "It'll take a day or two to get the results back. I'll call you as soon as we know."

I nodded and rolled up my sleeve. Erin held my coat as I sat in the chair across from the doctor. I clamped my eyes shut, feeling the prick of the needle as the doctor drew my blood. Mark left his coat on his seat when it was his turn, but Ethan clutched his nervously. Mark was a chatterbox, sort of arrogant and haughty. He definitely wasn't the sort of guy I'd be attracted to, but he wasn't like this when we met. He was different—a charmer. A lot more like Ethan was now.

I looked up at Ethan, who was sad and despondent. My heart ached seeing him like this. It was as if he were blaming himself for the accident. I wanted to reach out to him, to comfort him, but I couldn't. Not after what he did.

Still, I hoped against hope that somehow, I was entirely wrong. That somehow, Ethan wasn't lying, that my baby really was his, and that the love I had for him could somehow be strong enough to fix it all and we'd end up together. I did love him, even if I fell in love with him after the accident. Why should that matter?

But he lied...

The doctor finished drawing Ethan's blood and wrote down some notes on her clipboard before standing up. "Alright, we're all done here. I'll call you with the results as soon as we have them."

I watched as Ethan stood up from the chair and put his coat on, hands shoved deep into his pockets. His eyes were downcast, his shoulders slumped in defeat. I could tell that he was struggling. I was struggling too, just seeing him hurt. Mark, however, was bubbly, thanking the doctor and leading the charge out the door toward the waiting room. He turned to say something, but Erin glared at him and he recoiled, shaking his head and leaving without another word.

Ethan stopped by the door and offered a remorseful glance my way. I opened my mouth, but no words would come out. His shoulders fell and he mouthed, "I'm sorry," before he sighed and left. All I could do was watch him walk away. Erin kept glancing at me as though she was waiting for me to say something. But what could I say? All I could think about was Ethan's betrayal.

She noticed my distant expression and put a hand on my shoulder. "Are you okay?" she asked, concern etched on her face.

I sighed and shook my head. "I don't know, Erin. I feel like I've been living in a lie for so long."

She hugged me tightly, and I felt a lump form in my throat as tears threatened to spill. "I'm here for you, always," she whispered. "Now, let's go to the mall and see Santa. I know you're not two anymore, but it will cheer you up to see all the kids. You'll be back to teaching when the baby is born once Christmas is over, right?"

I nodded, but my heart wasn't even thinking about getting back to work now. I didn't know what I wanted anymore.

I put my coat on and followed Erin out the door. We drove to the mall, but I couldn't shake my growing depression. If it

was this bad before the baby came, how would postpartum work?

Erin must have sensed my thoughts because she started to sing Christmas carols, a smile on her face. She even brought candy canes for us to snack on while we watched the children wait in line to see Santa. She was trying so hard, but I just wasn't in the mood for any of it. My Christmas miracle was supposed to have been remembering Ethan and being so in love.

I got the "in love" part, but with an immense amount of heartbreak. Now, I wanted my Christmas miracle to be something else—to erase the lies and make him really exist in my life before the accident. It was the only way to reconcile in my heart why Mark was so angry with me before and why I had failed him so badly that he'd hurt me physically. It was also the only way to redeem the future and my child.

"I need to go home," I blurted out, making a beeline for the door. Erin didn't ask any questions. She followed me and obediently drove me home, where I curled into a ball and cried myself to sleep.

It was my worst nightmare, only it was real, and I wanted to wake up from it to be in Ethan's arms.

ETHAN

It had been seven days since I spoke to Lily other than the brief but almost silent interaction at the hospital for the paternity blood draw three days ago. I had pretty much gotten back into my daily routine of coffee, running, and showering each morning, but it was difficult to motivate myself the rest of the day, especially given the fact that I'd be on administrative leave for three weeks following my vacation time I took to be with her.

I bounced my knee nervously as I awaited the board members. Dr. Baker sat next to me at the table, going through patient files. He never let a moment pass him by where he wasn't working. It was my nature too, until all this happened. Now, I'd been restricted from accessing anything in the hospital network and all of my patients had been shifted to a different neurologist in the department.

It was bad enough to be under scrutiny, but to know everyone in the department and probably a majority of the folks who worked here were now talking about me... There was no way to keep it silent once Amily got talking. And people believed what they wanted to, despite having no facts to back any of their rumors.

"You're making me nervous, Son. Just relax." Dr. Baker didn't look up from his files, but I stopped bouncing my foot, instead choosing to unfold a paper clip and then refold it a number of times.

When the doors opened and the board members filed in, I sat straighter. I wore a suit and tie, hoping the attempt at a good appearance meant something to them. One by one, they took their seats. I'd come to learn a few of their names, chiefly the older man—Gregory—who grilled me the last time, and the woman who was the chairman—Alice. They didn't look pleased to see me again, and I had no idea why I was back since the final hearing was supposed to be the day before Thanksgiving.

“Dr. Lewis, thank you for coming in today.” Alice cleared her throat and pursed her lips at me. “We've had another complaint about you and I want to get to the bottom of this.”

Confused, I looked at Dr. Baker, who had put his files in order and was watching the board settle in. Another complaint? What other complaint could there be? I had told them everything and they even questioned Lily. Nothing else had happened.

“I'm sorry. There was another complaint about me?” I touched my tie nervously and adjusted it, then folded my sweaty hands. This was getting ridiculous now. Couldn't they just give me my punishment and let me lick my wounds already?

Gregory nodded his head, scowling. He leaned back in his chair and bounced a bit, staring at me with a look of contempt. I wondered if these people thought they were perfect, if they had never made a mistake in their lives. I was stupid. I told a few lies, but other than emotionally, no one was really hurt. And so far, it didn't appear that Lily was pressing charges, or her family, for that matter.

“Dr. Lewis, we had Amily Collins report to us that you were hostile and verbally abusive to her regarding her report about your behavior.” Alice looked down her nose at me and narrowed her eyes. “Dr. Baker is here as a witness to that behavior which goes against hospital conduct policies. Not only were you on administrative leave and should not have been on the hospital grounds, but according to policy, you were barred from speaking to her during the time of this investigation.”

“Wait, what?” I glanced at Dr. Baker, who looked down at his folded hands as if he wanted nothing to do with this. We were friends. Why hadn’t he told me this was happening? I never meant to ruffle any feathers. I was in my head and too stressed out. It was a huge mistake.

“Did you not read the entirety of the email sent to you regarding the administrative leave and investigation?” Her pursed lips infuriated me. I wanted to get up and leave, but not only did they hold the fate of my job here at St. Rita’s, but maybe even my license if this got escalated to the state.

“Uh...” My mouth was dry. I needed a glass of water or maybe a glass of whiskey.

“Mr. Lewis, let me assure you that we are all human. We understand mistakes happen. As medical professionals, however, we are held to higher standards. We are prone to believe the best about our doctors, but your emotional outbursts and threatening behavior are not going to be tolerated.” Alice shook her head at me and the rest of the board mumbled their agreement. “You are hereby placed on disciplinary leave. You will not receive pay. If you are on hospital grounds without a valid medical reason for being here, you will be terminated.”

“But—” I started to stand, but Dr. Baker’s hand shot out and gripped my wrist. I relaxed back into my seat and scowled. This couldn’t be happening. My heart felt like it would explode. I was so angry.

“You might consider applying at other facilities in the meantime because we aren’t certain there will be a positive resolution to this issue. In fact, we are concerned we may need to send this to the state hearing.” Her expression shifted. She looked apologetic and sincere, but it was too little, too late, and I knew it. It was my fault too.

“Thank you,” I choked out.

“You are dismissed.”

I sat there for a few cold minutes, staring at the table. Then in a numb state, I stood and walked to the door. I didn’t even

realize Dr. Baker was behind me until I felt his hand on my shoulder. I stopped and spun around.

“I’m sorry, Ethan. They told me I wasn’t to say anything to you.” He let go of me, and he looked almost as upset as I felt.

“But suspension without pay? Come on, Tim. How am I going to pay my bills?” I had some savings, but I had already dipped into that over the past few weeks. It was Christmas time. I knew I had messed up, but this felt heartless.

“Look, go home and relax. It’s not over. You have the final hearing on Wednesday. There is still hope that you’ll get a good resolution.” He nodded down the hallway, and I turned and started walking. He fell into step beside me.

“Should I really get a different job?” I shoved my hands in my pockets and stared at my feet as we moved toward the elevators. It was as much because I was avoiding eye contact as it was that I was too upset to even care where I was going. People in this place were so nosy.

“Not sure, Ethan. How are things with Lily?” He pressed the elevator button and stepped back. I shrugged.

“She isn’t speaking with me. We did a paternity test, but no results yet. It’ll be today, but there isn’t any point. It’s his, not mine. She will go back to him for sure.” It was what made sense, for her to wed the father of her child, though I’d have thrown him in jail, not married him.

“And what about you? It’s obvious you love her.”

I looked up at him, wondering if it really was that obvious. If it was, then why didn’t she see it too? Or was she too upset with the fact that I’d lied to her to even see how much I loved her? She didn’t see that I’d lied to protect and help her. She never would, either, because she would have Mark whispering in her ear what a monster I was. I never got to tell her why I had lied or what Mark was like when she was so out of it. I never would get that chance unless I made it happen. But how when she refused to answer my calls?

“What are you thinking?” Dr. Baker asked as we stepped onto the elevator.

“I love her, Tim. A lot...” I pushed the button for the ground floor and leaned against the wall. “That man was absolute trash to her. He was nasty and angry. He treated her like garbage, spoke harshly to her, forced food down her throat until she threw up.” It made no sense why she was ever with him.

“And...?” he prompted, as if he knew I was holding back.

“And I fell in love with her the instant I met her. She was this delicate flower that needed protection and healing. Her family didn’t believe her, and he was a monster. I couldn’t let her lie there in that bed defenseless. She needed me to stand up for her—I just said the wrong thing. I could have just kicked them out and sat with her, but I lied. I don’t even know why. I just knew if I didn’t, she’d have to go home with him and I knew he would hurt her. I just knew it.”

Tears stung my eyes and I wasn’t even ashamed. This entire thing had stripped me of all my pride and ego. Lily was a precious treasure that had been mistreated by everyone, including me. She was delicate and beautiful, and all I wanted was to make it right.

“Did you tell her?” he asked as the elevator doors slid open.

We stepped out into the lobby and stood there for a moment. It hadn’t been my place. How could I justify lying to her at all, let alone for my selfish reason of being emotionally uncomfortable with her situation? Yes, I had the right intention, but I had done the wrong thing and now, she was hurting worse because of me.

“No, I never thought it was the right thing to say.”

“How is the truth not the right thing?” He gave me a stony expression and I stared in disbelief. When I said nothing, he continued. “If you love her, you tell her the whole truth. It’s not an excuse. It’s an explanation. If she loves you and understands your heart, it will be tough to get through, but you might just win her heart.”

He nodded his head and stepped backward toward the door. “Just do it, Ethan. Come clean and see what happens. It’s out there anyway. What’s the worst thing to come of it?”

Tim left me standing there thinking. He might be right. If I explained to Lily why I did what I did, maybe she would understand. If she didn’t, I’d still be in the same boat I was in now, but if she did, we might have a chance. That thought gave me just enough hope to get back in my car and drive home. I sat in the armchair next to the Christmas tree, staring at my phone for at least forty minutes before I got the nerve to call her.

If this didn’t work, I was done. I’d just move to some other city and start over. I couldn’t look at anything here the same again, and I didn’t want to. Not without her.

The phone rang, but I ignored it—three times. I let it go to voicemail, but I knew it was the hospital. They had the results and I didn't want to know. My heart clung to the very thread of hope that the past four weeks hadn't been a lie, but my gut knew it had been. So I sat on the foot of my bed and stared at the phone screen until it went black. They left a message for me. I knew it said to call them. They'd never leave my medical results on a message.

They also had no legal right to tell Mark or Ethan, so until I got the news, neither of them would have it. I felt heavy and paralyzed. I couldn't lift the phone to my ear to make the call, so I turned it on speaker phone and dialed the number. After a few rings, a woman with a polite voice picked up.

“St. Rita's help line, this is Amber. How can I help you?”

I just wanted her to spit it out. I didn't want to interact. But she couldn't read my mind, especially not through a phone. “Hi, Amber. This is Lillian Bennett. Someone called about my paternity test results.”

“Hi, yes, Lily. I have your results right here. I just need your patient ID number and password.” I could hear her typing into her computer. I wanted to cry.

“Uh... It's nine-one-seven-two-four. And the password is Darwin.”

“Thank you, dear.” More typing sounds came through, and I decided it would be easier to take this news lying down. I scooted back on the bed and shoved the pillow under my head,

laying the phone on the mattress next to me. After a few minutes, Amber was done typing and I braced myself for what I knew she'd say.

“Alright, it looks like we had two samples to test against. Patient one, Mark Turner, and patient two, Ethan Lewis. The sample for Mr. Turner came back as a ninety-nine-point-nine percent match, and with patient two there were not enough similarities to match. Now, if you'd like us to test another sample we can—”

“No,” I interrupted. “No, thank you.” Tears were already welling up. I had no patience for this. “Thank you.” I hung up before I started sobbing. I knew my gut was right and my heart was completely mistaken. There was no way the baby would ever have been Ethan's. I knew it when I had that flashback in the car last week. I had never met him until he was my doctor. It hurt so bad. I just wanted to fall asleep and not wake up. The only thing getting me out of bed was the life growing inside me and my desire to be a good mother.

I cried hard, thankful that Mom and Dad weren't home. When I needed to blow my nose, I got a roll of toilet paper, but I crawled right back into bed. How could someone so amazing hurt me so deeply? How could he lie to me? This was why the review board was on his case, because he deceived me, not because he was in a relationship with me as his patient.

Erin called and I let it go to voicemail. Then Mom called but I ignored that too. I had no emotional energy to talk to anyone. They all knew today was the day most likely for the hospital to give the results, and even though it had been my choice—to put them at ease that the truth was finally out—I didn't want to talk about it. I wanted the universe to swallow me whole.

But when Ethan's name and number showed up on my phone, I froze. I stared at it as it rang for a solid minute then went black. I swiped at my eyes, waiting for the message to come through, but it didn't. Instead, the screen lit up with his caller ID again. This time, I sat up. Why would he call me? He knew it wasn't his child. He had no reason to even show up to

that test because he knew, which meant the only reason he came was to see me. But why?

I let it go to voicemail for the second time, and again there was no message. When the screen lit up for the third time, I couldn't resist. I wanted to hear his voice, to have him comfort me. I didn't care that he had lied. He was the best thing that had ever happened to me, and just for even a second, I wanted to feel like everything was okay.

So I picked up the phone and swiped right to answer.

"Ethan?"

"Don't hang up!" He sounded frantic, and my heart twisted in my chest. *"Lily, please just listen to me."*

I sniffled and wiped my face, then turned on speaker phone and laid the thing down next to me. Just hearing his voice was comforting, though I didn't think I'd ever trust him again.

"I lied to you." I heard the emotion in his voice and cried harder. *"We never knew each other before your accident. I fell in love with you the instant I saw you the first time. Everything I knew about you was because of Erin. And then I saw Mark being a douchebag to you and I just couldn't let that happen. Lily, I love you. I told them I was the father because they didn't see how awful the real father was treating you. He blamed you for cheating, and just one look at your face told me that could never be true."*

I tried so hard not to let him hear my crying, but I couldn't stop the loud, bellowing sobs from escaping. It was hard to even hear what he was saying over my own fit.

"I was so wrong. I never meant to hurt you at all. I felt horrible the whole time. I was guilty and I knew you'd remember everything, and I would be out of your life, but all I could think about was how awful that guy treated you. When your dad asked me my intention, I told him the truth. I wanted to—want to—marry you. I know you'll never forgive me, but it's true. I'm so in love with you, and all I wanted was for you to be happy."

“Oh, God...” I had to unwind some toilet paper from the roll to blow my nose because I could barely breathe. He was so sincere and upset, but after what had happened, I didn’t know how to feel. “I’m sorry, Ethan. I don’t think I can do this. I need some time to process what’s going on. You lied to me. Everything was based on a lie.”

“My love wasn’t. It was always real.”

The line went silent as I cleaned myself up, but it didn’t matter what he said at this point. What was done was done. Ethan wasn’t the father of the baby. Mark was. I didn’t want anything to do with Mark at all. The only thing I had left to do was to decide if I wanted to stay with my parents or just find a new path on my own. I had enough in savings to get out of town for a while, and if I found a good job elsewhere, I could start over before the baby even got here.

“I have to go, okay?” I slid off the side of the bed and picked up the phone.

“I do love you, Lily. Please just remember that, okay?”

“Goodbye, Ethan.” I hung up the phone and let out a deep breath. Tears started to stream down my face as I thought about everything that had happened in the last few weeks. It felt like my whole world had been flipped upside down and nothing was the same anymore. I knew my only choice was to get away. I scrawled a note on a piece of paper and laid it on the kitchen table then returned to my room and got a bag out of my closet.

I folded my clothes one by one and put them in the bag, taking care to keep them neat. I had to make sure everything was packed up right so that I could look professional for any job interview. As I went through my drawers, looking for items that needed to be included in the bag, the sadness of the situation began to sink in. I had been so hopeful that Ethan was going to be the father of this baby, and now it was all just a distant memory.

I zipped up the bag and got out another, this one for my toiletries. The bathroom was the last room I had to go through. I grabbed my toothbrush and other items from the counter and

placed them in the bag. As I turned to leave, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. Tired eyes stared back at me, reflecting all of the emotions that had been running through me. I wrestled with every thought. Mark was the father. He deserved to be in my daughter's life. But he was an abuser, which meant he would abuse her too, and I couldn't let that happen.

I had no idea what I was going to do, but I knew that I had to find a way to make it on my own. It was the only option I had left, and I was determined to make it work. With one last deep breath, I picked up both bags and walked out the door. No amount of moral obligation would get me to go back to him. I didn't even think I could be okay with supervised visitation, which the court would probably force on me and the baby. It wasn't right and I wouldn't allow it. So, I sat on the couch with my two bags at my feet and pulled out my phone.

I opened my app and requested an Uber. I was going to start fresh somewhere else, far away from Mark and the memories of what had happened. As I waited for the driver to arrive, I took one last look around my parents' house, feeling a mix of sadness and determination. I would never understand why I'd kept Mark's abuse a secret from my friends and family, but I knew they couldn't protect me now. The Uber would take me to the bus station where I could purchase a ticket to anywhere. I could start over down south or out west, somewhere I was more confident and away from things. When the baby was born, I'd call my parents and explain everything. I knew they'd understand. For now, I had to focus on getting away. I could worry about the rest later.

As I heard the car pull up in front of my house, I got up and grabbed my bags. It was time to start a new chapter of my life. I lugged the suitcases out the front door and locked up, not even paying attention to the car running in the driveway. Besides the fact that my eyes were blurry with tears, I could barely see straight. When the house was locked, I turned to step off the porch and ran smack into Mark's chest.

"What?" I stepped back, a bit startled. "What are you doing here?" Fear crept across my skin, making the hair stand

on end.

“I’m here to see about those test results. You ignored my call yesterday.” He reached for my suitcase and took it right out of my hand, leaving me with the other bag. I looked down at it and had a very uneasy feeling in my gut.

“Uh...” I swallowed hard. “I haven’t gotten them yet.” I licked my lips and took another step backward. I didn’t know why he took that bag, but I didn’t want him to have it.

“Well, that’s alright. They’ll call you. You can just come with me now.” He grabbed my elbow and started toward his car, and I had no choice but to walk along beside him, whimpering.

“Let me go, Mark. I’m not going to your house. I have plans.” I tried to wrestle my arm away from him, but he had such a tight hold it physically hurt to do so.

“Let me guess? You’re going back to that idiot doctor.” He shook his head and opened the door, tossing my bag in. His hand shot out toward the other bag, but I held it away from him.

“No, I’m not. I’m staying with Erin.” I didn’t have to lie to him. I could have just told him I was leaving town, but fear made me do it. I didn’t want him knowing I was leaving. I just wanted to be away from here. And in the very same instant I said the words, I realized why Ethan had lied. Fear.

“Just get in the car, Lily. We can talk as I drive.”

“No,” I protested, shaking my head. There was no one out here, no one looking out their window. For a cold day in November on a residential street, this was pretty normal. No one around to hear me call for help.

Mark jerked my arm hard and snatched my suitcase, then tossed it in the car. Then he forced me around the front of the car and pushed me into the passenger seat. He buckled me and leaned in close to whisper in my ear. “Try to get out and I’ll just run you over, a hit and run... Sounds like a nasty story for a girl who’s already had amnesia.”

My blood ran cold as he shut the door. This was very, very bad.

ETHAN

I couldn't take it. It had been twenty-four hours since we talked on the phone and I had to see Lily in person. I wasn't afraid she was going to press charges. I just had to apologize again and see her face when I did so. I had to know she wasn't angry with me, that there wasn't anything I could do to make it better. It wasn't even about me or my job anymore. I would be a toilet cleaner the rest of my life if I could just assure myself that she would be okay.

I got in my car and drove to her parents' house. It was midafternoon on a Saturday. They should've been home, so I wasn't surprised to see both of their cars in the driveway. Lily still hadn't purchased a new car since her accident, so it meant she was here too, unless she went somewhere with Erin. Part of me was glad, and part of me felt terrified. It was that ambivalence that glued me to my seat for a few minutes, staring at the wreath on the front door.

Anyone who passed the house would think it was just a normal day for them. The reindeer perched on the front lawn were reined in with a string of lights, and a wooden sleigh, painted red and also lit with more strands of lights, sat behind them. It appeared as any house on the street, jolly and ready for the holiday. But inside, I knew there was a lot of pain and a lot of healing to do. And I knew it was my fault. I wanted to take this time to apologize not only to Lily, but also to her parents. They hadn't deserved any of this either.

I shut my car off and climbed out. It was milder today, but that wasn't why I took my time heading for the door. My body

seemed reluctant to follow through with what my heart knew was the right thing. They had to have seen me coming because Gus opened the door and burst out before I even got there.

“Have you seen her? What happened? Did she call you?” Gus was agitated, even a little panicked. He ran a hand across the top of his balding head and stepped off the porch, moving my direction. Peggy stood in the doorway wearing a long sweater with a belt. She tied the belt and hugged her arms over her chest.

“What? I came to see her. You mean she’s not here?”

“Oh, dear.” Peggy whimpered and covered her mouth, then retreated into the house and left the door standing wide open.

“We thought she went with you.... Erin hasn’t spoken to her. Mark isn’t answering his phone. Ethan, what happened?” Gus had grilled me every time we were together about my intention, and by the end of this whole thing, I felt like he’d actually grown to see me as a good fit for Lily.

“You mean she didn’t tell you?” I hesitated. I wasn’t the one who was supposed to break the news to them. I thought it was done already.

“Tell us what?” Gus was confused, shaking his head. “She is just gone. She left a note saying she was catching a bus and she’d call when she was settled. We called the bus station. They haven’t had a passenger with her name come through. The police won’t let us file a report. She can’t even remember things about her life. What if she is having a delusion or something?”

I sighed. Lily left town? Of course, she needed space and closure. She wanted a way to process all of the crap I’d put her through without being pressured to think, feel, or do anything.

“We should go inside,” I coaxed, gently nudging Gus toward the door. He followed my lead, and we went in to find Peggy weeping. She sat on the couch and rocked back and forth. Her eyes were despondent as she looked up at me.

I paced as Gus sat down. It wasn’t my place to say anything, but Lily probably felt too hurt by it to speak about it

yet. I had to.

“She got the results back. The baby belongs to Mark.” I stopped in front of them, afraid of their reaction. Neither of them seemed surprised, but I continued before they could say a word. “Mark has been abusive to her. She remembered it in therapy, and she was pretty upset by that. She didn’t know what to think...”

“Oh, God,” Peggy wailed, “and I pressured her to go back to him so many times. Ethan, tell me it’s not true.”

“I’m sorry...” My heart sank. At this point, Peggy and Gus were in too much pain not knowing where Lily was. I couldn’t burden them with the rest. Just telling them about Mark had really affected Peggy. Gus glared at the floor.

“He’s not answering his phone. He wouldn’t answer the door... If he’s done something to her, I’ll—”

“Gus, would you like me to check it out?” The idea that Lily left town was shocking. I wanted to see her and make sure she was okay, and if she was gone, there was no way of getting closure. But it wasn’t about me now. If that was what she wanted, then I had to respect that. Still, given Mark’s history, if Lily’s parents thought that Mark might be somehow involved, it was worth looking at.

“Would you?” Peggy’s voice sounded hopeful. “Oh, Ethan, you mean so much to her. She told me how much she loves you. I know she wouldn’t just leave town unless something horrible had happened.” Peggy wrung her hands around the belt for her sweater and shuddered.

“Of course. I just need an address.”

Five minutes later, I was back in my car headed across town. Normally, I’d take in the sights, notice the carolers and decorations, but I was on a mission. I didn’t know whether to believe Lily’s note or her father’s suspicion. Mark was a jerk of a man. I’d seen it with my own eyes. But he wasn’t the type of guy to make Lily stay with him and keep her from her parents. At least, he didn’t appear to be. He liked Gus and Peggy. Why would he do that?

I turned into his neighborhood, a wealthy little estate with manicured lawns and edged sidewalks. It was the sort of place I saw myself living in a few years with a wife and children of my own—a wife whom I wanted to be Lily. I'd had that idea in my mind for years now, but only when I saw her did I know it was her I'd been waiting for. Now, I didn't know what to do except keep my word to Peggy that I'd sniff this out for her.

I read the house numbers, searching out the one scrawled hastily on a sticky note. Peggy's hands shook so hard as she wrote that I couldn't tell if it was nine-nine-seven or nine-four-seven, but when I saw the shiny black sedan parked in front of the only house on the street without decorations, I recognized it. Why didn't he decorate? Was it because Lily was the one who did that and she hadn't been around?

Glancing around at the homes, I noticed the neighborhood was pretty quiet. There weren't even many cars in the driveways, though lights twinkled everywhere as the afternoon sun was fading. Inside Mark's place, a light was on in the front room and I could see a television beyond the sheer curtain playing a football game. I left my car running and moved toward the door. If he was half the man he should be, he'd care that Lily was gone too.

The grass crunched under my feet as I walked across the lawn. There were cigarette butts in the landscaping, bits of trash scattered here and there. It wasn't at all what it appeared from the street, and that was the first thing that sent up a red flag. This guy was wealthy enough to buy this home but treated it this way. It hit a little too close to home that he had such an amazing woman and had put his hands on her in inappropriate ways.

I knocked, waiting for an answer, but after a few minutes of no one coming to the door, I had to knock again. When I pushed the button for the bell, it made no sound. I peeked in the front window and looked at the television. It was still playing the game, which I could almost hear through the thin pane of glass. There was no one in sight. I knew it was rude to look, but it was important. So I knocked again.

This time, after waiting almost five full minutes, I balled up my fist and pounded on the door. I wasn't leaving until he came out. "Mark, open the door. I need to talk to you. It's Ethan." I knew if he wouldn't just come to the door, mentioning who I was would rile him up a bit. He hated me for what I did. I could use that against him.

Like magic, the door swung open seconds later and a very drunk, unkempt Mark Turner swayed in the doorway, beer in hand.

"What do you want?" he slurred angrily, glaring at me. He slurped his beer and leaned on the door to steady himself.

"Peggy and Gus asked me to stop by."

"You're on a first-name basis with them?" His glare deepened and he stepped through the door menacingly.

"Look, Lily left a note saying she was taking a bus, but she never took a bus. Have you heard from her?"

"Get off my property. Haven't you done enough damage?" His raised voice bellowed across the lawn. I knew it would attract attention, and I backed up a step.

"Just tell me if you've seen her or heard from her." His reaction wasn't exactly the way a man in love would respond to the idea that his fiancée—or former fiancée—was missing.

"I said, get lost!" He slammed the half-full beer bottle down on the ground and it shattered, sending bits of glass and splashes of beer onto my shoes.

"Mark, Lily is missing. Peggy and Gus are going to file a missing persons report. If you've seen her, you need to say something." I knew in my gut that this guy had seen her and was just stonewalling me. He took another step toward me, this time with fists balled up and ready to strike, and I backed away yet again. In his state, I would annihilate him, but I wasn't here to fight. I just wanted to find Lily.

"Get the hell off my property, you piece of trash."

"Uh, Mr. Turner, do you need me to call the authorities?" A timid voice trembled behind me. I turned to see an elderly

man, probably in his eighties, with a tight newsboy cap perched on his gray hair. His breath puffed out and crystalized as he looked at me nervously.

“I was just going, thank you.” I nodded at him politely as Mark spat out a drunken string of curse words and slurs. The older man shook his head and waved a hand at him. It was obvious to anyone around here that Mark was drunk and angry. I saw a few more eyes staring at his house from windows nearby.

I climbed in my car and sat there, watching as the neighborhood calmed. The elderly man returned to his home. Mark shut his front door and then the drapes in the front window. I pulled away slowly, but I couldn't leave. I wasn't going to let him get away with this. I knew he'd done something to Lily. I just didn't know what. I circled the block and came back to park right in front of his neighbor's house. I had every intention of sitting here and staking out the place until he was sober and could have a rational discussion, even if that meant I had to wait until tomorrow. If he went somewhere, I'd follow him too.

In the meantime, I sent Peggy a text that she should definitely call the police and report Lily missing. It had been the twenty-four-hour limit now, and Mark wasn't being helpful. He would be one of the first people they wanted to talk to, and I was staying here to make sure they did. If not, I'd go in there myself and ask him what happened. I wasn't letting him out of my sight.

Lily was worth it.

Staring at the same four walls for the past thirty hours felt like torture. Mark forced me into that car under duress and there was no way out. Even when he came in here as drunk as can be, he guarded the door. I didn't understand what he was doing. He couldn't possibly think this was a healthy thing or that he'd win me over by forcing me to stay here. He knew this would only go badly for him.

But then, given what I knew about Mark and the abuse he'd put me through, he wasn't thinking clearly.

I'd pitied him for a long time. It was why I stayed. I felt guilty that he'd never had the parents he deserved, that life had kicked him more than one time. He fought for everything he had and bled out in the process, and now he was a shell of the man he should be, drunken and angry. No one deserved that. It was why I stayed with him, why I told no one about the abuse, because I thought I could help him, love him through it. But I couldn't. He was too angry, too upset, and I wasn't a therapist.

The bed was uncomfortable, lumpy and cold. This wasn't our bed. It wasn't where I slept with him. I remembered those nights too, being in his arms and always being on edge. I pitied him but I didn't love him. I hadn't for a long time. That went away the first time he hit me, but I swore to myself that he would get better, that if I helped him heal, he'd stop hitting me. I was patient, cooked for him, cleaned, even let him use my body as a means for sexual gratification.

But there were nights when he was so drunk and so in his own head that the pain of his younger years came out as rage, and no matter what I did, I couldn't fix it. I couldn't tame the beast. My words only incited him to anger and violence and it left me vulnerable and weak. So eventually, I stopped talking. I stopped trying to calm him. I turned into myself and realized I'd never save him, that I had to save myself.

That night, when he got drunk and belligerent, I asked him calmly if he could stop shouting at me. I'd had enough. My pregnancy was at the point where it made it difficult to control my emotions. We'd been unstable for months anyway, but when he accused me of cheating on him, I lost it.

I knew the fists would fly, but I didn't care. I stood up for myself. I could be his physical punching bag, but there was no way I was ever going to stand there and be accused of emotionally hurting him that way. I was not that woman, and that was the night I was done. That was what came back to me when I sat in the car that day and remembered the next few moments—Mark smacking me so hard I couldn't see for a second... the way I ran out with my keys and purse and drove off as fast as I could.

I remembered that Ethan wasn't a part of my life. That he never could be, because I wasn't a cheater or a liar or a sneak. I was the woman who stood there taking Mark's crap for months, trying to save him, and he wasn't worth it. I got in that car and raced off, only to be T-boned in the intersection two blocks from Mark's house because I didn't stop at the stop sign.

That's what started all of this. Me standing up for myself. And now I lay here, no phone, no food, no water, no bathroom, no dignity. Mark was every bit of the monster Ethan said he was. He wasn't the dreamboat Erin thought or the upstanding marketing engineer my parents believed him to be. He was a violent, angry drunk who terrified me. I trembled and let a few stray tears escape my eyes before blinking the rest away. I'd brought this on myself by not leaving him the first time he hit me, by thinking I could rehabilitate him, and look at me now.

The door creaked, and I jumped, scrambling to a sitting position on the bed. I'd felt nauseous all day, stomach bile sitting at the back of my throat. I knew this was coming—Mark, drunk as can be, entering this room to ask for sex. He did it every time he got upset about something, so much so that it had become a routine. I'd lie there patiently to get it over with and then try to soothe his savage beast by coaxing him to sleep so he didn't hit me. That, or he'd just hit me anyway.

I hadn't eaten, and that along with a touch of dehydration made me so sick to my stomach. I'd had light contractions all day, also probably from not being hydrated. They were uncomfortable enough to make the sour stomach worse too. But the stench of beer as he walked in was the worst, triggering nausea worse than my morning sickness that ended months ago.

"I need you," he grumbled, undoing his belt. He shut the door behind him and moved toward me. I swallowed hard, trying to keep the bile down.

"Mark, you're drunk. I'm tired. Can you please not do this?" I curled into a ball and backed against the headboard. The tiny room was supposed to be a walk-in pantry, not a bedroom, but he shoved the guest bed in here and that was that. There wasn't even any food in here, anyway. It was like he hadn't gone grocery shopping in weeks.

"I said, I need you, and you give me what I want." He advanced on me, towering angrily over me. My stomach roiled. I gagged and fought hard to keep the stomach acid at bay. I saw the bulge in his pants and also the one in his pocket—his phone. I needed that. I needed to call my parents.

"Uh... I feel sick." I kept my eyes pinned on the phone in his pocket as he stood next to the bed. He had his dick in his hand, stroking, but it wasn't exactly hard. Yet another problem he had at times. And when he put a knee on the edge of the bed, I lost it.

The vomit rose faster than I could turn my head. My stomach lurched and I threw up all over him. It projected out

of my mouth like a volcano, landing on his hand and his dick and running down the front of his pants. He jumped back, swearing at me and shouting, and I did the only thing I could think of. Even as more vomit was coming out of my mouth, I grabbed the corner of the comforter and moved toward him quickly.

“God, you’re disgusting! Get your hands off me,” he snapped as I tried to wipe the vomit from his slacks.

“I’m sorry. God, I’m so sorry,” I mumbled, gasping for air, but I wasn’t sorry. I was glad it got him to back off. In fact, I was happy. He deserved it after everything he did to me. I tried wiping at his pants, but it wasn’t to clean him off. It was so I could get the phone, and I did. I plucked it from his pocket and slid it into mine as quickly as I could, praying he didn’t notice. As drunk as he was, he was more worried about the vomit than the phone, and he used my only blanket to wipe himself off.

“You made yourself do that to get out of sex with me. Didn’t you?” His angry glare told me I was in for it. I backed away, but not before his hand connected with my cheek in a hard blow that tossed me to the bed.

“Ah...” I whimpered and curled around the baby, trying to protect my stomach. I figured he would come at me again, kick me or punch me. I clamped my eyes shut and stayed facing away from the door, waiting for him to hit me again, but instead, the door slammed shut and I heard a lock click. I sobbed, shaking the whole bed with my emotion when I realized he was leaving me alone.

It took me a few seconds to calm down. After a violent altercation like that, my hands shook so badly, I could barely get the phone from my pocket. I pulled it out thinking it was his phone. I didn’t know his password, but I would certainly try to get into it. But when I looked at the screen, I realized it was my phone. Only, he had tried to get into it so many times I was locked out of it for the next five minutes.

Tears of joy and relief replaced the tears of pain and fear. I swiped at my eyes and used my T-shirt to clean my face up. I just had to wait until the phone reset and I could call my

parents. It was a moment of trepidation, though, because if Mark realized I had the phone, he'd come back, and God only knew what he'd do then.

Minutes passed, and I chewed my lip, and as soon as the phone unlocked, I typed in my passcode and used speed dial to connect to my mom.

“Lily, where are you! We’re so worried.”

“Mom... please, I’m at Mark’s house. He’s keeping me locked in his pantry. Please, can Dad come get me?” I barely got the words out before she spoke again.

“I’m calling 9-1-1. Hide, baby. I’ll get help.”

I trembled and nodded, though she couldn’t see me. It was the most painful thing in the world to hang up and let the line click. But I knew it was only a matter of time before help arrived. Still, I was scared. The police could take twenty minutes in this town. Mom and Dad lived more than thirty minutes from here, and I wanted out now. Especially after what just happened. If Mark came back after cleaning himself up, I’d be forced to... Well, I didn’t want that.

So I dialed Ethan’s number without thinking. He lived only three minutes away and I knew he’d come. My heart told me he was safe even if he had lied.

“Lily?” His voice was frantic too. Mom must have called him before this.

“Ethan, I’m so sorry. Please. I love you. I need you to come. Mark isn’t who I thought and—”

The line went dead and my heart stopped. Ethan hung up on me? But he said he loved me. I stared at the phone in shock as sobs erupted from my throat.

Then the lock clicked, and the door opened, and Mark walked in.

My God...

ETHAN

I'd been in this car all day. I didn't eat a thing. Luckily, I had a bottle of water which I was able to drink and later used the empty bottle to relieve my bladder. Not my favorite thing, and I'd never do it again, but I wasn't about to leave this place. My gut told me Lily was in there and that she wasn't happy about it. As it got darker out, it was a bit less unnerving watching the house. So many times, I thought the neighbors were going to call the cops, but I sank down into the seat and hid from them.

I was almost ready to give up and get something to eat when my phone rang. I knew instantly who it was. Lily's caller ID image stared up at me. I swiped to answer and held the phone to my ear with a shaking hand.

"Lily?"

She mumbled an apology and something else and all I heard was "*Mark isn't who I thought—*" and that was all it took. I dropped the phone and opened the car door. I nearly fell on a patch of ice on the sidewalk in front of Mark's house, but I tore off across the lot to his front door. I didn't even knock. I threw my shoulder into it, once, twice, then a third time. The door burst open and wood splintered around me.

"Holy hell!" Mark growled and charged at me. He was drunk again, maybe still drunk from yesterday.

"Where is she!" I shouted at the top of my lungs. I didn't care if his elderly neighbors heard me this time.

“Get out of my house!” His shoulder rammed into my gut and knocked the wind out of me. He pinned me against the wall, punching my sides mercilessly, and I sucked in a breath of air and pushed at his body. With my muscles tightened down, the blows weren’t so bad, but it was difficult to breathe. I gave him a hard shove, and he toppled backward onto a coffee table that crumbled under his weight.

“Where is she, Mark? I know she’s here!” I walked past him and through a narrow doorway into a dark hall. I passed the kitchen on the right before he was on me again, tackling me from behind. I fell hard into the floor with his weight on top of me.

“You piece of trash,” he growled, gripping me and turning me over. I blocked a blow with one arm, but my face took the brunt of one I didn’t see coming. He smelled like vomit and beer. Something rose up in me that I’d never experienced, like a surge of adrenaline that made me strong enough to pick up a car. I shoved him hard, and he fell back, but when I tried to get up, he kicked my knee and I dropped again.

I heard her screaming, pounding on a door. It was just the motivation I needed. I scrambled to straddle him, pinning one arm down. Then I punched him hard in the gut, and then in the face. Blood gushed from his nose and my knuckles, but I didn’t stop. I struck him again for hitting her, then again for taking her. Then I hit him again, and his eyes shut and his head bobbed to the side. His arm went limp, and I knew he was knocked out.

“Please, help!” Her cries were urgent. She was terrified.

I stood and looked up the hallway where I heard her banging. I wiped my knuckles on my jeans and stepped over Mark’s body. I could already hear the wails of sirens in the distance. Someone had called the police, and I wasn’t about to be the bad guy here. I headed straight toward the banging and jiggled the handle. “Lily, it’s me, Ethan.”

“Oh, God, Ethan. He locked it. Get the key.” She was sobbing. I barely understood her.

“Back up, we don’t have time for a key.” If I waited for the key, the police would be here and think I was an intruder. I’d be shot for sure. I didn’t even think twice. I lifted my foot and kicked hard, blasting the thin door with my heel so hard it broke open in one kick. The door swung wide, and I followed it inward, wrapping my arms around her trembling form and sitting on the edge of the bed nestled beneath shelves where food should go.

“Oh, my God,” she sobbed, clinging to me. She climbed on my lap as I rocked and held her. “Oh, my God...”

“Hey, it’s okay. I’m here now.” I smoothed her hair back and let her hold me as tightly as she wanted. “I’m here now, okay?”

“Police!” I heard a loud shout from somewhere in the house, but I didn’t move. I sat there rocking her and letting her sob into my shoulder, even as the cops cleared the property and entered the room. “Ms. Bennett?” A female cop with thick black hair and dark skin crouched by my side. “Ms. Bennett, are you okay?” She touched Lily lightly and she jumped.

“Please... I need him,” she pleaded and squeezed me harder.

“It’s okay. You can stay with him. We’ll want to ask some questions, but I think we should get you checked out. Alright? Is it okay if we take you to the ambulance?” The woman stood and removed her hat. I could see in her eyes the pain there, as if she knew what Lily was going through. Lily didn’t say a word, but she did nod. Her feet were bare, no shoes in sight. She had no coat, no hat, and it was frigid outside.

“I’ll carry her,” I said, standing. Lily still clung to me, making it difficult to get her into a position where I could hoist her up, but I managed. I followed the cop out the door and past Mark who was cuffed and leaning against a wall. He mumbled something, but the cop standing over him shielded us from seeing more than that. He nodded at me and looked down at Mark as we passed. We walked out the front door, through the splintered wood of the coffee table, and into the cold night air.

“How do you know the victim?” the lady cop asked as we walked.

“I’m in love with her.” It was all I could say because the rest was too complicated. The cop didn’t say much more until I set Lily down on the gurney and the medics started checking her vitals. I didn’t intend to leave her side. I gripped the end of the gurney and watched them work, but the cop had more questions.

“Name, sir?”

“My name is Ethan Lewis.”

“How do you know Ms. Bennett?”

“I’m her doctor... and I’m in love with her. I told you that.”

“Mr. Lewis, why did you enter Mr. Turner’s house? We have a report that you broke in? One of the neighbors heard shouting and—”

“No!” Lily whined. “No, please. He saved me. Mark had me locked up. This isn’t Ethan’s fault. Mark locked me in that room, and Ethan came and saved me.” She was so insistent that the cop backed off.

“Turner wants to press charges,” another cop said, the one who was standing over Mark in the hallway. His scowl at me was indicative of accusation, but Lily shouted and startled them both.

“Mark can go to hell! He forced me into his car and brought me here and locked me up against my will. He took my phone. Ethan saved me. He did nothing wrong.” She sobbed and swatted at the medics, and they wrestled with her arms, trying to take her blood pressure.

“Is this true, Mr. Lewis?” The lady cop held her pen, poised to take notes.

“It’s true. Uh...” I noticed a car pulling up. Everything was happening so quickly, I didn’t stop to think where Peggy and Gus would be or who had even called the police. “I stopped by her parents’ house yesterday mid-afternoon. Lily had left a

note for them saying she was going out of town, but when they called the bus station to verify it, she hadn't purchased a ticket. They tried filing a report with you, but you told them it had to be twenty-four hours." I licked my lips, feeling nervous. After the incident with the review board, the last thing I needed was a criminal charge brought against me.

"Oh, God," Peggy squealed from somewhere. I heard shoes slapping on the pavement as I continued my story, grateful they were there to back me up.

"They asked me to come talk to Mark, but he was belligerent and drunk and chased me off, so I sat in my car and watched the house. I sat there all night and all day today, and when Lily called my phone, I just went in. I knew she was here. She was frantic, and I busted down the door to get to her."

The cop scribbled some notes and nodded as Peggy and Gus rounded the end of the ambulance and practically climbed onto the gurney with Lily. I was shaking, scared they would still find some fault in what I had done. I had, after all, broken down his door and assaulted him. But he was holding her hostage and I had no other choice.

"Mr. Lewis, is it okay if you come to the station to give us a statement?" The male cop sounded stern, as if he didn't believe me, but I felt hands clamp down on my bicep. Lily had climbed off the bed and pushed past her parents to stand next to me, shivering.

"Please, I need him. He didn't do anything wrong. He saved me. You can't take him away. I need him."

The cop stared at her with a very unhappy expression and his shoulders slumped. "Can you come in tomorrow and give a statement, please? We would appreciate your assistance in getting to the bottom of this."

"Of course," I said, nodding. "I'll bring Lily too, and she can give her statement at the same time... if that's okay. Like I said, I'm her doctor—a neurologist, actually. She's been through a lot lately, had a severe concussion with lasting memory loss. She's only just recovered her memory, and she

needs to be with her family unless the medics here say she needs to go in.” I glanced up at the two medics, one of whom I knew well.

“Nothing wrong with her, Doc, except some light dehydration.” That comment was enough to get the police off our backs, and they retreated, giving us some space.

“Oh, baby, we were so worried.” Gus doted on her, hugging her. He took off his coat and draped it around her shoulders. Peggy offered her a hat and gloves, and I felt like a fool that she stood there with no shoes.

“I love you, Daddy.” Lily squeezed him and accepted the things from her mother. I took my own shoes off, letting her slide them on her bare feet as the medics wiped some blood from her cheek and put a bandage on a cut that I thought probably needed stitches, but Lily refused.

After thirty minutes of unraveling what happened with her parents and finally getting medical clearance from the EMTs, they packed up the ambulance and drove off. The cops’ lights were still flashing. Mark sat in the back of a cruiser with handcuffs on, glaring at me, and Gus and Peggy were pleading with Lily to go home with them.

“No, I need to go with Ethan. Please. I understand you’re worried, but it’s what I want. Please respect that.” Lily was firm, tucking under my arm despite her mother wanting nothing but to protect her. They still knew nothing about the lie or my behavioral review at work, at least not to my knowledge.

“But honey, you should come with us.” Peggy’s eyes brimmed with tears and she shivered. We were all cold, especially my feet. Gus stuck it out like a real man, not even shaking a bit even though Lily had his coat.

“No...” Lily looked up at me. “I know it’s where I belong. And you can rest safely knowing I’m in good hands.” She laced her fingers through mine and turned back to her parents. “Thank you for coming. I promise I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Gus and Peggy, convinced that Lily was where she wanted to be, said their goodbyes and left. We gave Gus his coat back before they took off, and she climbed in my car. For a moment, we watched as the police sealed up Mark's front door, the cruiser with him in the back long gone now. She was quiet, sniffing and crying softly, so I said nothing. I took her hand and headed for home.

It didn't seem real that she was going with me, but I wasn't going to complain. I'd give this woman anything she wanted the rest of my days if she just said she was staying with me.

Ethan walked next to me up the walk to his front door. His shoes were too large, bobbling around on my feet. He was so chivalrous to allow me to wear them so my bare toes wouldn't get cold. We hardly spoke while he drove back to his house. I was crying too much to make sense with words, anyway. But with Ethan's hand in the small of my back, I felt reassured. The way he came bursting into Mark's house so quickly, he had to have been parked right outside, just like he said.

He unlocked the place and let me in. It felt like home, like I belonged here the way I had felt only days ago before everything happened. Nothing was touched, either. The decorations were exactly how I left them, a pile of dishes in the sink as if they were waiting on me to do them up the way I had been doing them when I was here. And Ethan's pillow and blanket were still draped across the couch. I wondered if he'd even slept in his bed without me.

I turned and waited for him to remove his coat, stepping out of his shoes so he could put them on the mat by the door. It also felt awkward being here. I hadn't exactly said anything to him since finding out, except for that passing phone call yesterday afternoon. I could only assume that he understood I'd remembered everything. I had been so insensitive about that, not telling him what was going on. I was too in my head. I hadn't even told him about the review board. I just went straight to my parents' house and hid.

"Are you okay?" he asked, lightly touching my arm.

Like a magnet pulled me in, I dived into his embrace, wrapping my arms around him tightly. I was safe here—safer than I'd ever been or would ever be again. I listened to his heartbeat as his arms wrapped around me slowly and he squeezed. It didn't matter to me that nothing was as it should have been or that our entire relationship had been based on a lie. I still loved him. Something had still transpired in the past four weeks to make me want this man more than anything else in my life.

“Thank you for coming.” I cried softly, still very shaken by what went down. Mark and I had history, but that was the most terrifying thing I'd ever been through. He had never been that way with me before, so possessive like that.

“Hey, I'd come find you and rescue you anywhere, at any time, no matter what. Okay?” Ethan pulled my head back and grasped it between both of his large, strong hands. “I meant what I said, Lily. I never wanted to hurt you.”

He brushed the tender spot on my cheek where Mark struck me, then pressed his lips against it lightly. “That man is a monster.” His lips stung my skin, but I wouldn't pull away, not for a single second. I let tears sluice across my skin and he kissed them away. “How could anyone hurt you like this?” His words comforted an ache in me I had needed soothing for a long time.

We stood there by the door for a long few minutes, me crying, him talking softly to me. Ethan was so incredible, encouraging me and making me feel safe. I whispered to him what Mark was going to do to me, and he tensed and I felt his grip tighten. I knew if he had known that, he wouldn't have stopped at knocking Mark out—the man would be dead.

“I need to get you to your therapist, Lily. You need some help.” His eyes searched my face.

“The only help I need, the only person I want to talk to you, is you.” I sniffled and rose up on my tiptoes to kiss him, which he shied away from.

“Lily, I lied to you, like really badly. And it wasn't just one lie. It was lie upon lie, all made to cover the first one.” He

stepped back, though his hands still rested on my hips. “You didn’t deserve that. I should have been honest. You thought we had something, but you’d never met me.”

I buried myself in his chest again, refusing to let him back away. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Yes, it does. I let you initiate sex with me multiple times when I knew you would never remember anything about me. I got jealous when your real family and friends wanted to help you remember.”

“Ethan, it doesn’t matter.” I hugged him more tightly.

“Lily, you’re being ridiculous.” He pried my hands from around his waist and pushed me back, gripping both wrists. “You’re ignoring the facts.” His eyes narrowed, his face contorted. I didn’t understand if he was trying to push me away or what.

“Do you love me?” I asked, but I never gave him the chance to answer. I knew he did. “Because I love you. I love the way you wake with a smile and always have a patient answer for my needs. I love that you sing when you cook and that you take care of your body by running every morning. I love that you have no clue how to decorate a house or where to put your silverware so that it’s easily accessible in your kitchen. I love that you leave your boxers lying on the floor next to the shower and that your favorite toothpaste is one that I hate.”

More tears welled up as his facial expression softened. “I love that you wanted to protect me so desperately that you told my family you were the one to blame, not me. That you continued to shelter my fragile emotional state while I was hurting so badly because I couldn’t remember. You did the wrong thing, but you did it for the right reason. How could I be angry about that?”

He looked confused and let go of my hands. “So, you’re not angry with me?”

“I’m angry as hell!” I smiled at him. “That you didn’t tell me sooner so we could fall in love for real. That you didn’t let

me stand up for you at that hearing the way I should have—being fully informed. That you haven't truly asked me to marry you yet."

Ethan chuckled, then smiled and narrowed his eyes. His forehead creased. "Really?"

"Yes." I laughed, then nodded. "Really... I understand why you did what you did, and the moment Mark shoved me into his car, the thing I wanted most in the world was to be right here in your arms where I knew I was safe."

I leaned into him again, kissing him hard. He responded with a kiss so passionate my knees went weak. I knew what it was like to kiss Ethan Lewis—well, the Ethan Lewis who was timid and reserved because he was weighed down by guilt. And this—my God, was it incredible. It was like the mask came off and he was being himself with me for the first time. His hands squeezed and groped me, pulling me so hard against his body that my stomach protested and the baby kicked.

I chuckled as my little girl pushed her feet against Ethan's stomach and refused to let us enjoy the moment. He grinned and looked down at the way my stomach contorted and moved as she kicked. "She doesn't seem to like me."

"She will love you... just wait and see." I placed his hand on the spot where she was kicking and waited for him to feel it. The moment was precious. I couldn't wait to meet her, and I couldn't wait for Ethan to meet her either.

"You know what they do for children who can't sleep?" he asked with a slightly naughty smirk on his face.

"What?" I asked, chuckling as he pulled his hand away and grabbed my hand.

"A hot bath..." He stepped toward the bathroom, and I followed him, feeling my body flush with arousal.

"A hot bath," I asked, "or a hot shower?"

His grin widened and he shrugged. "Or maybe a nice release of hormones that are really relaxing and helpful."

“Are we still talking about children who can’t sleep?” I snickered, and he nodded.

“Yes, well I’ll give you the hormonal release and it will be shared through the placenta.”

“I’m not sure the word placenta is supposed to be part of your seduction technique, but I understand what you’re saying.” I giggled as he backed into the bathroom and turned on the water. He slowly undressed me, tossing my bloodied, dirty clothes into his hamper. Then he peeled his own clothing off. I noticed a bit of frostbite on his toes, but he said nothing, and when I looked down, ready to mention it, he tipped my chin upward and kissed me.

I draped my arms around his shoulders and let him guide me into the shower beneath the hot flow of water. It was warm and welcoming, instantly relaxing my aching muscles. Ethan’s lips continued to pursue mine as he took the bar of soap and washed me from head to toe. When his hands searched my valley and sudsed me up, I moaned and grabbed his wrist. Everything was so sensitive.

“In the shower?” I asked.

“In the shower, then in the bed, then on the couch, then the kitchen counter, then every day in every room of this house for the rest of my life because I can’t imagine living without you ever again.” His fingers sank into me, and the bar of soap dropped to the shower floor between my feet. I gasped and arched my head back as he bit down on my neck. I knew right then that I was his, completely and utterly. Ethan had a way of making me feel things that I never knew were possible. With each touch, each kiss, each word, he was claiming me. And I was more than happy to let him.

The hot water cascaded down our bodies as we continued to explore each other’s flesh. Ethan’s hands roamed over my curves, his fingers tracing every inch of my skin, eliciting a gasp from me every time he found a sensitive spot. I ran my fingers through his hair, pulling him closer to me as our mouths collided in a feverish kiss.

“I didn’t think this would ever happen. I thought you’d hate me.”

“And miss this?” I asked him, guiding his hand back to my pussy. His fingers slipped inside me and I moaned. I loved the way he touched me. His fingers felt like they were made for me.

“I love you, Lily. I wanted you from the first moment I saw you. I want to be with you forever.” He kissed me. I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him back. I felt like his touch was healing me, like I was becoming a new person. Like I was finally becoming the version of me that I was always meant to be.

The heel of his hand worked my clit while his fingers rubbed my G-spot. I whimpered and clenched around him, grinding against his grip while he assaulted my mouth with more kisses. Water rushed over my face as I aggressively leaned into him, making it hard to breathe. I couldn’t get enough. His touch was electric and I was on fire. “God, I need you. I need you in me, and with me and around me and...”

“I’m yours. I’m never leaving,” he breathed, biting my shoulder. I felt my body tensing as he spoke, like his words were magically pushing my buttons. “I love you, and I want you to feel incredible, and I want to fill you with myself until you’re whole again.”

The first wave of orgasm wracked my body with trembling weakness. I screamed and dug my nails into his shoulders. I was barely aware of what was happening. It felt like my body was on fire, and that fire was melting my brain and bones and making me into some sort of puddle of goo. The heat was overwhelming, and I could feel my legs trying to give out beneath me, but Ethan held me up. I leaned my head against his chest, panting.

I bit his skin and clawed at his shoulders, whimpering and whining until the throes of orgasm passed and I let my head rest back on the wall behind me. “I want you to feel incredible, too. I want to feel you every second of every day. I don’t want to miss a second of you.”

“Good, because you’re stuck with me now,” he said, rinsing his fingers. He felt the hard lump that was my protruding stomach. It fascinated me how orgasming could create such strong contractions in my belly. “Now, let me get you to bed. You need to rest.” He turned off the water and grabbed a towel, wrapping it around me before he stepped out of the shower. He dried me off and took me to bed, laying me down softly and pulling the covers up over us. I snuggled close to him, my head resting on his chest while his arms held me tight against him. His dick was still rock hard, making me crave it inside me, so I stroked him and waited for him to respond.

“Well?” I whispered, but I didn’t have to wait for a response. Ethan rolled to his back and guided me to straddle him.

“You are incredible, Lily,” he whispered. His voice was hoarse and full of lust. He held his cock upright so I could slide down around it, and with the position of the baby and how sensitive my pussy was from orgasm, I shuddered in pleasure. I started rocking and grinding on him instinctively, moaning.

“This is incredible... You are incredible.” I braced myself on his chest as his hand reached under my belly. His thumb found my clit and began to rub it. “Yes.. like that.”

“I love making you feel good,” he said, gripping my ass and thrusting up into me. “I love making you come.” He worked my clit so well, and I was so sensitive from the orgasm that I could feel the pleasure building in my core. He felt it too, and his breath was coming faster and his voice was getting raspier.

“Ethan! I’m going to come again.” I felt the pressure building inside me, and I clamped around him harder, gripping his cock and squeezing him with my muscles. “Like that! Oh, my God, yes!” I was moving faster and faster, grinding and rocking on him and squeezing him as he kept up his rhythm. My moans were loud, and I could barely hold myself up on him. “Ethan! I’m going to come!” My orgasm exploded through me, and I screamed. My pussy clenched and spasmed

around his cock, and I heard him groan as he came as well. Hot jets of cum filled me up, and I leaned on him, panting and gasping.

His thrusts slowed and my body calmed. I remained there on top of him for a moment until he rolled to the side and laid me down. He grabbed the towel, discarded when I straddled him, and cleaned himself, then me. Then he tossed the towel and curled up around me. His strong arms soothed me, calming my body as I caught my breath. We didn't say a word. We didn't need to. Everything had already been said.

Except, a new concern came to my mind, one that I never thought I'd feel or face. My stomach still tightened in regular contractions brought on by orgasm, and each one reminded me that the child growing inside me didn't belong to this man. And the man to whom she belonged would likely be going to jail, at least for a short time. How would I raise a baby with a criminal, and would I ever be free of him?

Those thoughts made me cling to Ethan harder. If only I could wake up and it was all a bad nightmare and Ethan was the father.

ETHAN

I stood awaiting my final conduct review remarks. Lily stood beside me, arm hooked around mine. I tried to insist that she stay home, but she refused. Now that everything was in the open and had been for four days, there was no keeping her away. I felt like a pack of wild horses couldn't move her from my side. She wanted to fight for me as much as I had fought for her in rescuing her from that monster.

“Dr. Lewis,” Alice said, scowling down her nose like at every other hearing, “we really don't need to hear testimony from Ms. Bennett again.” She shook her head and raised an eyebrow at Lily, who simply smiled. I opened my mouth to respond but Lily beat me to it.

“I understand, Madam Chairwoman, but I felt I did Ethan a disservice at the last hearing.” She cleared her throat and continued. “Dr. Lewis was more than a good doctor. He went above and beyond for me, ensuring that I had a safe place to recover. He invited me into his home, gave me his bed, fed me, encouraged me to do my therapy, allowed me space to investigate the world around me so that I could remember things in my own way, at my own pace.

“If you recall the news from this weekend, my former fiancé, Mark Turner, was abusive and controlling. Had I gone to live with him, I'd have been force-fed a pack of lies that would have made my memory issues worse, and I would be in an abusive situation. Ethan prevented that.”

“Ms. Bennett, while we appreciate your candor, the time for more testimony...” Alice took her glasses off and squinted.

“I understand, Madam Chairwoman, but until you know the whole truth, your judgment can’t be fair.” Lily wasn’t backing down at all. She was a lioness on a mission to protect her pride.

“I’m of the understanding that Dr. Lewis lied to you about the nature of your pregnancy? Is that right?” Gregory sat forward and stared right at Lily as if she were the one under review.

“That was a very huge misunderstanding, and Nurse Collins was mistaken. Ethan wants to be the father of my child, but the paternity test proved he is not.” Her throat constricted as she spoke. I heard how she choked out the words while keeping the emotion back. I knew how badly she wanted me to be the baby’s father because she had mentioned it many times over the past few days. My heart ached for her, but time would help us move past the sad fact that Mark had to be a part of our lives.

“Then Ms. Collins is wrong?” Alice asked, eyebrows raised.

“I don’t think she heard everything correctly. Ethan’s only mistake in this situation was falling in love with me as he cared for me, and the only reason that was a mistake was because at the time, I was committed to someone else. Someone whom I now know is wrong for me.”

Alice sat back and looked at Gregory, then the other board members one by one. “Excuse me for a second?” she said, gesturing to them all. The board got up and left, and the room was so thick with tension that neither Lily nor I spoke until they returned five minutes later. Alice sat down with a harrumph, and I noticed Dr. Baker standing just outside the door.

“Well, Dr. Lewis,” Alice started, “it appears the board has come to a decision. You’ve already served one month of suspension without pay, and we believe you are a valuable asset to this hospital. You are being put on probation under Dr.

Baker's supervision for the next six months due to your conduct regarding Amily Collins. If you act in an unprofessional way again, we reserve the right to terminate you immediately." She sighed. "As for Ms. Collins, she's taken a job at Lima Memorial, so you won't have that personal conflict here any longer. Now, you are excused. You may return to duty following the holiday, and we will put you back in the rotation."

I wanted to cheer and whoop for joy, but she scowled at me. "And, Mr. Lewis?"

"Yes, Madam Chairwoman?"

Lily clung to my arm more tightly, clearly excited for me.

"You have an amazing woman right there." Alice clicked her tongue. "It takes a lot of love to do what she just did for you. Keep her."

I had to fight a chuckle as the board stood and nodded. They chatted among themselves as Lily and I retreated to the hallway where we celebrated with a kiss. I was overjoyed to have the whole thing behind me, and on such a great day, too.

"Look, we need to get to Erin's house now." Lily's assertiveness was so cute. I loved how she mothered me and kept me to the schedule. It was as if since remembering everything, she'd come into her personality again, and I loved her even more because of it. She was more wonderful than I could have ever imagined.

"Yes, Mom," I said, winking.

We headed out to our car and through the few inches of sloshy snow that blanketed the city in an unprecedented fall snowstorm. It made the Christmas spirit really come alive in us, even on the day before Thanksgiving. Erin was hosting some friends for a "Friendsgiving" celebration today, and tomorrow, we would go to Peggy and Gus's house. My parents, living out of state, would join us on a video call later this evening.

When we arrived at Erin's house, I had no clue what to expect. My work colleagues were my only friends, and while

we sometimes got a drink at the bar after work or met up at the gym from time to time, we rarely socialized. It was pleasant to meet several people Lily went to high school and college with, among some others she didn't know so well.

Erin's place was nice too—a loft above an old shoe factory. It was large, four bedrooms, with a massive open floor plan for the living-dining-kitchen area. It was perfect for hosting an event with multiple couples, a few of whom were surprised to see me with Lily instead of Mark. Her grace and tact in introducing me to her friends so late in her pregnancy was perfect, making me swoon for her even harder. If I weren't already in love, this would have made me fall hard.

I sat on a chair in the kitchen in the corner of the room as Lily flitted about, entertaining her friends with stories stemming from back in the day as they grew up together. She was a charmer, naturally gaining their attention. It was nice to see her in her element, and it helped me understand her better. Love at first sight didn't mean I knew everything, only that I knew I wanted to know everything.

One of the men at the party sat next to me and munched on some finger foods while we waited for dinner to be ready, and he made small talk, but my ear was tuned to Lily. She stood across the kitchen with Erin and a woman whose name I didn't know. They asked her about the baby and then about Mark. Lily shifted the conversation and avoided that topic.

“Ethan is a neurologist. Did I mention that?” She sucked on a candy cane, and I noticed the mistletoe hanging over her head. I had a mind to swoop in and kiss her right then and there, but I wanted to hear what she'd say.

“I didn't know. That's so incredible. I never pegged you for dating a doctor type.” The new friend batted playfully at Lily's arm and she grinned.

“I got to meet his boss and some of his colleagues today.” She had a way of spinning the board review as some magical event where she felt accepted in my world. Any other man would have felt vulnerable that she knew his secrets, but I felt a hundred percent safe as she continued. “He is such an

amazing doctor. He works so closely with his boss. I'm sure he's going to do really well, maybe even become head of his department one day."

I loved that her idea of my probation as *working closely with my boss*. I chuckled and sat back in the seat, now openly staring at her. She really was amazing. I couldn't ask for a better partner in life. She overlooked everything that happened and my obvious flaws and accepted me exactly how I was. When I thought about how I might have looked compared to Mark, I knew I was the better of the two choices, but Lily had the choice to leave me completely behind and find someone who was really worthy of her.

She chose me anyway.

Lily continued talking to her friends about me, and I couldn't stand being this far away from her for one more minute. My heart was about to burst. I stood and walked over to her, interrupting her. I flicked my eyes upward and grinned, and she looked up to see the mistletoe. Her friends chuckled and backed away, egging her on.

"Why, Mr. Lewis, I do believe you owe me a kiss." She winked at me and wrapped her arms around my shoulders, so I dived in, pulling her against my body and planting a kiss on her lips.

Those in the room whooped and hollered, and she grinned against my lips. It was a sweet moment, one I was certain we'd both remember. And even though everyone was staring, I whispered, "I love you," and kissed her again.

"Get a room!" someone called, and Lily pulled me into the laundry room and shut the door, only to arouse another bout of laughter and jeers from her friends. I knew it was the perfect time to give her my Christmas gift, despite having a month left until Christmas.

I reached into my inner breast pocket of my jacket and pulled out the bundle of papers. "What's this?" she asked, looking confused. She took them from me and unfolded them.

“Adoption papers,” I said softly, not really sure how she’d take it. “I want to adopt the baby when she’s born.”

Lily’s eyes filled with tears. “You what?” she asked, shaking her head.

“I want us all to be a family, and I want that to start with my adopting the baby.”

Her bottom lip pushed out in a happy grimace as tears flowed. “But that means...”

“Yes, Mark would have to sign over paternity, but after everything that happened, I know we can convince him.” I leaned in and kissed her forehead. “I love you, Lily. Please say you’ll consider this if we can convince Mark?”

“Yes, oh, my God, Ethan. Yes, of course.” She smiled and cried and kissed me again, then gasped, “Oh!” She reached for my hand and pressed it to her belly. “Feel it?”

“I do!” I smiled. “Lily junior is strong.”

“Or maybe Leilani or Nandini...” Her eyes sparkled as she looked into mine. “Which do you like more?”

“What?” Now I was the one who was confused.

“You can’t be a father if you don’t help pick the name.” Lily’s face was priceless, and I was smitten.

“You want me to help pick her name?” I felt emotion overwhelming me.

“Yes, I really do.” Her hand pressed mine to her belly and she sighed. “I want you to be my partner in every sense of the word, Ethan.”

I had no response except to kiss her again. Never in my wildest dreams had I thought she’d be this open to me. She was my dream come true.

“I like the name Leilani Mālama. It means ‘royal child we care for’. Because this little girl will be a princess to both of us.” I couldn’t think of a more fitting name.

“Push, baby, you can do it.” Ethan leaned over me, coaching me and coaxing me to work hard. Leilani was coming, and despite it ruining our entire holiday plan, we were ecstatic. Mom was here too, holding my right hand while Ethan held my left hand. Though she was more eager to see the baby and lost a bit of focus when it came to helping me. I was so thankful for Ethan and the fact that all this blood and body fluid stuff didn’t discourage him.

“Oh, God... it hurts.” I squeezed their hands so hard I swore I was going to break them in two. Mom grimaced but Ethan’s eyes stayed locked on mine.

“Remember, deep breath. Now tuck your chin. One more big push. One, two, three, four... You got this... Six, seven, eight... Don’t give up!”

“Wahhhh!” The wail of Leilani’s sob filled the air as her body separated from mine, and I cried in relief, flopping back in the bed.

Ethan was there instantly, kissing my forehead and pushing the hair out of my face as the nurses laid her on my belly and wiped her clean. Mom doted on her, mumbling something about how perfect she was, but all I could do was close my eyes and breathe. The pain was gone and it was over. I shook and shivered. Ethan covered me with a blanket and then they put Lily on my chest.

“Baby, you did so amazing. Look at our little girl.” His voice was full of the same emotion dripping down my cheeks.

“The best Christmas present a man could ask for.”

I looked down at my daughter, red skin and covered in vernix. She wailed and squirmed and I ached to soothe her little heart.

“God, she’s so tiny,” I muttered.

“Five pounds, seven ounces, fifteen and three-quarter inches long.” Mom’s proud announcement came before a slew of flashes from the back of her phone as she played proud grandma-slash-paparazzi. Something told me there would be more pictures of this child than all of my childhood combined, all in the first week of her life.

“She has your eyes,” Ethan whispered, kissing my forehead again. “She’s beautiful.”

I let my own tears fall freely, even as I delivered the afterbirth and endured the cramping. The nurses helped me get Leilani to latch on to my breast to nurse, then cleaned me up and put my bed back together. Ethan stayed by me the whole time even though I was in and out of consciousness. Labor started around lunchtime, but it was almost midnight on Christmas Eve. And he was right. Leilani was the best Christmas present ever. Second-best were the signed adoption papers Mark had couriered to us only this morning.

“I can’t believe she’s really mine,” he said, pulling a chair up to my bedside. Mom stepped out when the doctor left to go sit with Dad until they let him come back. I reclined in the bed and held my bundle who eagerly sucked at my nipple.

“I can’t believe you’re really mine.” I felt so drugged, though I hadn’t even taken anything for pain. I had done it all natural. It was just the haze of having no sleep for so long and exerting so much energy.

“I’ve been yours since the first moment our eyes met.” Ethan took my hand and kissed it. “And I will be yours until my very last breath.”

The door creaked open, and Mom and Dad walked in, both with eager smiles and now with a giant stash of balloons and flowers. Dad had been busy while I was pushing. The balloons

said *Congratulations* and *It's a Girl!* in bold pink and silver letters. I took a deep breath of relaxation and shifted in the bed. It was still cold, but I felt warmed by their love and presence. We'd had our differences over the past several months, but they fully supported me now, and they loved Ethan as much as I did. It was a Christmas miracle.

"Hey, Dad..." I greeted him as he kissed my forehead and pulled the edge of the receiving blanket back to see Leilani's face.

"Hey, Lily. I heard you did an amazing job." He touched Leilani's cheek gently and then straightened. "She's beautiful."

I blinked slowly and nodded. Drowsiness made it hard to stay coherent, but I knew they wouldn't stay long. It was late and both of them were tired. My Christmas would be spent in the hospital this year, ensuring I was strong enough to go home with the baby and making sure she was healthy enough to go too. But Mom and Dad had a huge Christmas lunch planned for some of our extended family. They'd all be sad I missed it, but Mom would show them baby pictures.

"It's late," Mom said, nudging him. "We should let her sleep. We can stop here while Betty helps with the cooking before lunch tomorrow."

"Of course," Dad grumbled in response.

"Uh... before you go." Ethan stood and turned to the duffle bag we brought with us when my contractions hit. He pulled out the adoption papers Mark had signed and turned to face my dad. My parents knew nothing about the adoption, or that Mark had signed away his parental rights in exchange for a lighter sentence for the kidnapping and assault charges. I smiled as Ethan approached my dad with them in hand.

"Sir, this came in today." He handed the bundle to Dad, who looked them over, and continued talking. "This won't be final for a few months, but now that they're signed and I know I'm going to be Leilani's legal father, there is something I want to ask you."

Dad handed the papers to Mom and his eyebrows rose. “What’s that?”

Ethan spoke to Dad but he looked at me. “I want to marry your daughter, and I want to do it soon.”

My heart melted, and tears welled up. Ethan had been talking about me and him being together forever, ever since Thanksgiving, but I had no idea he planned to propose to me like this. My gut told me marriage was inevitable when he asked to be Lily’s adoptive father, and my emphatic answer would have always been yes, anyway. I loved him so much. But this was so romantic and I didn’t know why.

“It makes sense, sir. I’ll be Leilani’s father, and well... frankly, this was supposed to happen at lunch tomorrow—I had this whole thing planned and—”

“It’s about time you made it official,” Dad said, interrupting Ethan’s nervous rambling. He slapped Ethan on the shoulder and Mom whimpered out a joyful sigh.

“Oh, dear.” She handed the papers back to Ethan and then walked over and gave me a hug. “Congratulations.”

“Who said I’m saying yes?” I asked jokingly, and she snickered. Everyone chuckled as Ethan and Dad walked to the door, talking quietly. I watched them after I said goodbye to Mom, and it was clear to me that they both loved me very much.

Sleep took me, but not before I heard my dad call Ethan “Son” and say goodbye. I had a family, and that was a gift that I’d always cherish. This little girl in my arms was the glue that repaired everything in my life, and I would spend the rest of my days ensuring she was cared for and loved. I knew Ethan would too.

EPILOGUE

“**A**ll I’m saying is, I’ve been planning this day for almost twelve months, Erin. The poinsettias, the mistletoe, the garland. It has to be perfect. I already had to compromise on my Christmas ham dinner at the reception because of the national shortage. I can’t—”

“Whoa!” Erin chuckled as she grabbed my arms and stopped me from pacing. My long satin gown swished across the marble floor of the castle’s bridal suite. “You are completely irrational and way too emotional. You’re acting the way you did when you found out you were pregnant with Leilani. Woman, it’s your wedding day, not the end of the world.”

Tears welled up, and I bit back a smile and just nodded at her. I took a deep breath and blew it out. “You’re right, I just want everything to be perfect.”

“If everything were perfect, you’d have a boring day to remember. You want things to be mixed up and a little crazy because those are the stories you’re going to tell people when you remember your wedding day for the next fifty years.” Mom smiled at me and fluffed the train of my gown. “Besides, perfect is overrated, and you, my dear, are going to stress yourself out with the details.”

Erin smiled at me. “Listen to her. She’s smart.”

I laughed at her and tried to relax. “Alright, but it’s time to go and I can’t find the bouquet.” My bouquet, a bundle of poinsettias and baby’s breath with greenery, was the last touch

to my Christmas wedding. When Ethan asked me to marry him, I insisted that we have a Christmas wedding because it only seemed fitting. Our entire relationship was grown in the fertile soil of the Christmas spirit, and now, a year later, I was ready to be his wife—and so much more.

“I’ll get Leilei and we’ll meet you out there.” Mom rushed off to find Leilani, who despite not walking yet, would be our flower girl. Mom would push her down the aisle in the wagon stroller which was decorated to appear like Santa’s sleigh with candy cane wheels and reindeer on the handle. Her little red gown was so adorable that I cried putting it on her. That earned me an eye roll from Erin who thought I was being too emotional, but this was my wedding day. I just let it all out.

“Let’s go,” she said, wrapping her arm through mine. We headed toward the door and on the way passed a low table where my bouquet lay.

Ushered to the spot at the back of the great hall in the Great Stone Castle, I felt nerves jittering around in my stomach. Dad waited for me in his black tux. Erin’s emerald-green dress coordinated with his cummerbund and the beaded pins in my hair. Everything had been meticulously planned to a T, even the date of December eighteenth—close to Christmas but not intruding on anyone’s holiday meal plans.

“Ready?” Dad asked as the doors opened and Mom pushed Leilani down the aisle. Erin winked at me and took her place with Dr. Baker, Ethan’s best man. They walked down the aisle next, and I sighed.

“I’m ready, Daddy.” I kissed his cheek, and he folded the silky white veil over my eyes then led me down the aisle. I was blinded by flashing lights as cameras snapped pictures of me. The entire hall was filled with our family and friends, all decked out in their holiday best. The song *If Every Day Could be Christmas* played over speakers, and Ethan stood near the minister, watching me approach him.

The next thirty minutes were a blur. All I could think about was my wedding night and being alone with Ethan as his wife. Living with him the past year had been the best year of my

life, but tonight was special. I had a gift to top all Christmas gifts he'd ever had, and I couldn't wait to give it to him.

So when the reception was nearing a close and we dashed through the tunnel of love formed by our friends who threw birdseed and mistletoe, my heart hammered. He whisked me off my feet into the back of the limo, and the driver shut us in to the exultation of congratulations exclaimed by our family and friends.

“Wow! You're my wife.” Ethan pulled me onto his lap, and I had no choice but to obey. The gown got in the way, but I hiked it up around my waist. It was no different from when we first met and I had a huge belly that separated us.

“Uh, no, you're my husband,” I joked, leaning down to kiss him. The limo driver took off. He'd chauffeur us to Ethan's place so we could change and grab our bags, then off to the airport for our two-week-long honeymoon in Fiji. I was thankful for Mom and Dad who were keeping Leilani, now only days from being a year old and fully weaned so I could enjoy this trip.

“Hmm... well, I don't mind that title.” He kissed me again and dug his hands beneath the layers of satin and tulle. “As long as it means I get exclusive rights to this delicious pussy.” His fingers pressed against the outside of my panties and I gasped then snickered.

“You've had those exclusive rights for a year now... Mmm,” I groaned as he pulled the silky fabric away from my skin and pushed a finger deep into me. “Here in the limo?”

“You're not actually going to make me wait until we land in Japan and check into a hotel?”

The layover in Tokyo before our flight to the island would be exhausting—fifteen hours after our three-hour flight to LAX. By then, the magic would be over and we'd be too tired to consummate this marriage. I shrugged. “Your house?”

“Where's your sense of adventure, Mrs. Lewis? We've never had sex in a car before, least of all a limo... And we're just married. What, are you too stodgy now that you're an old

married woman? Not a risk taker?” His fingers dipped and rubbed on my entrance, a thumb massaging my clit through my panties. I whimpered and rested my hands on his shoulders, rocking against him.

“You’re taunting me?” I asked playfully. He had a way of bringing out the beast in me. While one hand groped my pussy, he pulled my strapless gown down in front with the other and exposed one of my tender breasts. I gasped as he took it into his mouth, rolling his tongue around my nipple.

“Mmm, yeah, tits of a married woman taste way better.” He smiled against my skin, and I couldn’t hold back the chuckle. His dick was hard, rubbing against my thigh as I rocked.

“Okay, but we have to be quiet.”

“You think this limo driver never chauffeured newlyweds who screwed in the back seat on the way to the airport?” Ethan nipped at my nipple and then kissed the inside curve of my breast. “Can I rip them off?” he asked, and I grinned.

“If you must...” But before I even got my answer out, he had hooked his finger around the crotch of my panties and pulled so hard they tore. It made my pussy clench with desire for him. “God... you’re incredible, Mr. Lewis.”

“That’s Dr. Lewis.” His fingers plunged into me, massaging and grinding on me. I moaned and rocked my hips. His other hand gripped my hip and pulled me down onto him, and there was no mistaking the hard cock in his pants.

“I don’t care what your name is, just make me come.” Leaning down, I kissed him hard and his lips swallowed my moans of pleasure. He thrust into me over and over, his fingers touching every spot that craved attention until he had me quivering and writhing around. “Oh, God... yes... don’t stop,” I panted, grabbing his shoulders so hard my knuckles went white. He had a way of making me feel so good I almost lost control. And when he slowly pulled his hand out of me and licked his fingers clean, I pushed the dress out of the way so I could undo his belt.

“Hmm... so you want to be filled with my seed?” His smirk was naughty, and I almost laughed at how cheesy he sounded.

“Just get your dick out and make me come again.”

“So you’re bossing me around now?” He playfully pulled his cock out of the fly of his pants and tapped it on my clit, making the material of my dress dance.

“I’m telling you how to take care of your wife.” I pulled his lips against mine and raised my hips up, and as I sank down I felt the glorious fullness of his dick sliding into me. I grunted, clenching around him, and his thumb found my core, massaging my clit.

I rose and fell on him as he thrust upward to meet me.

I felt another orgasm rising and I started to get vocal. “Oh, God, Ethan. My God, I’m so close.”

His thumb moved faster, and I clenched around him, and that was all it took. I rode out the wave of pleasure, crying out and digging my nails into the leather headrest behind him. He grabbed my hips, thrusting into me a few more times, and made a few low grunts before going still. I looked down to see his face, his eyes closed and his mouth open as he panted. Guttural groans reverberated out of his chest as I felt his hot explosion deep inside me. I continued to convulse around him, milking him as he relaxed beneath me and laid his head back.

“God, woman, you push my buttons.” He sighed and shut his eyes, and I slid off his lap, feeling his cum trickle down my thigh.

I flopped onto the seat next to him with a giddy grin on my face I couldn’t extinguish. “Yeah, well, don’t get too used to it.” I couldn’t stop smiling. I knew he was going to flip out in a good way.

“Why’s that?” he asked, half-heartedly playing into my joking manner. I heard his belt rattle, then his zipper, then his belt again.

“Because I’m about to gain forty pounds and my body will never be the same again.” I moaned and pushed my dress

down around my knees, and he laughed.

“What—like the freshman fifteen of marriage?” he asked, reaching over to tickle me.

I giggled and squirmed, and when he stopped I said, “No, like the way a pregnant woman packs on the pounds because she’s growing a tiny human.”

I held my breath, waiting for him to understand. His eyes clouded over and his brow furrowed. “What?” he asked, angling his body toward me. He leaned forward and took my hand. “You mean...?”

“Yes, I’m pregnant again, and I’m fairly certain it’s yours this time.” I bit my lower lip as my smile grew and I watched his eyes well up with tears.

“You mean...”

“Yes, you’ll be a father for real.” My heart leapt up into my throat, and I choked up, letting my own tears fall.

“Baby, I’ve been a real father since the moment those papers were signed last year on Christmas Eve.” Ethan brought my fingers to his lips and kissed them. “Leilei is mine, through and through. You know that, right?”

Now it was my turn to be confused because I never knew Ethan really felt this way. I had hoped, and he never gave me any reason to doubt it, but it filled my heart to hear him say it.

“Don’t get me wrong.” His hand shot out to my stomach and he pressed his palm against it. “I am thrilled we are having another, but it is *another* child for me. You’ve already made me a father the day you said I could adopt her, and other children won’t be any more ‘my child’ than Leilani is.”

“Oh, God, Ethan,” I sobbed, “I love you so much.”

He pulled me into his arms and kissed my cheek. “I love you too, baby.” He kissed me again. “Wanna screw again? We can do it before we get back to Lima.”

I chuckled and squeezed him. “Already? What did you do, eat Viagra for dinner?”

“Maybe... or maybe your hot body is addicting.”

I climbed back onto his lap with his hands eagerly groping me, and I was the happiest woman alive. Now, if I could keep up with his libido on this trip and not throw up too much, we'd have a great honeymoon.

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I agreed to be my best friend's surrogate.

Then I had a one night stand.

***And then* I realized I slept with my bestie's OBGYN.**

Who's definitely *not* going to knock me up...

When I meet gorgeous Dr Grant Richards, apparently, there's no stopping me. The handsome silver fox has my panties practically igniting with one look...

So we spend the night together.

And meet again in the examination room, with my bestie by my side, because she's his patient.

My best friend *needs* me to get pregnant, because she cannot carry a baby herself.

But before the procedure can happen, I break...

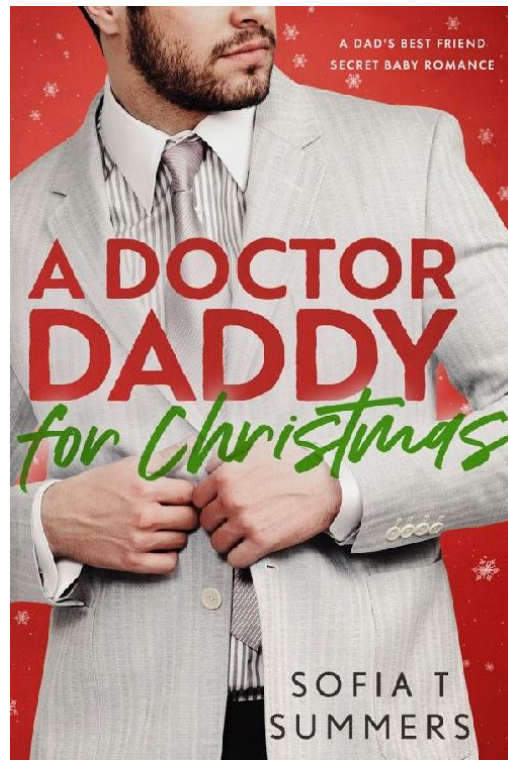
Because despite my best efforts, I'm pregnant already...

And the baby? It's Grant's.

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A DOCTOR DADDY FOR CHRISTMAS (PREVIEW)



DESCRIPTION

My legs shook when I saw my dad's best friend a decade later.

And I could barely breathe when Callum touched me again after stomping all over my heart.

To be fair, it wasn't his fault.

I was the boss's daughter, and my overprotective father had warned him against dating me.

And since I wasn't in the mood to have my heart broken this holiday season, I only had one option.

Shut him out.

But the weather had other plans.

My annual Christmas fundraiser got snowed in, leaving Callum and I to confront our grudges.

We did all that... *and a lot more.*

So much more that I had to rush to the grocery store and buy a pregnancy test.

That news was sure to infuriate my dad.

But Callum's Christmas miracle was for the taking.

If only he had met the three-month *little* old secret that I'd been keeping from him...

PROLOGUE

Ellen

I spent all morning baking these cookies and I don't even know why. After Dad's speech about how Callum may be promoted to director and that it would force me to give up my career, I felt crushed. Callum wouldn't honestly believe that for a second, though he would definitely want to respect my father's wishes—especially after Dad chased him off nine years ago, before my marriage to Roger.

Standing at the kitchen counter, I wrapped a sheet of plastic wrap over the warm cookies and watched it fog up from the steam. Mom said a way to a man's heart is through his stomach, so this was akin to attempting bribery. I didn't care. I'd bribe Callum into my life every day, all day long if it meant he would actually be in my life. I was uncertain of whether it was even what he wanted.

I carried the plate to the front door where I set them on the table and turned to the closet for my coat. December's blustery winds were at an all-time high that day. With Christmas two weeks out and winter's grip in full swing over New York state, a coat was essential. I took my leather trench out and put it on, shoving my hands into the gloves after meticulously buttoning each of the black buttons. My hair was decent today, so no hat, but I had used remote start to warm my car. And hopefully, the wind wouldn't destroy my coiffed locks.

The driveway was icy—almost took a spill getting to my sedan—but I made it safely with the cookies, my purse, and

my keys. The car was barely putting heat out, though, which told me exactly how cold it was. Near zero with wind chills near negative twenty. I couldn't complain, though. I'd seen areas of the world in all my travels for work where people had it far worse. I was thankful for my warm clothing and fancy car.

I headed across town to the hospital. Callum wasn't expecting me. I knew he'd be at work right now because he told me he was pulling doubles for a few weeks—shifts from early morning to almost midnight. With the way he'd been ignoring all my calls and text messages, I figured it was the only time I'd get with him. I didn't relish the idea of having this conversation during his workday, but avoiding it wasn't working for me.

The parking lot was full except for a few spaces as far away from the door as possible. Figured my luck would be as such. I felt like it had been drained for years, anyway. When good things happened to me, they were truly highlights and blessings. Anymore, the random frustrating things—like having to walk all the way across a parking lot in bone-chilling temps with wind—I took in stride. That was one good thing about the divorce. It taught me to be more resilient.

As I walked toward the door, my collar turned up against the wind, I thought of those days in the lodge when we were snowed in. The entire city of Evansville had been blanketed in a few feet of snow, but in the mountains it was worse. They closed off everything, trapping us in, and Callum and I had the chance to really connect for the first time in years. I planned every detail of that so well—us hooking up again—that I had actually neglected some minor details about the event and Chandra, my partner, went scrambling to ensure everything was perfect. No one was the wiser, except me.

I put off my job for him once, and I'd do it again if he asked. I'd even sign it all over to Chandra to let her have full stake. It wasn't worth it to me to have a company and all that money, travel the world, have the fame and reputation, but have no one to truly share it with. No family, no legacy to leave except reputation and stocks. I thought Roger was that,

but it fell apart, and I blamed myself. Which was why I was trying twice as hard to make this thing with Callum work. Roger wasn't worth giving up everything for. I knew it when I married him, which is why I pursued my company.

Callum was, though. He was worth every last breath I had in me.

There were a few of my father's friends near the elevator, so I chose the stairwell. Callum worked on the third floor, so it wasn't like it was a huge climb, and the bit of exertion proved to warm me up a little. On the way up, I sent Callum a text.

Ellen 12:19 PM: Thought I'd stop by. I made cookies.

I tugged my gloves off and shoved them in my pocket, waiting for him to respond. I was nearly at his floor when my phone vibrated.

Callum 12:21 PM: Sounds good. Come on up to my office.

So far, so good. He wasn't rejecting me or ignoring me this time, not when I had the ability to make a scene. Not that I would. I was a professional and had no desire to humiliate or embarrass him. So I opened the door to the third floor and stepped through it, balancing the cookies on one hand, then the other while I shrugged out of my coat. Callum's small office space here was down the hall from my father's, and a coat rack near the breakroom was the perfect place to leave the heavy trench coat. I hung it there then headed to his office to wait.

It was dark when I walked in. I flipped on the light and peeled the plastic wrap off the cookies and tossed it in the trash, then sat down at his desk and waited. The cookies smelled so good I almost ate one myself, but I felt jittery, too anxious to eat. I'd been back and forth for weeks on whether this was even worth pursuing because I knew what I felt about my ability to maintain a relationship. Today was the day for the decision.

Callum walked in, dressed in his tweed pants, white button down, and lab coat. He looked a bit tired and rough around the edges, like he hadn't shaven in a few days. "Hey," I said,

trying not to allow any of my frustration to seep out in my tone.

“Hey,” he replied. “Thanks for the cookies.”

I shrugged. “You never called.” I slid the cookies across the desk and waited. He sat down, and I would have sworn I saw him squirming. Putting pressure on him might be the only way I’d get to the bottom of things, so I was only doing what I had to.

“I know I haven’t been the easiest person to deal with lately,” I began, my eyes never leaving his, “but I wanted to talk to you about what’s been on my mind.”

Callum nodded, taking another bite of the cookie as I took a breath and continued. “It’s about my father,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper. “I know you spoke with him the other day, and I just wanted to know what he said.”

Cal took small bites of the cookie, as if procrastinating. If he thought he was getting out of this conversation without answering me, he was wrong. I wasn’t going to move a muscle until we faced it head on. I loved him. He knew that. And I knew he loved me too, even if he was on the fence about respecting my father’s wishes. I just wanted him to see that I was in my thirties now. I’d been a world traveler for years. I didn’t need my father’s permission to date someone.

“He made it clear that he doesn’t think we should be together.” He avoided eye contact with me as he said the words, like he was ashamed to admit the truth, or maybe he was ashamed because he agreed. I was angry. I knew why my father didn’t want us together. He felt Callum would hold me back, keep me from fulfilling my destiny or something. I didn’t care. My life would be so much better with Cal in it.

“I don’t know what to do.” My hands shook as I spoke. “I love you, but I don’t want to disappoint my family. They mean everything to me.”

Callum reached across the table for my hand, but I didn’t take it. “I love you too, Ellen,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper, “but your father is right. You have worked so hard

to build your company, and it would be wrong of me to come into your life at this point and have you give all that up.”

Something sparked inside me, a little angry voice that had been there for years, since Dad practically forced me to date Roger just to get over Callum leaving me the first time. I didn't know at the time that Cal was only doing what my father said. All I knew was that someone was trying to make decisions for my life without my consent, and I hated it then, and I hated it now too. “I can't believe you're just going to give up on us like this,” I whispered, my voice breaking.

“I'm not giving up on us. I just think that we need to take a step back and reevaluate things. You've come so far, Ellen. I'm trying to make the right choice for your future.” I saw the hurt in his eyes, but his words didn't line up with what real love looked like. It wasn't pushing someone away so they'd be happier without you. Real love rose to meet the challenges and conquered them.

I was furious in a way I'd never been with Callum. I stared into the plate of cookies, trying to control my facial expression. I was perfectly capable of making my own decisions for my future, and I didn't need anyone to tell me what to do. I longed for his love and support, even his partnership and advice, but if he was no different from my father—from my ex-husband—I wasn't sure this was what I wanted, either.

“You know what, Callum? Maybe you're right.” I stood and squared my shoulders. “It's always best that other people, specifically men, make choices for my future.” He rubbed the back of his neck as I continued. “Because I'm just a helpless woman who knows nothing. I can't make decisions for myself or possibly know what my heart feels.”

“Ellen, please.” He sat forward, which only angered me further. I had nothing more to say to him. If the past several weeks hadn't shown him how perfect we were for each other, my words in this moment never would.

“I'll talk to you later, Callum.” I picked up the plate of cookies and walked out. I didn't want to give up on us. I didn't

want to walk away, but if he wasn't willing or didn't want to fight for us, there was no point in my doing it either. I wasn't about to carry a relationship on my back like I did with Roger, making myself believe it was all my fault. I had done that once, but this time, it wasn't me. I wasn't giving up. He already had. I was accepting the consequences of his choices, and it hurt.

I found my coat, dumped the cookies into the trash bin, and walked to the elevator. I was a fool for thinking he would ever really choose me. My father was right nine years ago. Callum Andrews will never change. He wanted a fling and his career. With the directorship hanging in front of him, I didn't stand a chance. He was going to choose himself over me every time, and that wasn't the type of man I wanted to be in a relationship with.

End of preview. [Get the entire story here.](#)

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