

Baby

WITH MY

EX'S BEST FRIEND

BROOKLYN COX

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Chapter One

Reagan

“Okay, we have another pair of shoes. A couple of hats... what is this? Batman boxer shorts?” Lucy listed off as she handed them to me.

I threw the shoes and the hats in a box and then snatched the boxers from her hand. “Actually, those are mine.”

She looked at me questioningly. “Do I want to know?”

“If you must know, they’re very comfortable...and I happen to like Batman. It’s no big deal,” I said, as I began to tape up the now full box.

“How come I never knew about this? Wait a minute...which Batman?” she asked, and once again, I remembered why Lucy was my best friend. She was very serious about finding out which iteration of Batman was my favorite and not just making fun of me for having boxer shorts with a comic book character all over them.

“The OG, of course,” I looked at her like she was crazy.

“Adam West? From the sixties TV show?” she asked incredulously.

I nearly dropped my boxer shorts on the floor. “I misspoke, the second OG,” I corrected.

“I’m not sure how I feel about this development, but that’s the most animated that I’ve seen you since you and Brian broke up,” she said, then immediately grimaced. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to bring up his name again.”

I shook my head. “There’s no need for any of that. It’s not like I lost some great love of my life. We just weren’t working.”

“I know that, but there is this other sadness about you. What else is going on, Reagan?” Lucy asked.

I averted my gaze. “Nothing, nothing, I promise. Brian and I gave it a shot, we even tried cohabitating. It just wasn’t working. Of course, I would’ve preferred he would’ve kept his dick in his pants until we’d decided for certain it wasn’t working.”

Lucy made a face. “He didn’t...”

“He did,” I confirmed. “He and I have been having conversation after conversation about how our relationship wasn’t quite what either one of us was expecting, but we weren’t officially broken up. That was, until I caught him...on my couch.”

“Gross,” Lucy said, jumping up from her spot on the couch. “Warn a girl first.”

I rolled my eyes. “It has been dry cleaned to the hilt, don’t worry.”

“Yeah, well, if it’s all the same to you, I think I’ll just sit over here,” she said, moving to one of the chairs next to the couch. “Are you sure you’re okay, Reagan?”

I gave her my brightest smile. “Right as rain. I don’t need somebody who’s not right for me bringing me down. It sucks to have to start over again, but at least I don’t have to try to put up a good face on everything for him. That was exhausting.”

She looked at me sympathetically. I could tell she wasn’t buying it, but I could also tell that, for the moment, she was not going to press any harder. “What time is he supposed to come by to pick this stuff up?” she asked.

“Oh, no, I don’t want him in my place anymore, so I told him I would drop this off at Adam’s place,” I explained.

“Adam’s place? His best friend? Isn’t this the same guy you told me about who made you want to beat your head against the wall?” she asked dubiously.

“He is...quite the charmer,” I said dryly. “Luckily, I won’t have to deal with him much, other than dropping off this box since Brian is staying with him for now. Brian promised me that he would be out tonight, so we won’t have to pretend to do the sorrowful goodbye bullshit. With any luck, Adam will be out, too, and I can just dump off this box of crap on the doorstep.”

“I’m not sure what I should say here. Do you want to celebrate? We can have a break-up party,” Lucy suggested.

I laughed. My best friends, Lucy and Amy, were forever finding any excuse to have a girls’ night or a party, not that we really needed an excuse. Although, over the last few years, it had been more just me and Lucy since Amy was over on the West Coast, though she would usually make an appearance through a Zoom call.

“As much as I appreciate it, it’s not that big of a thing. I’m going to drop the box off, and then, I’m going to move on with my life. It’s as simple as that,” I assured her.

“Where does Adam live? I can drop it off for you on my way home,” she offered helpfully. That was Lucy for you, always willing to do whatever possible to spare somebody’s pain.

“He lives in the opposite direction that you’re going in. It’s no big deal, Lucy. Besides, you don’t want to be late for your big date night with the hubby,” I said, waggling my eyebrows suggestively.

Even after a couple of years of marriage, Lucy still blushed deeply and then proceeded to launch into her trademark oversharing. “I know, I’m so excited. We’ve been trying Tantric sex. Did you know that the female body is capable of having a thirty-minute orgasm?”

My eyes widened. “Damn. I mean, a few minutes would be nice, but after that, I have things to do,” I told her laughing.

“No, Rea, you’re missing out. When it’s with somebody who you truly love and adore, it’s like having a soul orgasm,” she enthused, looking dreamy.

I suppressed an eye roll, something I did often with Lucy because as much as I loved her, some of her ideas did not jive well with my own. That was all right, I was glad things were going so well between her and her husband, Sam. Considering the fact that Sam started as her blowhard boss, the fact that he’d transitioned into her sweet and doting husband had been something of a surprise. But they worked well together, and they seemed genuinely happy. I was happy for them...if not a little jealous.

Don’t do that, a voice warned in my head. Comparison was the thief of joy. I knew that, and there was no point in comparing my life with those of my best friends. The three of us couldn’t be any more different—that’s what I loved about all of us. But I would be lying if I said that I didn’t feel a pang of regret when I saw the two of them so loved up and happy.

Maybe that’s what I’d been trying to force onto Brian, but it didn’t matter how well I set the stage. Even if everything else was perfect, if that person wasn’t right, I wasn’t going to have the same thing that Lucy and Amy did, respectively. Maybe I just wasn’t meant to have it at all.

Intellectually, that was fine with me. I was young and successful, and I loved my job as a probate lawyer. It definitely had its challenges, but I found it very rewarding.

This slump was just that quarter-life crisis that I heard people talking about, even if I was a little past the quarter-life mark.

Lucy and I said our goodbyes, and I walked her out of the building with my box in hand. Better to get this over with now and move on with things.

Adam lived across town in a renovated brownstone. The bottom floor belonged to an older couple who ran a jewelry store a few blocks over. Adam occupied the top floor. It was prime real estate for New York, and no doubt expensive, but that made no difference to Dr. Adam Rollins.

I'm sure his practice kept him more than financially comfortable, but even if it didn't, he'd been born with a silver spoon in his mouth. He was several years older than Brian, but they had met in college. Apparently, Adam had been expected to follow the family legacy of being "professionally rich." But citing dissatisfaction and a touch of rebellion, he had gone to college a little later in life and became a doctor.

I shuddered to think about what it must have been like to be a patient of Adam's. He was grumpy, arrogant, and had the sense of humor of a teenage boy. Despite the fact that he was so much older than Brian, one wouldn't know after watching them together.

While Brian navigated the world in clean-cut and expensive suits that let people know to take him seriously, Adam wandered around in a hockey jersey and jeans most of the

time. And, by the way he interacted with others, I don't think he gave two shits about people taking him seriously. Part of me admired that a little bit, but I didn't have generational wealth to back me up, so I had no choice but to be a hard ass...especially in my line of work.

My grandmother always told me that some people would only be willing to hand you shit if you were willing to take it. So, I had made it my mission not to take any of it. That type of thinking was why Adam and I never got along throughout my relationship with Brian. He was obnoxious, and I hated his childlike antics. As far as I was concerned, Adam was a bad influence on Brian.

It was a shame, really, since Adam was not an unattractive guy, even with his perpetual five o'clock shadow. But there was a certain intelligence in his eyes that always made one wonder what he was going to do next. I couldn't say he wasn't interesting. Just annoying as hell.

As I climbed the stairs to his portion of the brownstone, I prayed silently that he was not actually home. At the top of the stairs, I looked around furtively. There appeared to be no one around.

Thank God.

I dropped the box unceremoniously onto the doormat in front of Adams's door. "There," I said, rubbing my hands together, "that's the end of that." I straightened and turned on my heel to head back towards the stairs.

I stilled when I heard a familiar voice...a teasing, deep voice saying, "What? No hello for your favorite person?"

I turned around to face Adam. He leaned against his door frame, looking me up and down with that cat-that-ate-the-canary smile.

"Why, whatever do you mean, Adam? I left you a parting gift," I said, motioning to the box on his doorstep.

He looked down at me suspiciously. "I didn't peg you as the type of person to be willing to get your hands dirty enough to put actual shit in here. But I do peg you as somebody who pays somebody else to do it," he said, narrowing his eyes at me, that smile still curving his too-full lips. It was really a shame to make somebody so annoying so attractive.

"I do not have time for those kinds of childish games, unlike somebody I know," I pointed out.

He waved a dismissive hand at me. "Ah, come on, you know, I'm just screwing with you. You're too easy to do that with."

I rolled my eyes. "Yes, I've noticed that you feel that way. Luckily for me, I don't have to deal with it anymore," I said, starting to turn around.

"You know what your problem is?" he called from behind me.

I stopped in my tracks, clenching my jaw together. I hated that question. And yet, I could not help but engage. It was no

wonder I became a lawyer, I loved to argue. I turned around, eyeing him coolly. “No, oh wise one, enlighten me.”

“Oh, you take yourself too seriously. You need to loosen up and have some fun,” he said, shrugging his shoulders.

I barked out a laugh. “That’s a bit like the pot calling the kettle black, don’t you think?”

His brow furrowed together in confusion. “What are you talking about? I’m a fun guy,” he said in all seriousness.

I shook my head. “Asking somebody to pull your finger does not make you a fun guy, it just makes you an overgrown child.”

He laughed. “See, that’s what I’m talking about right there. You’re too good for an old pull-my-finger joke. You take yourself too seriously,” he said in a taunting voice.

My hackles were up now, and I stepped towards him. “Your evidence is lacking, Dr. Rollins, and you have no right to even suggest such a thing. What does it matter to you, anyway? Brian and I have broken up, so you won’t have to deal with me anymore.”

His shoulders slumped somewhat. “I just think it’s a shame that a beautiful woman like you is wasting your time on people who are clearly not a good fit. Don’t get me wrong, Brian is my best friend. He’s a great guy. He’s just not the guy for you—you need somebody who challenges you, somebody to get you going.”

I laughed. “Well, would you look at that, all this time and I should’ve been coming to you for relationship advice,” I said, darting a look over his shoulder to his empty living room, where there was one solitary container of Chinese food. “I forgot you’re such an expert, with your dinner of one.”

“Hey, I am single by choice. I could get anybody I wanted if I wanted to,” he said, stepping closer to me.

“How would you plan to do that? With your arresting wit?” I said, stepping even closer to him and getting in his face.

He looked down at my face, and I never noticed just how deep his brown eyes were. They danced with laughter and irritation, a combination that I was all too familiar with, unfortunately. “I’ll show you...I’ll show you just how I would accomplish that,” he said, his eyes falling to my mouth and his voice dropping.

I felt my eyes widen. He couldn’t be about to—

And then, he was bending down and pressing his lips against mine. I froze as he gave me a long, thorough kiss that made my toes curl inside my shoes.

What the hell was wrong with me? It was Adam, for God’s sake..

But as his tongue swept inside and I tasted the faint traces of beer and inhaled the deep, musky scent of him, something unfurled inside my chest, something that licked down deep inside of me into places I hadn’t really felt before.

I pulled away suddenly, looking startled, as if I had been the one to initiate that kiss. We looked at each other for a long moment like two deer caught in the headlights of a car. Then, as I rubbed at my swollen lips, there was a promise of something in those eyes that reached inside of me and spoke to the most vulnerable part of me...at least, that was how I would excuse my next action later.

Because I raised myself up on my toes. I threw my arms around his neck and brought him back down for another kiss. None of it made sense, but my body had taken over control.

He responded by wrapping his arms around me and pulling me close to him, pressing me against his surprisingly hard body. It was kind of hard to tell beneath those hockey jerseys and hospital scrubs that there was nothing but hard muscle and sinew. There was something else hard waiting for me, too.

One of his hands moved down my back and over my ass, and I moaned into his mouth as he squeezed my cheek in a possessive grip. It was all much too fast and insanely inappropriate...and it was turning me on more than I have ever felt in my lifetime.

He pulled back again, breathing heavily. “You want to come in?”

I didn’t even think, the words just spilled out of my mouth. “God, yes.”

He pulled me inside and shut the door, then gently pushed me back against it, capturing my mouth again with his. I let my tongue do more of the exploring this time, surprised at the

trill of excitement that ran up my spine when I heard the nearly feral crawl that escaped his throat. I guess I shouldn't have been too surprised that Adam had passion—all we ever did when we were around one another was argue.

His hand cupped my cheek, the pad of his thumb stroking my chin as he pulled back and looked down at my eyes. “You are infuriating and the sexiest woman I have ever met.”

“You have a funny way of showing that,” I told him breathily.

“You were Brian's girl. No way was I about to tell either one of you that I got a hard-on every time you walked into a room.”

I laughed. “Bro code?”

“Something like that,” he said breathlessly. “I don't want to talk about him, I don't know why I brought him up.” He ran his fingers over my face.

“Well, I know one way to get all that off your mind,” I said, pushing away from the door, my hands going to my blouse.

Watching as his eyes dilated, I slowly unbuttoned my blouse, and it was oddly titillating. I could feel the moisture at the crux of my thighs gathering as he bit his lip and watched me carefully. I was only a few buttons down before he surged forward. “This image is sexy as hell, honey, but I'm going to have to stop you,” he told me in a husky voice.

I looked up at him, dismayed. “Excuse me?”

His eyes held mine as his hands moved mine away from the buttons of my blouse. One side of his mouth tilted up in a boyish smile. “I saw this in a movie once,” he said quietly as he grasped the front of my blouse and ripped the rest of it open.

“Adam!”

“I’ll get you another one, I promise. That was worth it,” he said, feasting his eyes on my heaving bosom. I couldn’t seem to get the air to my lungs quickly enough. I felt like I had just run the New York marathon, and yet, I was energized in a way that I had never felt before. I laughed as I let what was left of my shirt slip down my arms.

“Okay,” I told him. “But don’t you dare do the same thing to this bra—this one is my favorite,” I said, looking down at the light pink lacy cups that held my breasts at the moment.

He stepped closer, his forehead against mine, as he looked down at me, smiling, “It’s my favorite right now, too. Although, I’m afraid it’s going to have to go,” he said in a simultaneously teasing and threatening tone.

To save my bra from being ripped to shreds, I reached behind me quickly and unhooked it, letting it slide to the floor next to my tattered blouse.

I heard his breath come out in a whoosh and knowing that I had caused that made me stand a little straighter and push out my breasts a little more until the hard tips of them brushed against his chest. “You have way too many clothes on,” I told him.

He swallowed hard, not breaking his gaze as he yanked his shirt over his head and started undoing his belt, shoving his pants down to the floor. As he did so, I watched him with fascination, all the while undoing my slacks and sliding them down into the growing pile of clothes.

Adam was not clean-shaven. Along with his five o'clock shadow, he had a patch of hair on his chest that I strangely wanted to run my fingers through. I had never seen myself as a woman who would get into that, but it made sense with him. The hair on his chest narrowed down into a trail from his belly button down to the elastic band of his boxer briefs. My eyes followed that trail—my tongue darted out to lick my lips as I eyed the very large tent his erection made beneath his boxer briefs.

I heard his husky chuckle. "Shall I?" he asked, hooking his thumbs into the waistband.

My hand started forward. "Oh, no, let me," I said, yanking the waistband down to let his engorged cock spring free.

Damn, who knew?

"As much as I admire the way you're looking at my dick," he broke in, putting his hand at my waist and pulling me close to him, "there's something very urgent that we need to see to."

I looked up at him, feeling almost lightheaded from the way his eyes roved over my body like he wanted to swallow me whole. It wasn't like I hadn't felt desire before, and it wasn't like I hadn't had a fun sex life, but the way he was looking at me was possessive and intense—not something I ever thought

I would be this turned on by, and yet, I felt like putty in his hands.

“And what could that possibly be?” I asked breathlessly.

He grabbed my hand and then led me towards the hallway off the living room. Without a word, we entered his room. I was surprised by what met my eyes. I didn't know what I'd been expecting—maybe more sports memorabilia, much like the stuff that was decorating the walls of his living room and kitchen. Instead, I was faced with a king-sized bed with sumptuous linens in earth tones. In the free second I had, I was also surprised to note that Adam's bookshelves were in fact crammed full of books.

I might have to examine that later, I made a mental note to myself.

None of that mattered at that moment, though. The way he was looking at me was all that I cared about.

Gently, he tossed me to the bed, and I fell back with a laugh. “Smooth,” I teased him.

His face got serious. “I can hardly worry about being smooth when all I want to do is taste that pussy,” he said, hooking his thumbs beneath the skinny piece of elastic that held the crotch of my lacy panties together. Yet again, I felt the wind knocked out of me as he held my eyes and took off my panties, flinging them across the room.

“Why do I get the feeling that for all of your bossiness, you want somebody to tell you what to do in the bedroom?” he

asked, running his fingers over my trembling thighs.

I forced a laugh. “I bet you would like that,” I challenged him. “I bet you would like it if I told you how to manhandle me, to make me cum hard for you.”

I saw him swallow hard and his brown eyes darkened to nearly black as he took in the sight of me, spread out across his bed. “Well, let’s just see,” he said, his eyes reaching mine before he ordered in an authoritative voice, “spread your legs for me, Reagan, let me see how wet I made you.”

I had never been talked to like that, and I would’ve never put up with being talked to like that before. But before I could bite out a scathing response, my knees opened, much to the chuckling satisfaction of Adam, who wasted no time in dropping to his elbows and positioning his mouth over my quivering sex.

“Look at that. Look at all that wetness for me. I bet it tastes good, too,” he said huskily, and my breath caught in my throat when he darted out the tip of tongue, flicking it against my pussy.

I wasn’t sure I could breathe for the next couple of minutes as Adam ravaged me, first slipping his tongue in and out of my anxious channel and then circling over my swollen clit. That move made my hips buck up, and a cry rang from my throat. Just when I thought I was going to fall apart by the mere movement of his mouth, my body jolted in surprised ecstasy at the addition of his fingers sliding inside me. “Holy shit,” I breathed.

He moaned against me. “You taste so goddamn good, Reagan, just like I knew you would. So sweet,” he said, and I was shocked to find that just the feeling of his breathy words against my mound had me already close to the edge.

I peeked down at him, just wanting to get a quick glimpse, but I became entranced by the way he watched me carefully as he sucked and licked and teased me just to the edge of orgasm before letting up for a moment, only to bring me there again and again.

“Adam,” I cried, desperate to come. “Adam, please,” I begged as my orgasm grew closer and closer. I looked down at him and was satisfied to see that while he was pleasuring me, his own hand was wrapped around his shaft, stroking himself. It caused a fresh wave of wetness to wash over me. He gave me a slow smile. “Do you like watching me jerk off to you?”

“Yes.” I moaned. “Please, please, let me come,” I said.

His soft chuckle vibrated against my sensitive flesh as he slipped his fingers inside of me and started working furiously in tandem with his tongue over my clit. This time, he didn’t just bring me to the edge, he kept going as my orgasm hit me violently. “That’s it, Reagan, come for me,” he cooed as I melted into the mattress.

After a few minutes, my heart finally started slowing down, and the endorphins made my body feel relaxed and at ease.

He crawled up my body, and I could feel his hardness against my thigh as he kissed my breasts, sucking first one and then the other nipple into his mouth, lapping at them with his

ardent tongue. I relished the attention he gave my breasts before he moved his mouth further up my chest to my neck and then pulled back to look at me. I could see the smile in his eyes, the self-satisfaction. One side of his mouth tilted up. “So, what did you think of that, Queen Reagan?” he asked, harkening back to a nickname I had hated since I’d known him.

I leveled him with a hard stare, before letting the smile slowly overtake my mouth. “Get the condoms,” I told him.

He barked out a laugh but hurriedly moved off of me to root around in the drawer of his bedside table. He produced what I’d asked for, and I grabbed one, hurriedly ripping open the packet. “I like the enthusiasm,” he murmured as he sat back against the headboard and watched as I rolled the condom over his hardness, taking my time to feel every ridge.

I reveled in the feel of him, a swarm of ideas racing through my mind of all the things I wanted to do to him. “I’m going to need to give him some more attention later,” I told Adam solemnly as I nodded toward his dick. “But for right now, it is more urgent that he get inside of me.”

“Would have to agree with you,” he said, looking up at me with a slight smile on those full lips. “Let me see you put me inside of you, Reagan.”

That request made me bite my lip. I wasn’t sure how, but there was something about it that was simultaneously commanding and vulnerable. I held his gaze as I positioned him at my opening and slowly slid my tight channel down

over him. He let out an agonized groan as I held my breath, trying to get used to the size of him. “Fuck, that’s glorious,” he choked out, and I laughed at the word. It wasn’t every day that somebody called my pussy glorious.

Leaning down, then smoothing my hand over his stubbly jaw, I was unable to rip my eyes from his as my hips started to move. In fact, I couldn’t look away from him the whole time. For the first time in my sexual life, I didn’t get in my own head. I didn’t worry about what I looked like, or sounded like. I didn’t even let myself drift away like sometimes I did during non-exciting encounters. Sex wasn’t really the time to be thinking of a to-do list for the next day, but I knew I wasn’t the only woman who was guilty of that. None of that was drifting into my head now—it was just me and Adam and his big hard cock inside of my pussy, making me feel so fucking good... better than I knew was possible.

His hands grasped at my hips and branded the flesh, but I loved the heat of him. I leaned forward, clutching his chest for leverage as I moved my hips more quickly, excited by the way he was clenching his jaw and holding back. “That’s a good girl,” he said, “ride my cock, just like that.” He released one hand from my hip and moved it to the swell of my ass.

I let out a surprised shriek when he spanked me but found that it made me clinch even tighter around him as I rode him. “You like that, don’t you?” he asked with a small smile.

“Yes.” I moaned. “Do it again,” I instructed him.

He happily obliged, and the stinging of his hand against my bottom made me go even faster. He let out a feral groan. “Reagan, you have no idea what you do to me.”

I leaned down and kissed his now salty lips, our bodies both slick with sweat. “No, but I have a feeling I’m about to find out,” I told him as I ground down harder against him.

His remaining hand on my hip tightened even more, his fingertips biting into my sensitive flesh. But I didn’t care. I loved how tight he was holding me, and at that moment, I felt like those were the only two things keeping me together as my second orgasm of the night began to barrel down on me. As tendrils of pleasure began to take me over, I looked down at him, dismayed. “Adam, I’m going to come again,” I confessed.

“That’s good, sweetheart, you come for me, squeeze my shaft as hard as you can, you hear me? Milk this cock,” he instructed. And those words sent me over the edge, my pussy clamped down hard around him as my orgasm hit at full force. He held tight to me as he bucked up wildly, riding out his own orgasm and breathing heavily into my neck, murmuring, “Fuck,” over and over again.

I kept moving my hips until the spasms faded, seemingly unable to stop. And we stayed in each other’s arms for long moments afterward, just catching our breath. Finally, we broke apart far enough to look at one another. The question was hanging between us: what did we do now?

But I didn't want to answer that right away, I just wanted him to keep touching me. So, I kissed him again, setting off for yet another encounter, to be followed by a couple more.

I wasn't sure what time we finally fell asleep. I just knew that exhaustion hit us at some point, and we fell into a heap in each other's arms, out before either one of us could overanalyze anything.

Chapter Two

Adam

“So, what do we do now?” I asked, feeling like an asshole for even letting the words out of my mouth. We both knew the answer to my question, but it was awkward, sitting up naked in bed, looking at the woman who I had spent the better part of the year arguing with every chance I got after we had just had the most amazing night together. Never mind the fact that she was my best friend’s newly minted ex-girlfriend. I had broken all sorts of friend codes by sleeping with her. But whatever friend code existed between me and Brian didn’t seem to hold a candle to the pull of Reagan Miles.

Truth be told, I’d been turned on by her since the moment Brian first introduced me to her. I should’ve just been happy for him, but I knew from the jump that those two weren’t right for one another, and I might’ve made my feelings known. Brian was a good guy, don’t get me wrong. I loved him. But Reagan was a whole different sort of woman, way out of Brian’s league. And now, my suspicions had just been confirmed. Reagan was way more than Brian could’ve ever

handled. Quite frankly, she scared the shit out of me, but I was just enough of a martyr to enjoy it.

None of that mattered, though. She was Brian's ex. We had crossed so many lines, and now, we needed to deal with it.

"I'm not sure, I've never been in this position before," she said, biting that lip of hers.

"But I'm pretty sure you were in all the positions last night," I pointed out helpfully.

She rolled her eyes. "Don't remind me," she said, looking away, but I could see the small smile she was fighting back.

"Look, not that we were any great love to one another, but I still don't think Brian needs to know about this," she said.

I nodded enthusiastically. "I completely agree with you for once. What he doesn't know won't hurt him, right?"

She sighed. "Something like that."

We sat in silence. Maybe I should tell her that it had been a mistake...except nothing in me believed that. I didn't know what I felt at that moment, I just knew I had had some of the most explosive orgasms in the last eight hours of my life, and with Reagan of all people. I was still in shock.

"It shouldn't be a big deal really," she said, seeming to come into herself again. "We're two consenting adults who did adult things together. That's it. And now, for the sake of your friendship and my sanity, I think it would be best if we just... pretended like it never happened," she said with a grimace.

A sharp, stabbing pain struck in the vicinity of my heart that instantly confused me, but I nodded dumbly. “Yeah, I agree. No harm, no foul.”

“Since Brian and I aren’t together anymore, it’s not like you and I will ever be around one another. So, we don’t have to worry about any awkward run-ins,” she reasoned, keeping her eyes away from mine.

I wanted to cup that chin in my hand. I wanted to force her to look at me and see if she could still say those words looking into my eyes, but I stopped myself.

She was right. We had no reason to see each other again, last night be damned. The quicker that we both moved on, the less painful it would be.

Why was I even thinking about pain? I had a fun night with a beautiful woman. That was it. End of story.

Reagan haunted me for months after that.

She was right. We didn’t run into each other, and that turned out to be an agonizing realization. There was nobody to argue with, nobody to irritate, nobody to derive pleasure from teasing.

The thing was, that it was all surely one-sided. She had just broken up with Brian, and I was clearly the rebound. Yet, here I was, six months later still thinking about her.

“That makes sense. It’s not uncommon for people to reach for somebody unlikely after a breakup,” my patient, Mr. Ellerbee, commented.

I looked at him sharply. “Did I say all that stuff out loud?”

The old man smiled pleasantly at me. “More of a mumble about great sex and never seeing her again and your best friend.”

I let out a heavy sigh. Mr. Ellerbee patted me on the shoulder. “Don’t worry Doc, it gets better with time.”

I shook my head. “I’m sorry, Mr. Ellerbee, I didn’t realize I was letting that loose. Forget you heard anything.”

“Screw that! Tell me about this great sex,” he said with a mischievous smile.

I laughed, knowing that the old man would happily spend all of his appointment time swapping lewd stories just to relive his glory days. “Maybe next time. Now, tell me about these reactions you’ve been having with your medication...” Mr. Ellerbee proceeded to fill me in on the unfortunate and frankly gross side effects that he was experiencing.

After I finished with Mr. Ellerbee, I squeezed in a couple more appointments and then called it a day. I would take my case files home and work on them there. That would distract me, surely.

I spent one night, one night with Reagan, but now, the memory of her followed me around everywhere.

This was the woman I was used to arguing with all the time... she was also the woman I'd had to thank for the most amazing night of my life. There wasn't one place in my apartment where I didn't think of her. My bed wasn't the only place that had seen some action. In fact, there wasn't a place in my apartment that I could look at that didn't make me relive some sort of memory with her. Even memories that didn't have anything to do with our forbidden night together.

I couldn't look at my kitchen counter without remembering the first night we met. Brian had brought her over to introduce her to his friends. We were all going to have dinner someplace fancy together, but when they walked in, she saw the track event of the Olympics playing on my TV and immediately became engrossed. Much to Brian's dismay, we ordered in that night, and I watched, fascinated, as the tall and beautiful woman screamed bloody murder for her chosen one or two to "Move faster, what do you have? Two lead feet?"

Brian looked at me apologetically, but I thought it was funny. Against my better judgment, that was where I started developing a little crush on her. If I were a different sort of man, I would have pursued her myself. But I couldn't do it to Brian, much less myself. I decided a long time ago that settling down in family life was not for me. I saw what happened when my supposed family tried to fake their way through their supposed togetherness and love for one another.

Later, I tried to think about the patients I would be seeing the next day. I ran a tiny office on the east side of Brooklyn. The majority of my patients were elderly—that was the way I

preferred it. Older people didn't pull any punches, and I didn't have to worry about quite as much barfing as I did with children. Plus, my patients didn't give me too much shit if I didn't fall all over myself listening to their stories—they wanted to feel better, and I wanted to help them, but we didn't need to be best friends or anything. I had excelled in med school with everything but bedside manner. But who had time for that in this world?

As I neared the brownstone, I saw the bottom floor lit up. The Mendelsons must have been home. I passed by the door on the way to the stairs, and I could hear their laughter drifting through. For some reason, it caused a funny, little pang in my chest. There was nobody waiting home for me. *And that's the way I like it*, I told myself, but sometimes...sometimes, I wondered...

I scrolled quickly through my favorites on my phone and put in an order for a pizza and turned on the game, which would serve as background noise while I looked through my files for the evening and caught up on some paperwork. As I waited for my pizza, I sipped on a beer and shuffled through a pile of mail that I collected on the way in. “Crap, crap, jury summons. Shit, didn't see that one, what is this?” I said, pulling out a brightly decorated envelope with my name scrolled in an elegant hand.

I slit it open and out came a Christmas card. “Shit, it's barely past Thanksgiving. I'm already getting Christmas cards.”

The card was composed of several pictures of a happy looking family with the words “Seasons Greetings” artfully printed at the top. “Good old Veronica,” I smiled fondly.

Veronica was my cousin, and I hadn’t seen her in person in years, though the reason why was unlike most of my family. Some would say that I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth, and technically, that was true. However, as I would learn very early on, there was a price for everything—even when you didn’t ask for it. My family came from old money and thought anybody who didn’t also come from such means did not belong in their circle. Unless they were working for them, of course.

I had never fit in. I was too loud, I was too brash, I was too forward by the country club lifestyle’s standard. I was supposed to follow my old man’s footsteps and wind up in some sort of hedge fund, investment bullshit deal. But it bored me to tears, and I was more interested in how things, like the body worked, as opposed to making money grow.

After high school, I took a leap year that ended up lasting several years. After seeing the world and so many underdeveloped places, I came home with a new motivation and even less tolerance for my family’s opulence. I looked at all these unhappy people I was related to and felt even more determined to make a difference.

So, I went to college a little bit later. Despite my dedication to my chosen vocation, I definitely made sure to cram in all the college experiences I’d missed. The one time I got talked

into going to a frat party just to see what all the noise is about was when I met Brian. In fact, he was in the middle of doing a keg stand as a celebration for passing his exams before he started law school. He was fun and easy-going but serious about his passion. It was nice to have a friend in my corner to shoot the shit with.

Veronica, like me, didn't fit in with the family. But she did her due diligence and went to school and got an accounting degree to make her old man happy, even though it clearly wasn't what she wanted. Her parents didn't seem to care about that, though. She was living up to the family standard, and that was all that mattered to them. That was, until she met Henry.

Veronica apparently had flown to see a high-flying client in Germany. The client took her for a tour through their palatial house and showed her all the renovations they were doing thanks to Ronnie's savvy accounting skills. It was where Veronica met one of their carpenters, Henry. Ronnie told me it was love at first sight, and within months, she and Henry were engaged. The family was not pleased. He was a German carpenter who lived paycheck to paycheck, so they didn't think he was a good match for her or the family. They were sure that he was just getting close to her for her wealth.

This cynicism upset her so much that she eloped and stayed away from the family ever since. I sent her a wedding present and told her if she ever needed anything from one black sheep to another that I would always be there for her. For the next several years, I would get birthday cards and Christmas cards and the occasional text or phone call. She told me I was the

first family member she had told about their baby. Wolfgang was his name. It was kind of a hard name to forget. I had never met the little guy, but she would send pictures, and they looked like a happy little family. I was happy for her and glad to help her in any way I could.

In fact, a couple of years earlier, she had called asking for a reference for a good American attorney. Naturally, I had referred her to Brian. I didn't blame her for wanting to go through the attorneys my family used. The Hamptons might look luxurious and relaxing to those on the outside, but my family had turned their little corner of paradise into a veritable viper's pit.

A knock sounded at my door. Pizza was here.

I tossed the Christmas card on top of my mail stack and let my stomach lead me to the door. I'd have to remember to give old Ronnie a call here soon and see how she and the kid were doing. Maybe I'd even get to meet him someday.

My phone blared, jolting me awake. I looked over at my clock: 4 AM. Who the duck called at 4 AM? It wasn't unheard of to get calls at all hours of the night as a doctor, but since I ran my whole clinic, it didn't happen as much as it would if I worked in an actual hospital.

I looked at my phone, and it was a funky looking number, definitely not a New York area code. I hit the decline button

and rolled over. Just as I was drifting off again, the shrill ring sounded.

“That’s what you get, dumb ass, for not turning off your ringer,” I told myself. This person was not going to take the hint, so I angrily swiped the phone open and answered, “Who the hell is it, and do you have any idea what time it is?”

A voice came over the line in bits and pieces. The connection was terrible, and whoever was talking didn’t sound like they were speaking English, or they just weren’t used to speaking it.

“Mr. and Mrs. Townsend... automobile crash... sole survivor...” I jerked to a sitting position in bed.

“Hello? Hello, is this some sort of joke? What’s going on? Is there somebody close by who can tell me more clearly what’s happening?” I asked, my heart racing. “Hello, hello?”

The line went dead. I tried calling the number back, but to no avail. Needless to say, I didn’t go back to sleep. I tried that number again and again, walking the floors of my apartment and trying not to look at that damn Christmas card I tossed down the evening before.

“Hey, God, it’s me, I know you and I don’t have regularly scheduled programming with one another, but I could really use your help with this one,” I prayed aloud. I prayed for Ronnie, the man who had made her so happy, and the sweet, little boy in that picture.

Chapter Three

Reagan

My vacation really needed to be several weeks longer. I had too much fun hanging out with my dad, Amy, and my grandma. But who was I kidding? I really just wanted to go back and see Layla. That kid was only four years old, and she already had more personality than most of the adults I worked with put together.

I never thought I would want a sibling growing up, and it was probably better I didn't have one. I was too much of a hard ass. Not that I wasn't now, but I could temper that around sweet, little Layla. And I could spoil her and be gone before my dad or Amy yelled at me. That was my favorite thing to do, quite frankly.

I thought that I was ready to come back to work until I walked into my office and saw the stack of folders waiting for me. "Shit, can't even ease back into it, go figure," I murmured quietly to myself.

For the next several hours, I acquainted myself with my cases. I was halfway through the day when my assistant,

Cheri, popped her head through the door. “Rea, I just got confirmation from the DHS worker about that child’s flight, he should be here tomorrow,” she told me as if I knew what the hell she was talking about.

“You want to fill me in? I just got back. I’m still trying to catch up here,” I told her, feeling bad that I had no clue what she was talking about.

“It’s the Townsend case,” she said, pointing to my slightly smaller stack of folders from what I started with that morning. I flipped through the names until I got to the Ts, and my heart fell as I read the particulars of the case. “Oh, no, that poor child.”

“Tell me about it,” Cheri agreed. “He’s going to be here tomorrow, and he doesn’t have a soul.”

I flipped through the papers in the folder, trying to acquaint myself with the details as quickly as possible. “Not even the person he’s been given custody to? I’m assuming that the parents did choose somebody,” I said, reading quickly down the file. “Wait a minute, this can’t be right,” I said as I took in the words before me.

“According to the file, his mother wanted him to go to her cousin...” Cheri said, looking down at her notes. “A Dr. Adam Rollins?”

Tears burned the back of my eyes. I had tried long and hard not to remember that night with Adam. Hell, part of the reason I had taken a vacation out to California to see my family was to get him out of my head. In a strange turn of events, it was

taking longer to get over that one night with him than the whole relationship I'd had with Brian.

My heart broke for him. Obviously, the cousin thought quite a bit of him if she left her child to him, but leaving a child with Adam was unimaginable to me. The self-proclaimed grump caring for a six-year-old boy?

The kid had already been through enough losing both of his parents to a car crash, and now, he was going to get Adam as his new guardian? "Holy shit," I breathed to myself.

"Reagan? What's wrong?" Cheri asked, concerned.

"I know his guardian all too well. This poor kid," I said.

"Is the guardian that bad? Do we need to get DHS involved with him, too?"

I shook my head. "Not bad like that, he's just a self-proclaimed bachelor, never plans on getting married or having kids. Now, poof—he's got a six-year-old boy, and he doesn't even know it yet."

Cheri looked at me sympathetically. "This is the part of our job that I really hate," she said.

"No shit," I said. "When is his flight getting in?"

"I forwarded the email from the DHS worker, the boy's flight should be here in the morning shortly before the reading of the will," she explained.

Shit, that didn't give us a lot of time. I waffled back and forth with whether I should just drop everything I was doing at

the moment and go tell Adam, but I knew he would be working. I didn't imagine dropping that bombshell on somebody would go over well in the middle of his very important job. So, I decided to wait till after hours, but I had a hard time focusing on the rest of my cases for the rest of the day. I just kept thinking about everything that little boy had lost and the shock that Adam was in for.

I had put myself on a "no thinking of Adam" diet over the last few months. Any time I started slipping and thinking softly towards him, I remembered about all of the arguments we would get into when I was still with Brian and cling to those memories. I was largely unsuccessful because, inevitably, it would just lead me to another memory of our time together. I had spent one too many nights thinking of him and touching myself. I blamed myself for my own weakness—that's what good sex could do to me, making me churn up a whole scenario that wasn't even possible.

I had just told Cheri that he was a lifelong bachelor, he was not the kind to get into relationships, and I needed to remember that. I also needed to remember my professionalism. What I had to tell him was going to be difficult, but what was going on with this little boy was more important. The child would be here before the reading of the will, but I didn't really think he needed to sit through all that. So, Cheri and I worked out a plan to have him hang out in my office while the reading was going on, which meant I needed to find something to entertain a six-year-old little boy. I knew I

was out of my element. A little girl? I had that figured out, but a boy? Not so much.

As I left the office and hailed a taxi, I dialed up Amy.

Amy had been one of my best friends since college. She was also now technically my stepmother. That made for a couple of awkward family holidays. I had been furious when I discovered Amy and my father sneaking around behind my back not too long before college graduation. I even told them that I wouldn't have anything to do with either one of them if they pursued the relationship, but it became clear over time how much they truly loved one another. It was a hard pill to swallow, seeing one of my best friends with my dad. But when it got down to it, she was one of the best people I knew, and so was he, so it actually kind of made sense for them to be together. It took some getting used to, sure. But Layla had gone a long way to make it more normal for everybody.

I decided Amy would have a better idea of what entertained a little boy. Not only was she a mom, but she was also an elementary school music teacher. "Amy? Hey, girl, I need your help. What do six-year-old little boys like?"

Later that evening, I found myself on Adam's doorstep. I wasn't sure how long I stood there, but I knew it was longer than what was considered polite. I just knew as soon as I knocked on the door, everything was going to change for him. His whole life was going to be turned upside down, and I

hated the fact that I was the one who had to give him the news. Not to mention that it was going to be supremely awkward, considering that the last time I was in his place, he was wringing orgasm after orgasm out of me.

I sucked in a deep breath. “Here goes nothing,” I told myself as I nervously knocked on the door.

The nerves in my stomach made sense, I was coming here as the bearer of bad news. But when that door opened and he looked at me with those deep brown eyes, the butterflies that started flowering in my chest definitely did not make sense to me.

You’re here to do a job, a voice reminded me.

“Reagan?” he asked, tilting his head and looking at me strangely. “This is a surprise. What are you doing here?”

“Um, I’m sorry to drop by unannounced. Um, can I come in?” I asked nervously. I could see the concern on his face as he stepped aside to let me through, and I didn’t blame him. We knew each other well enough to know that I was rarely nervous about anything.

“Reagan, you’re really starting to scare me. This whole twitchy thing isn’t like you, so what’s going on? Oh, my God, is it Brian? Is he okay? Did something happen, and they called you first?” He was baffled.

I shook my head vehemently. “No, no. At least, I think so. I haven’t talked to Brian in forever. I am assuming he’s okay.”

He looked at me slightly embarrassed, then moved swiftly into the living room, averting his gaze. “Yeah, um, sorry about that, I’m just a little on edge. I got some bad news recently, and I guess I am worried about it happening to everybody now,” he admitted quietly as he sat down on his couch carefully, almost as if he was made of glass.

I hated what I was about to say. I swallowed hard. “About that. First of all, let me say that I am very sorry for your loss,” I told him, knowing that the words were hollow and useless but feeling the need to say them, anyway.

His head jerked up. “You know about that? You said you hadn’t talked to Brian lately, how do you—”

“I am handling the Townsends’ probate case,” I explained.

“Oh, I didn’t realize you were their lawyer,” he said, still slightly out of it.

“Yeah, well, apparently when you referred Brian to her, he talked to her and saw that she was more in need of my kind of lawyering, so he referred her to me. However, at the time, I did not realize all the particulars of the will. Usually, my assistant takes care of that, the client and I just go over the basics, so I didn’t realize that...” I trailed off, my throat closing up. How the hell was I going to tell him this? And why was this so much harder than any of the other clients I had this conversation with?

Because you felt something for this guy, at least once upon a time.

Shut up, no, I didn't.

I shook my head. Now was not the time for my internal voices to duke it out with one another. “I wasn’t sure if you got my email about the reading of the will being tomorrow, but it’s very important that you’re there.”

He shook his head. “I don’t see what the point is. I mean, I loved Ronnie, but I’m assuming she left everything to her son,” he said, looking up at me.

I licked my lips, trying to get my throat muscles to work.

Just rip off the band-aid, Reagan. “Adam, I don’t know the best way to say this—”

He broke out with a small laugh. “Never known you to worry about saying anything, Reagan. Whatever it is, spit it out. It can’t be any more shocking than what I’ve already heard over the last couple of days.”

I took a deep breath. “Adam, Veronica left her son to you.”

The words hung between us like bombs just waiting to explode.

I watched the words sink in, and his eyes widened as he went pale. “I’m sorry, what?” he choked out.

“Wolfgang. Veronica and Henry made it expressly clear that if anything were to happen to them, they want you to raise Wolfgang,” I explained.

“Are you fucking kidding me? I mean, I don’t know what to do with a kid. Why on earth...” he trailed off, looking stunned.

“I don’t know all the whys and wherefores. I just know that this is what she wanted. And I wanted to tell you ahead of time, so it wouldn’t be such a shock during the reading. But there’s more,” I added warily.

He shook his head with a disbelieving smile. “This is the worst game show I’ve ever been at. But wait, there’s more. Go ahead, lay it on me.”

“Wolfgang is on a flight as we speak, and he will be here tomorrow. Once the reading is done, you’re supposed to assume full custody of him,” I told him.

He put his head in his hands for a long moment and stayed like that. I wanted to go to him and comfort him, but I wasn’t sure it wouldn’t go too far. In this particular moment, it was more important than ever that I stay professional.

He finally looked up at me with unshed tears swimming in his eyes. “I loved her, honey, I did. But what was she thinking by leaving her kid to me? I am in no position to raise a child. Isn’t that something you use a grandma for? Oh, what am I saying? I know her mother, she is about as warm as a fish. This kid’s been through enough, and now, he’s stuck with me?” he said, getting up and running a frustrated hand through his hair.

I was silent for a long moment, unsure what I should say—what the hell I should do. “Please don’t look at me like that,” he said.

I stiffened. “Like what?”

“Like you’re feeling sorry for me. Come on, Reagan, everything is upside down. At least make one thing the same—tell me what an awful idea this is. Tell me what a horrible parent I’d make.” he ranted.

“Look, you’re not exactly known for being Mr. Teddy Bear, we both know that, but why on earth do you want me telling you that you’re incapable of this—”

“Because I am incapable of this,” he broke in desperately.

He began pacing back and forth across the small expanse of floor in front of his couch. The pain emanating from him threatened to pull me in with him. I want to go to him and pull him into my arms and tell him it was going to be okay. How the hell had that happened? I wasn’t a cold person by any means, but I wasn’t exactly all touchy and feely. I blamed this evolving softness towards people on my friends and, of course, Layla. Maybe Adam would find himself in a similar situation. As obnoxious as he could be, maybe he’d discover a new side of himself through Wolfgang. Still, I needed to reign in these urges to comfort by touching, as it was too dangerous where Adam was concerned. So, I needed to remember who I was to this situation and what my job was. In a measured voice, I laid out his options. “You have the option to deny custody at the reading. The state would try to find a foster home for him as quickly as possible. Your second option would be to try and locate another family member who would be willing to take him, but that won’t necessarily be a quick endeavor.”

“And my third option?” he asked, looking at me with eyes red from crying.

“Your third option would be to take full custody and raise him as requested by your cousin,” I said simply.

He plopped back down on the couch, shaking his head. “I can’t send the kid off to a foster parent. God only knows what he’d get. Fuck, these are impossible choices,” he moaned.

Unable to stop myself, I moved closer, sitting on the coffee table directly in front of him and taking his hand in mine. The moment I felt the warmth of him, I was instantly reminded of all the unspeakable pleasures his hands had been capable of, but when I looked into those normally arrogant brown eyes and saw nothing but pain and fear there, my libido cooled. Everything else in me took over. “Adam, I know these are tough choices, but you don’t have to make them right this moment. You said you don’t want to go the foster care option, and I would definitely agree with you there. As for the other two, why don’t I put out some feelers about willing family members while you get Wolfgang settled in the states? By the time we’re able to locate someone, maybe you’ll have a better idea of what you want to do,” I reasoned calmly.

He looked at me miserably and squeezed my hand. “That’s just it, Reagan. I do already know the answer, but I hate it. I can’t raise a child—I don’t have to tell you that. I work all the time, there’s barely any food in the fridge, I curse like a sailor, and I keep odd hours.”

I nodded. Those were all valid concerns, but they did not change one simple truth. “Well, all of that is going to have to change—at least for the time being.”

“I know. Goddamn, here I am, going on about me and this poor kid just lost both his parents. You must think I’m a special kind of asshole,” he said.

I offered him a small smile. “You’ve always been a special kind of asshole, Adam, but not because of that.”

He snorted. “Gee, thanks,” he said dryly.

“No, I mean it. This situation is a lot. I would suspect that anybody else would have similar worries.” I looked at him for a long moment, then poked his knee. “Besides, you never know. You might finally have someone the right age to appreciate those fart noises you make with your mouth.”

He huffed a small laugh. “Yeah,” he said, looking off into the distance. “My fart noises are top-tier,” he said matter-of-factly.

I laughed. “There’s the Adam I know.”

He gave me a serious look. “Please, that’s not the only Adam you know,” he said, his voice dropping.

I couldn’t help it. My eyes dropped to his mouth for the briefest of moments, but I yanked my gaze away quickly. “Yes, well, I thought we agreed not to acknowledge those versions of ourselves. Besides, there are more pressing matters at hand,” I reminded him as I rose, moving away from him quickly.

There was still too much heat between us, and now, there was vulnerability added to it—the perfect mixture for another mistake. I hurried to my bag, which had been left on his kitchen counter. I procured one of my business cards from it and stuck it to his fridge with one of his magnets. “I’m leaving you my card in case you need anything. Make sure you’re on time for the reading. You might want to arrange for the supplies to make Wolfgang as comfortable as possible.”

“Right,” Adam said rising from the couch. “I need to get him a bed and blankets and...a pinball machine. That seems like something a six-year-old kid would need right?”

“Um, I would just stick with the basics for now,” I said, slipping my purse strap over my shoulder and heading for the door. Before I left, I turned back to him. He was watching me carefully, and once again, I had to fight the urge not to rush over to him and throw my arms around him to comfort him. “I know it will be much easier said than done, but try to get some sleep, okay?”

He looked like he was about to say something but seemed to think better of it and just nodded, muttering out a ragged, “Thanks, Reagan.”

I left his apartment with a lump in my throat. There was no relief for ripping off that band-aid, just a gnawing worry of what was going to happen next and how Adam and Wolfgang were going to get through this.

Chapter Four

Adam

Reagan Miles had finally been inside my apartment again, but not for any reasons I would have ever imagined.

I looked down at the Christmas card of Ronnie and her family yet again. I examined that little boy smiling in the picture. He looked so happy in his mother's embrace. What the hell did I have to offer him? And what the hell had Ronnie been thinking? Did Henry not have any family? Surely, there had to be somebody. Definitely somebody better than me.

I'd barely slept. I tossed and turned for a couple of hours but finally gave up the ghost around three and decided to take care of some things early. There was an all-night mart where I cleared out the freezer aisle. What kid didn't like pizza bites? Wolfgang now had more than he could've ever hoped for.

I'd have to wait until normal business hours to find a bed... or maybe I should wait so he could pick one out for himself?

I would ask him when I finally met him. What else I would say to him, I still had no clue.

Around five in the morning, I decided it was late enough to call Brian. Lawyers got up early, right?

“Hello?” A groggy voice answered.

“Bri, it’s Adam.”

“Adam, are you okay? Did you lock yourself out again?” he asked sleepily.

“No, I just have some big news. Guess who was in my apartment last night,” I told him in a teasing voice, needing something to feel normal.

“Another Knicks cheerleader?”

“No, but she would definitely make an interesting cheerleader, if the cheerleader said, ‘Oh my God, Adam, please raise yourself to at least a middle school level of humor,’” I said, doing an impersonation that I’d performed for Brian several times before.

I could practically hear him bolting upright up over the line. “Reagan was there?”

Maybe I shouldn’t have been talking about Reagan in my apartment to Brian. But they had been broken up for a long time, and he definitely did not know about our night together. I supposed I should feel more guilty for sleeping with my best friend’s ex-girlfriend, especially due to how quickly after they broke up it happened. But Brian admitted to me that he had gotten a “head start” on playing the field ahead of the breakup.

I knew there was no love lost between the two. Brian was mostly a good guy, but I'd never known him to be a particularly good boyfriend to any woman, especially Reagan. That woman required a whole different kind of man. Probably one who didn't exist, but she was definitely a force to be reckoned with.

Which was why I hadn't been able to get her off my mind after all these months. In fact, the only thing that had nearly toppled her out of my head was the impending arrival of Wolfgang.

"Yeah. Apparently, she was Ronnie's lawyer..." I trailed off.

I could hear Brian blow out a long breath. "That's right, I did refer her over to Reagan. Man, I'm really sorry you're having to deal with all this. I know she was one of your family members you actually liked."

"Yeah, well, I guess the feeling must've been mutual because...she left her kid to me."

There was a long silence and then laughter—quite frankly, too much laughter. "That's funny, man, you with a kid." Brian chuckled.

"Yeah, it would be funny if it weren't true," I told him.

"Holy shit, are you serious?"

"As a heart attack," I replied.

"Well, what did Reagan say? I mean, you have to have options, right?"

“She outlined out my options for me. Not going to lie, they all suck ass. Not willing to just throw the kid directly into the foster system. Reagan said she’s going to try to find another relative who might be a better fit for childcare, but in the meantime, looks like I’m a temporary daddy,” I explained.

I could hear Brian’s woosh of breath as he sighed. “Wow, dude, that’s a lot. Is there anything I can do to help?”

“You know anything about raising kids?” I asked hopefully.

He let out a groan, then laughed. “Afraid not. Only child here, as you know. Look online, it has a lot of answers. Surely, it can guide you.”

I rolled my eyes, knowing how to stupid this statement was. It was probably a good thing Brian didn’t have kids yet. “Yeah, thanks, man, but afraid that might lead me into a black hole of craziness.”

“Probably. But listen, I do want to help, if nothing else than at least moral support. So, just let me know what you need from me, okay?” he offered.

“Yeah, I’ll do that...”

I hung up the phone, my anxiety eased for all five seconds before it started ramping up again. For the second time in six months, I detested how alone I was. It used to be something I reveled in, but ever since my night with Reagan, I had been feeling more and more of a gnawing ache, noticing just how quiet my apartment was when I came home.

Maybe I was just going through that phase in life. I'd spent the last several years with my head down, building up my practice, and taking care of people. Maybe I was just going through that biological yearning to have somebody close?

And yet, knowing that this huge event in my life was about to take place just made that feeling strike again. It was nice to hear Brian's voice and know that he was there for me, but I couldn't help but ask myself: what could he really do for me? I was on my own.

I glanced down at the Christmas card again. "I bet that's what Wolfgang is feeling right about now, too," I muttered to myself. That poor child was on his own in world, and for some strange reason, his mother decided that I would be the person to make sure he wasn't alone for long.

No, I couldn't even begin to understand the reasoning behind Ronnie and Henry's decision, but it appeared that, for the time being, Wolfgang would be mine. I was determined that I would do my very best for him. I just had no clue what that meant in terms of taking care of a child.

I trudged to my refrigerator to rustle up some breakfast, and Reagan's business card caught my eye.

She did say if I needed anything to just call her. I snatched up the card and pulled out my phone and was about to dial. As I read the numbers before me, though, something made me stop.

Last night had been an anomaly. Reagan had come here to deliver life-changing news, and I knew deep inside that was

the only reason I kept my hands to myself. But how many more times would I be able to do that with her close by? Because even after she left last night, when I was trying to get my mind to calm down from the incessant churning and agonizing it was doing over this boy, the only safe place it found was to turn its attention towards Reagan. I replayed all of our time together, not just the sexy times we spent together either, but all of the bickering and arguing we did when she was still with Brian.

I had missed those times. Hadn't realized how much I looked forward to it when they were still a regular occurrence.

I shook my head and put the card back beneath the magnets. "Come on, Rollins, get your shit together. We have a huge day ahead of us."

All of my appointments for the day had been canceled and rescheduled with my apologies to the patients. I managed to get a buddy of mine to go into the office and look at the more urgent cases. Now, I was looking in the mirror. I'd changed clothes at least three times. I knew I needed to look professional because it is a will reading, but it was also the first time I was meeting Wolfgang. I didn't want to look like some stiff in a suit. He'd probably had enough of that at his parents' funeral.

Finally, I settled on slacks, a blazer, and a button-down shirt with a tie that had little lights on it that lit up into palm trees.

The administrative assistant at my office got it for me last Christmas as a gag gift, but I was hoping that it would let Wolfgang know that I was a fun guy.

“Oh, God, not look like one of those lame Dads,” I muttered to myself as I paced in the front foyer of the law offices of Tate and Foster. I’d gotten there particularly early, and the secretary at the front was watching me nervously as I paced back and forth.

I gave her a small smile and a little wave. She furrowed her brow and looked back at her computer. I stuck my tongue out at her, but she didn’t see it. “No big deal, just a grown man, talking to himself,” I muttered to myself as I continued to wear a hole in the luxurious carpet that they had in their waiting area. “I’m doing it again.”

Finally, a little before nine-thirty, a young woman with intricate braids in her hair came towards me with a warm smile. “Dr. Rollins?”

“Yeah, that’s me,” I said a little too loudly.

Her smile widened. “My name is Cheri. We’re about to start the reading, if you would just follow me this way.”

“Right, right behind you. Is Wolfgang already here?”

“He is actually, he arrived just a little while ago. He’s waiting in Miss Miles’s office,” she assured me.

I nodded like that made sense. “That’s good, at least he’s with somebody I know and trust,” I blathered and wondered where the hell it came from.

Cheri smiled at me. “I see those protective instincts are already kicking in.”

I laughed. “I don’t know about that. I just want to make sure the kid isn’t freaked out. Reagan can be a real piece of work, but she’s good at making somebody feel like she knows what to do, and that’s gotta be good for the kid, right?” I rambled.

Cheri nodded. “I would think so. Now, before we go in there, this should go fairly quickly, but don’t be afraid to ask any questions you might have. And if you think of any later, as always, Reagan is available to answer any legal concerns you might have, okay?” she asked if she was talking to a child.

I nodded mutely, then followed her into a conference room with a long table. There was a man in a suit sitting at the head of the table, and another man in a suit sitting next to him. They seemed indistinguishable. I was directed to a seat on the opposite side of one of the suited men, and I tried to look around surreptitiously for any telltale sign of Reagan.

I wished she would show up. She promised she would be here. I needed her.

I swallowed hard at the idea of needing Reagan anywhere. Oh, hell, who was I kidding? The world was turned upside down, I needed her here, and there was no denying it. And as if I had willed her to me, she appeared flush-faced in the doorway.

“Sorry about the delay, gentlemen. Had a most pressing matter I had to deal with in my office,” she said with a professional smile.

Her eyes met mine. She nodded at me encouragingly. I tried not to think about how strange that was compared to our typical dynamic, though everything was strange right now. I was surprised when she sat down right next to me and even more surprised that I felt instantly comforted. The sweet scent of her perfume met my nose, and I breathed in a deep breath, and it felt like the first time I'd be able to do so in the last seventy-two hours.

She looked at me thoughtfully and then looked at her colleagues. "Shall we get started?"

I nodded again, thinking of how this moment was the one that would irrevocably change my and little Wolfgang's lives forever.

Chapter Five

Reagan

Those big brown eyes seemed to be hereditary because they were what met me when I first saw Wolfgang Townsend. The child looked terrified, clutching a stuffed Pikachu, as he dutifully followed me to the curb. I offered my hand, but he shook his head no. All of his responses had either been a nod or a head shake. I had yet to hear the little guy's voice.

I put a bright smile on my face and introduced myself. "I am Reagan. You can call me Rea if that's easier for you, that's what my little sister calls me. And you are Wolfgang, or would you like to be called Wolf?"

He just stared at me, then looked around at the bustling travelers rushing around us. I cleared my throat nervously, deciding that we should just get a move on. "Okay, let's head back to the office where you'll meet Adam."

I hailed a taxi and directed Wolfgang to sit in the back while I threw the rest of his bags into the trunk. As I climbed inside the cab, shutting the door behind me, our driver was struggling

to pull into traffic. “Come on, you moron, can’t you see I’m trying to get in here? What a doofus.”

For the most part, it was just white noise to me after living here for so long. I smiled down at Wolfgang. “Are you hungry? I have some snacks in my bag.” He shook his head no, looking at me solemnly.

“How was your flight? First time on an airplane?”

Wolfgang shrugged his shoulders. *Boy, tough crowd.* Though I couldn’t blame him one bit. The things this child had been through in the last several days I would not have wished on my worst enemy. I couldn’t stand the thought of how Layla would react if something happened to her parents, even if she did have me to take care of her.

“Are you kidding me? Look at this jackass. Cut me off when I had the right of way. There’s a special place in hell for you!” our cab driver hollered out the window.

I looked over at Wolfgang, whose eyes were still wide, and scooted forward in my seat. “Excuse me, sir, but there’s a small child back here. Would you mind cleaning up the language a bit?” I said, in my most pleasant voice, no-nonsense voice.

“Hey, lady, you pay me to get you from point A to point B. You don’t pay me to sound like the freaking queen of England while I do it,” he complained loudly.

I glanced surreptitiously at Wolfgang, who was watching the exchange carefully. I scooted a little further up in my seat

and lowered my voice, hoping that the boy would not hear me as I said through gritted teeth to the taxi cab driver, “Now, you listen to me. I am in no mood for this kind of... ca-ca,” I said, catching myself before I cussed “There’s a little boy in that backseat, it is his first time here, and he is scared out of his mind. Could you just be human for the length of this drive?”

The guy glared at me through the rearview mirror. I sighed. “Fine, I’ll give you an extra big tip if you’ll do this for me,” I offered.

The guy’s cold eyes warmed, then he said theatrically, “Well, of course, dear ma’am and young sire. No...caca will come out of my mouth from this point forward, your highness.”

I was about to light into him when I heard a sound that made my heart almost burst out of my chest: Wolfgang was giggling. I jerked my head back to see him covering his mouth as he watched me and the driver carefully. “Listen, I know you’re being facetious, but it just made that kid laugh. Thank you,” I told him sincerely.

The driver was still glaring at me through the rearview mirror, but I could see the small smile playing at his lips at the sound of the little boy’s laughter.

I settled back in my seat. Wolfgang sobered up and, after an awkward silence, asked me softly, “What’s Adam like?”

Annoying, grumpy, really good in the sack. Get a hold of yourself, Reagan.

“He’s a doctor,” I started, then added, “graduated at the top of his class.” The only reason I knew that was because Adam regularly bragged about it. I looked down to Wolfgang’s face, who seemed wholly unimpressed by those two facts. Remembering why the kid laughed just a few minutes before, I tried my luck with something I thought might be slightly more impressive to a young boy. “He can burp the alphabet.”

Wolfgang looked lit up from within. “Really? I can, too. Well, only to J, but I’m working on the rest.”

I laughed then. “I bet Adam would be happy to help you with the rest.”

“What else can he do?” he asked hopefully.

“I once saw him shove three jellybeans up his nose, then snort them back out, but I would strongly advise against that, kid. Don’t get any ideas,” I warned him.

Before Wolfgang could respond, the driver announced, “Hate to interrupt, your highness,” he said with a bite, “but we have arrived.”

Wolfgang looked suddenly nervous again. “Oh, hey. Don’t get nervous, Adam is a really good guy, and he can be really funny, though don’t tell him I said that. I don’t want him to get the big head,” I whispered conspiratorially.

Wolfgang gave me a slight smile, and I paid the driver with a generous tip.

“Good luck, kid,” the driver called after we exited the car. I gathered up Wolfgang’s luggage, and he followed me inside

the office, where I took them directly to my personal office where Cheri was waiting.

She welcomed Wolfgang with a big smile. “Now, Wolfgang, I have to go take care of a very quick meeting with Adam, and then, you two can meet and you’ll get to see where you’ll be staying. In the meantime, do you want to stay here and maybe play some games with Cheri?”

Wolfgang looked a little uncertain, but Cherie, who had two children of her own, was able to effectively comfort him. “I’ll tell what, why don’t you sit in the big fancy chair that usually only Reagan is allowed to sit in?” she asked, dropping her voice and wiggling her eyebrows at him.

Wolfgang was happy enough to sit in my swivel chair. I checked my watch, knowing I should really be getting to the boardroom, but I hated leaving him. I knew he would be fine, but there was something about that child that made me want to stay and comfort him. “Hey, Wolfgang, why don’t you look in that big drawer on the left? I think there’s something you’ll like in there.”

He looked at me a little warily, then opened my bottom drawer on the left. I knew I had hit the jackpot when I saw his eyes widen and a grin covered his mouth. “You have Pokémon cards?” he asked in astonishment.

“No, sir, you now have Pokémon cards,” I told him, sending up a silent thank you to Amy for her spot-on suggestion. I watched as he opened up the package, and he proceeded to inform me which ones were his favorites. There was no way I

was going to rush this little guy. He was so delighted with such a simple pleasure, and he wanted to share it.

I spent the next fifteen minutes listening as Wolfgang gave me a tutorial about all the characters and what they could do. I would've stayed longer, too, if Cheri hadn't broken in and said, "Okay, Miss Miles, you really need to get to the meeting, but Wolfgang, I'll be glad to learn about these characters. My kids are always talking about them, and I still can't keep them straight."

Cheri took the seat I'd been sitting in. I looked back at Wolfgang one last time before I walked out the door. I could hear him as I made my way down the hallway going over the characters again with Cheri.

There was something about him that seemed so familiar, and when I walked into the room and Adam's eyes jerked up and met mine, I connected the dots. There really was a family resemblance.

I pasted on a bright smile and hurried over to Adam, and he looked like he was about to vomit all over the table. It looked like there would be two guys I would be trying to comfort today.

Sitting down next to Adam, I had the strongest urge to reach over and grab his hand. I needed to remain professional here. It didn't matter that I knew the client involved...knew him intimately, as a matter of fact. I was still the Townsends' lawyer, and we needed to get everything settled. Adam was the only one who showed up for the reading, so it went fairly

quickly. I could tell he was only half listening, his knee jiggling beneath the table as my colleagues went through all the dry points of the will. When they were finally done, Mr. Tate looked up, “All fairly standard. Any questions, Dr. Rollins?”

Adam stared off into space, his knee still jiggling beneath the table. I brushed my hand across his. “Adam?”

“Reagan, here...I mean, Miss Miles said that she might be able to track down a relative who might be better suited to take the kid—it’s not that I don’t like him. I mean, I don’t know him. Ronnie was a really good kid, though, so I’m assuming she was raising one. It’s just that I didn’t exactly have the best example growing up, and I don’t really know what to do with children,” Adam babbled on.

Mr. Tate smiled kindly at Adam. “Well, Ms. Miles certainly can continue to look for another suitable guardian. But judging from this will, if I may say so, Dr. Rollins, your family comes from a significant amount of money. You could always just hire somebody to take care of the child.” Mr. Tate offered.

I saw a cold expression go over Adams’s face, and he stiffened next to me. Mr. Tate went on with the rest of the reading of the will while Adam’s attention wandered off to God knows where in the meantime. Mr. Tate finally finished with his reading of the will.

Adam was silent until I cleared my throat, and he snapped back to attention. “What? I’m sorry. When do I get to meet Wolfgang?”

Mr. Tate's eyes met mine, and he smiled graciously at Adam. "I believe he is in Miss Miles's office. She can take you there now if you're ready."

"I'm ready," he said anxiously, rising from his chair. He started to exit, then stopped nervously, wiping his hands down the thighs of the slacks and, remembering himself, he said, "Thank you, gentlemen, for everything."

Mr. Tate and Mr. Foster nodded their heads at him as I followed him out of the conference room and down the hall to my office.

He stopped short about halfway to the hallway and whirled around to look at me. "What am I doing, Reagan? I don't even know where the hell your office is," he said, his brow furrowed, and I had to resist the urge to smooth my hand over it.

I could see the anxiety clawing at him. "Adam," I tried to say in my most consoling voice. "You need to calm down. If you go in there looking like you do now, you're just going to freak out that boy more," I warned him.

He looked away, running a frustrated hand through his hair. "I know that, I know that, it's just...Reagan, I don't know how I do this. I mean, what do I even say to the kid?"

I looked around us, and luckily, the hall was empty, as was the bench that was two doors down from my office. "Here, come on," I said, grabbing him by the elbow and gently leading him to the bench.

We sat there for a long moment as I thought about what I should say. I seemed to be at a loss for words a lot lately, and I seemed to be especially so in front of Adam. All of a sudden, all those times that we argued incessantly seemed like a lot more fun. “I know this is scary. But he seems like a really sweet kid. He asked about you. I think he just wants to know if you’re going to be nice.”

Adam looked at me uncertainly. “I would never be mean to him. I know I’m kind of...what did you call me?”

“Obnoxious. Annoying. Grumpy,” I supplied.

The corner of his mouth tilted. “I can always count on you to be honest with me.”

“In a bid to get him to smile, I may have talked up your belching skills,” I admitted with a sheepish expression.

His head came up, and he looked at me with an intriguing sparkle in his eyes. “My belching skills?”

“He seemed impressed that you could burp the alphabet... and I might have told him about the jellybean thing. He was also impressed by that. So, those could be openers, as strange as they are,” I offered.

“I could work with that,” Adam said, seeming to gain a little bit more confidence. “I just don’t wanna screw up,” he admitted. I felt myself soften, and he must’ve noticed because he quickly added, “I’m not used to that.”

I rolled my eyes at that comment. “Look, Adam, if my limited experience with children is worth anything, what I do

know is that you will screw up. It's inevitable."

He gave me a small laugh. "Gee, thanks. Your confidence in me, as always, is staggering."

"This has nothing to do with my confidence in you and everything to do with the fact that no parents or caretakers are perfect. You're in an impossible situation right now, nobody can expect you to get it just right. But I've seen you when you're determined about something. Remember that case you were working on a couple of years ago when Brian and I were still together? Nobody else could tell that lady what was wrong with her, and you would not stop until you had it figured out. You saved her life because of that."

Adam shrugged. "That's my job, though."

I glanced over towards my closed office door. "Yeah, well, for the foreseeable future, that little boy is your job as well. So long as you can make him feel safe and comfortable, keep him clean and fed, then that's a win. It will start coming together for you in time, and who knows, I might be able to find another relative pretty quickly," I told him, but Adam still looked uncertain.

His knee still jiggled furiously, and before I could stop myself, I reached out my hand to place on his knee to still him.

His head jerked up, and he looked at me, heat in his eyes. How could he have been terrified two seconds ago but now looked like he could maul me on the bench outside of my office? I ripped my hand away. "Sorry, I forgot who I was dealing with here," I said, looking away.

“And who’s that?” he questioned.

“The most arrogant man on earth. So, where is that confidence now?” I baited him.

He rolled his eyes and shook his head, and I saw a flash of sadness in those deep brown eyes again. Later, I would blame that flash of vulnerability on my impulsive response when I reminded him, “I meant what I said before. If you need anything, just call me. I’ll help however I can.”

He looked at me solemnly, letting out a long breath, and he finally rose from the bench. “All right, I think I’m as ready as I’ll ever be.”

Slowly, I opened my office door and poked my head in. Wolfgang and Cheri were still happily talking about Pokémon cards.

“Hey, Wolfgang, I have somebody here who’s really anxious to meet you,” I said, moving further inside and making way for Adam. I looked between the two of them with the same sets of soulful brown eyes. “Adam, this is Wolfgang,” I introduced.

Adam stepped forward, his posture emanating nerves and uncertainty.

Wolfgang looked just as uncertain as he looked up at a tall guy who had his hands shoved in the pockets of his slacks. There was an awkward silence. Finally, Adam opened his mouth and proceeded to belch out, “Hi, I’m Adam.”

“Gross,” I muttered. Cheri and I exchanged a wide-eyed look, but Wolfgang was giggling, a whole body laugh that made everybody in the room smile despite themselves. Through his giggles, he managed to get out in a small voice, “Hi, Adam.”

Adam grinned, taking in the dimpled smile and laughter of the little boy. And something stole over him. It was strange—never before could I say that I saw somebody completely change before my very eyes, and maybe I couldn’t say it then, but Adam looked like he’d been zapped. If there was ever a thing like love at first sight, I felt like I had just witnessed it.

“That’s it, I’m coming over tonight,” Lucy announced over the phone.

“What? Why? I thought you would be hanging out with your husband,” I said, emphasizing the last word.

“Sam has to work late tonight. But that wouldn’t matter because you have that sound in your voice,” she pointed out.

“What sound? I don’t have sound,” I insisted.

I could hear her sigh over the phone. “If you insist, Reagan. All the same, I’m coming over. I know how hard you’ve taken this news. Sounds like you’ve been through an emotional roller coaster today. We need to have you in a safe space with a licensed counselor, which would be me, so we can explore these emotions.”

“If by exploring, you mean drown myself in ice cream and/or alcohol, then I’m all for that,” I answered.

She laughed. “Those don’t really go with my tenants of betterment and healing, but I can make an exception for you,” she said with a smile in her voice.

Part of me was glad that she was coming, but a part of me also just wanted to be left alone. But as worried as I was about Wolfgang and Adam, it would be nice for Lucy to be there. She would definitely serve as a distraction.

By the time Lucy came over, I was worn out from worrying over those two. They had been alone together for maybe six, seven hours, and I was fighting the urge to call Adam to check in on them. There’d been several times throughout the day I’d reached for my phone and typed out a text, only to delete it. I didn’t need to be jumping all over Adam, he was nervous enough, and I needed to give the two of them time to get acquainted with one another. Still, I couldn’t stop the worry. Wolfgang had just gone through so much, and Adam was seriously freaked out.

“Is this about the little boy, or is it about your one-night stand with Adam?” Lucy asked.

“Of course it’s about the little boy...and Adam, I can’t really pretend that that doesn’t factor in somehow, but I do really feel for this kid, Lucy. I mean, can you imagine what he must be going through?” I asked her miserably.

She looked at me for a long moment with a faint smile on her lips.

“What?” I asked her defensively.

She shook her head. “Oh, nothing. I just think it’s funny how you put on this no-nonsense persona, but underneath that, you’re just a big old softy.”

“I am not. Take that back,” I insisted.

She laughed at that. “Do you know what I’m talking about, Rea? You’re worried about this little boy, but you’re forgetting that Adam is a very efficient adult. I mean, he got through med school for God’s sake, and for all his worries, I have a feeling he’ll do just fine.”

“Yeah, I guess that makes sense,” I mumbled, not wanting to fully admit that she was probably right.

“You know I’m right,” she said, seemingly reading my mind. I hated it when she did that. “But there’s something else, isn’t there?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I sniffed.

“Come on, Reagan. You’ve been mooning over Adam longer than it took you to get over Brian,” she pointed out.

“What are you trying to suggest? That I’m fast?” I argued, knowing damn well that she wasn’t, but I didn’t like the direction she was taking this conversation.

“You know I would never suggest something that outdated. I’m just saying, there seems to be more feelings for Adam than anybody else I’ve ever seen you with. Maybe there is more to that night you spent with him than you want to admit?” she suggested with her eyebrows raised.

“It was just a night, Lucy. I’ll admit that it was a night of amazing sex,” I conceded.

She barked with a laugh. “That’s putting it mildly, at least, if what you described was any indication.”

I shrugged. “I didn’t think I got into that much detail.”

“Please, after that description I rushed home to Sam, and we tried to reenact it. It was pretty hot unless you were lying,” she drew out the last word.

I looked at her sharply. “I was not, though, sometimes I wish I had been.”

“See? That right there, this back-and-forth with you. Normally, you would just be thrilled to have had an amazing night of sex. The fact that you wish that hadn’t been the case tells me that there’s something else underneath that. Whether you like it or not, Reagan, the universe conspired to bring you two together that night, and the universe has conspired to bring you two together again,” she said with a knowing expression.

“That’s ridiculous. It was just a coincidence,” I said, then bit my tongue, not wanting to listen to another diatribe about Lucy’s views on there being no such thing as a coincidence in this world.

“You know my feelings on that,” Lucy said. “Come on, think about it. You two had your big night together after your breakup. You don’t see each other for months, don’t have any reason to, and then, this of all things happens? I mean, what are the odds?”

“I really don’t want to think about this being some way for the universe to conspire getting me and Adam together, not at the expense of Wolfgang.”

“Well, no, of course not. I could see that,” she admitted. “Still, I find it interesting that you two are back in each other’s orbit. Do you know his birthday? I bet anything he’s an earth sign,” she said, looking thoughtfully off into the distance.

I sighed. Lucy was a hopeless romantic, so of course, she was only going to think we were meant to be together just because we happened to have mind-bending sex together. And I couldn’t deny that. I did think about those times frequently, but there was something much more important going on now. Wolfgang’s scared expression kept flashing in my eyes and tugging at my heart. I had seen some sad cases over the years in my line of work, but this was the first time it’d affected me so deeply. I couldn’t quite wrap my head around why.

I managed to get Lucy off the trail of Adam and Wolfgang for the rest of the evening. I asked her about the new developments in the organization that she ran. Lucy was the head of the health and wellness division of her husband’s tech company. They were one of the first companies of their kind to include such a division, thanks to Lucy, and because of that, their company’s employees reported it as one of the best places to work in the United States. She filled me in on the latest phone call she’d had with Amy, and I made a mental note to reach out to her and thank her again for her advice—which, of course, led me to thinking about Wolfgang again, not that he’d ever been far from my mind...or Adam.

After Lucy went home, I decided to call it a night and patted myself on the back for not texting Adam.

All the worrying throughout the day must have worn me out more than I thought, because I fell asleep surprisingly fast that evening. But my sleep would not be restful, for Adam paid me a visit in my dreams. And this time, it wasn't worry and comfort he was seeking. Instead, he was looking for the warmth of my body, and I gladly handed it over to him again and again. I awoke with a start, my hand shoved down the front of my panties, working myself into a frenzy. When I woke up to my dark room by myself in such a state, I threw my head back and growled out my frustration. And then, I let my mind wander to the dream I just had. I could practically feel his mouth on me, the way he expertly worked his fingers inside of me, and how just the thought of looking into his eyes made me flush all over with heat that felt like it would incinerate me. Yet, I still wanted more. I worked myself into a frenzy until I orgasmed and mumbled his name into the pillow.

That orgasm should've relaxed me. I should've found myself drifting off to dreamland yet again. Instead, my worry over Adam and Wolfgang just seemed to renew itself. I couldn't help but wonder how their first night together was and if everything had gone smoothly.

In the name of comforting myself so I could get back to sleep, I promised myself that I would call him first thing in the morning. That would be a perfectly professional thing to do, after all. Check in on them to see how they were adjusting and

if Adam had any other questions about the legal process... at least, that's what I told myself.

Chapter Six

Adam

I could hear the clock ticking on the wall as Wolfgang sat in the middle of my couch, looking up at me solemnly. We had been sitting there awkwardly for what seemed like forever, though it was probably only a couple of minutes. Beyond our quick bonding over belching the alphabet, our conversation had been stilted. I was struggling to come up with the right things to say, but then, I remembered what Reagan said to me, that it wasn't going to be perfect and that I just needed to do my best.

“You hungry?” I asked him.

He shrugged his shoulders.

“Do you like pizza?” I asked him.

His eyes lit up, and he nodded fervently. “All right, now we're getting somewhere. What do you like on your pizza?” Another nervous shrug. “Fine, I'll tell them to put the worms, the spider eggs, and mud...”

Wolf giggled. “No, that’s gross.” He looked thoughtful for a moment. “Pepperoni and sausage,” he said quietly.

“All right, one extra-large pepperoni and sausage pizza coming up, my man,” I said, getting out my phone to order. As I was doing so, Wolfgang got off the couch and wandered over next to the bookshelf. He stared up all the books and the various trophies and knickknacks that I had. When I finished with my order, he pointed up to a hockey trophy. I won it a couple of years before as a part of a league I used to be a part of. With my medical practice up and going, I had to drop it due to a lack of time. “What’s that, Uncle Adam?”

Uncle Adam? That was different, and it would take some getting used to, but I liked the sound of it. “That’s my hockey trophy,” I said, coming up behind him and pulling it down for him to get a closer look. “Here you go. Just be gentle.”

He looked at me with interested eyes. “You play hockey?”

“Yeah,” I told him. “Do you play any sports?”

“I played soccer last year,” he answered.

“We’ll see? There you go. Hockey and soccer are a lot alike, except you do it on ice skates and use the stick to help you knock the ball, which in this case is a puck, around. I can teach you if you want,” I offered. Had I just offered that? But I knew he probably wouldn’t be staying with me long enough to do that. I felt a pang of regret in my chest at the thought. This kid just couldn’t catch any breaks, and I couldn’t help but want to promise him the world, even as I knew it wasn’t wise to make promises I couldn’t keep.

After we both devoured the whole pizza, I was about to tell Wolfgang that we needed to go out and pick out a bed for him to sleep in, and then, I would put it together for him. But he patted his full tummy and looked at me and announced, “I’m tired.”

“Oh, yeah, I bet, kiddo. You’ve had a big day. I was going to take you out to pick out a bed, but I suppose we can wait to do that till tomorrow,” I said, my mind scrambling. I didn’t want to just park the kid on the couch. I supposed I could give him my bed while I slept on the couch, but then, an idea came to mind.

“Hey, hold on a second, Wolfgang,” I told him, turning towards the hall.

“You can call me Wolfie,” came his soft reply behind me. I turned to him then, giving him a big smile.

“Wolfie...I like the sound of that,” I told him before turning back towards the hallway and rushing towards one of the hall closets.

Ten minutes later, I had an air mattress fully blown up in the middle of my living room. I pushed the coffee table over to the side and presented it to Wolfie like I was Vanna White. “Ta-da,” I told him with a smile. He looked at me dubiously, and I looked down at the bare mattress. “No, you’re right, it’s kind of lame. What could make it better?” I said, thinking to myself out loud. A lightbulb went off in my head. I snapped my

fingers together. “I know,” I exclaimed and rushed back to the hall closet, digging around the messy piles of things until I located what I was looking for.

I knew I’d hit paydirt when I saw Wolfie grin at the sight of what I had pulled out. Once it was all assembled, Wolfie had a grade A fort. I’d remembered I still had a tent from last year’s camping trip I was supposed to take. The tent was the perfect size for the air mattress to go inside, and Wolfie was thrilled.

He happily crawled inside and started whipping Pokémon cards that Reagan had given him out of his pocket. I went to the kitchen to clean up our dishes and did a little dance by the fridge over my victory. It only took a few minutes for me to get everything cleaned up. “All right, buddy, you probably need a bath. Let’s get you a change of clothes, and I can run bath water for you,” I said, heading over to the tent, but Wolfie was already passed out, clutching his Pokémon cards in his hand, his little face cherubic in sleep.

“That’s all right, buddy,” I whispered, “you just rest.” I grabbed a blanket from the couch and draped it over him, then looked around helplessly. What did I do now? I decided to lay out on the couch for a while, just making sure that he was okay. But as I told Wolfie, it had been a big day, and the weight of it pulled at my eyelids. I was asleep myself before I even realized it.

“Mommy! Mommy!”

The shrill, terrified scream of a kid jerked me from my sleep. It took me a moment to remember who that scream belonged to, and where I was, but as soon as I did, I jerked through my stupor on the couch and rushed to the tent. Wolfie was in a full-on fit. “Wolfie? Hey, it’s okay, it’s okay, I’m here.”

The boy looked up at me with tears streaming down his face. “I want my mommy,” he wailed.

The words tore at me, and I would’ve given anything at that moment to be able to somehow produce his mother for him. “I know, buddy. But I’m here, and it’s going to be okay,” I tried to assure him.

He kept crying and saying that he wanted his mother, and I sat there awkwardly, not having a clue what to do. Finally, I thought about what I would’ve wanted to be done at his age in that situation and what I’d actually wished for much more when I was a kid, but it just didn’t seem to be something my family had been capable of.

I pulled him to me, held him in my arms, and rocked him slowly, murmuring words of assurance, telling him that everything was going to be okay, even if I wasn’t sure of that. Although, at that moment, I did feel fairly certain that I would do just about anything to make sure that that would be the case for this little boy, no matter what happened.

“Shh, shh, shh, it’s okay,” I said in a low, soothing voice. “Uncle Adam’s here.” I halted, not sure what else to add. Then, I remembered what Reagan had said, about what all kids

really wanted. “You’re safe here, Wolfie. You belong here,” I said the words over and over again till I lulled him back to sleep.

I stayed that way with him in my arms for a long time after he went back to sleep, and it wasn’t until my back cramped up that I finally laid him gently down and worked my way back to the couch, hoping I didn’t grunt or groan too loudly from the pain. As I finally plopped down on the couch, I looked at his sleeping form and allowed myself to do the thing that I wouldn’t earlier: I cried my eyes out and, in my head, cursed the truck driver who hit his parents and took them away from him.

I had some impossible decisions that stood before me. I vowed to do whatever it took to make Wolfie feel okay, even if that meant swallowing my pride and asking for help. It wasn’t just about me anymore. I had a child to look after, and I needed to make sure that he was happy and healthy.

That would mean turning to somebody who I had been trying to avoid for several months. There was still a lot of feelings between me and Reagan, that much was obvious— at least to me. But I had a new reason to tamp down those desires for the woman I couldn’t have: Wolfie.

Once Wolfie had started opening up, he talked nonstop about meeting Reagan, all the things they talked about, and how she looked at his Pokémon cards with him. I wasn’t surprised to hear he was infatuated with her since I was

suffering from that myself—though I would deny it come morning.

But one thing that I wouldn't deny in the light of day was that I needed her help. She was the closest thing to a child expert I had in my life. All my friends were bachelors, my family was no good at child-rearing, and I felt like I was plenty of evidence of that. But Reagan at least had some knowledge because of that little sister of hers. She had managed to connect with Wolfie somehow in the short time they spent together. Maybe if she was around, he would feel more comfortable more quickly. At this point, I was desperate as I tried not to think about the horrible way that child screamed for his mother.

Desperate to take my mind off the agony of it, I focused on the one thing that seemed like a safe spot, even though my body knew she wasn't. I thought about the way she looked in that hall, trying to comfort me. And I thought about if I had to do it all over again, then I would've just kissed her then, just to see her reaction. I imagine she would've sputtered, then cussed me out—and I would've loved every second of it. I managed to drift off to sleep, thinking of arguing with Reagan, and how it made her face flush, just like it had when I kissed her.

The next morning, I woke to the shrill ring of my cell phone. Groggily, I answered, "Hello?"

"Adam?" It was Reagan. Had I dreamed of her calling me?

“Reagan, what time is it?” I asked, trying to straighten up from the couch. I peeked in the tent, where Wolfie was still out cold.

“I’m sorry I’m calling early,” she said in a placating voice. “I just wanted to make sure that you two were doing okay. Yesterday was a pretty momentous day,” she added, sounding a little nervous. The knowledge that she was nervous to talk to me caused a ripple of excitement inside me. *What the fuck was wrong with me?* I wondered to myself. Who was I kidding? I loved any reaction from this woman, as long as she wasn’t walking away from me.

“Admit it,” I said in a low voice, “you missed us.”

I could hear her huff over the phone line. “Maybe Wolfgang. The kid makes quite an impression.”

“Yes, yes, he does,” I agreed. Sobering up, I told her, “Listen, I’m glad you called.”

She laughed dryly. “Are you now? Was it that bad?”

“No, no—not at first, anyway. He’s a good kid, and we had a good time. But he woke up with nightmares...screaming for his mom and...I don’t know what to do with that. The only thing I can think of is just to make him as comfortable as possible, so it won’t be so scary without his parents,” I reasoned.

“That makes sense. He may not be able to stop from missing his mom and dad, but routine and structure are key for kids. His routine has been completely destroyed. So, you two

are going to have to work on building one together,” she pointed out.

“That’s the thing, where do I even start?”

“I can help with that,” she volunteered. “One of my best friends is a teacher and a mom. She’s always preaching about routine and having to stick to the schedule, so I could ask her for some advice. While I’m at it, I can ask her about some things Wolfie might need that maybe you and I overlooked. You know what? I am going to put together a spreadsheet and share it with you, that way you can see it whenever I update it.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold your horses. I know how you love yourself some documents and spreadsheets and such, but I’m not going to be able to keep up with that. Can’t I just write it on a post-it somewhere?” I asked.

She laughed. “Do you think all that’s going to fit on a post-it note?”

“Okay, So, two Post-its?”

Chapter Seven

Reagan

By the time the afternoon rolled around, I'd already been to the bookstore and printed out several articles with suggestions on how to help a child of trauma and loss acclimate to a new situation.

I texted Adam ahead of time, figuring that Wolfie didn't need any surprises, even if it was just me dropping by. Adam informed me that he'd taken Wolfie to his practice. So, I headed to Brooklyn, materials in hand and an odd tugging of excitement blooming in my chest.

"It's just Adam," I muttered to myself as I fished out my compact and examined my face. It'd been a tough couple of days, and I could see that reflected in my facial features. I rooted around in my back for some mascara.

"You got a hot date or something?" the cab driver asked in a conversational tone.

"What?" I asked, distracted. "No, I'm just taking care of some business," I replied, glancing toward the rearview mirror

and briefly meeting the eyes of the driver. The skin around her eyes crinkled in a smile, and I felt my cheeks redden once I realized what I was doing. Hastily, I tossed my tube of mascara back into my bag and smiled sheepishly at the driver.

“It’s not like that,” I told her. “I mean, not at the moment, anyway. There was that one night we slept together, but that was just a one-time thing,” I explained. The driver didn’t say anything, just raised her eyebrows in clear interest. “I know what you’re thinking, but we’re not well suited for one another at all. I mean, the man is insufferable, we always argue when we’re together—”

“Apparently, not *always*...” she trailed off.

My shoulders slumped as my mind raced through all the moments that Adam and I hadn’t been arguing. “Well, yeah, I guess,” I admitted quietly. “But we’re two progressive adults, we can just have fun for one night without that meaning anything.”

“Of course you can, it’s not like you still think about him or anything like that,” the driver said suggestively.

“I mean, it was hands down the best sex I’ve ever had, and he does pop up in my head way more often than I’m comfortable with, but that’s only because of the orgasms.”

At that, the driver’s eyebrows shot straight up into her hairline. I grimaced at the rearview mirror. “And that was way too much information. I’ll shut up now,” I said yanking my eyes back to the thick folder in my hands.

I opened up the front cover to once again eyeball the copious number of notes I'd put together for Adam. He'd probably bitch, but I didn't graduate at the top of my law school class by skating by. I'd fostered the ability to conduct large amounts of research quickly, and I had a talent for culling through the bullshit quickly. It made me very effective at my job. I just wasn't so sure how effective it would make me in helping Adam with taking care of a child.

Whatever doubts I had were calmed by Amy's advice on kids: "One day at a time, and lots of love and patience."

Wolfgang was certainly going to take a lot of both of those things, especially after hearing about the nightmares from Adam.

With a twist to my gut, I remembered why I was doing what I was doing—it wasn't to see Adam again. It wasn't just some excuse to pick a fight with this man that for whatever reason I couldn't stop thinking about. It was to make sure that both came Adam and Wolfgang came out of this okay.

When I arrived in front of Adam's practice, I marveled again at the state of it. It wasn't run down by any means, but it was definitely not what one expected from a Rollins.

I'd only been there once before to drop something off for Brian when we were still together. The building had been standing since the forties, and it certainly looked like it. I appreciated its old charm, and I was glad that Adam hadn't decided to modernize it too much, other than the medical

equipment, of course. It would've stuck out like a sore thumb in this neighborhood.

When I exited the taxi, my cab driver yelled after me, "Good luck with the guy who doesn't mean a thing, but definitely means something," she yelled out in her singsong voice.

I gritted my teeth at the comment. How dare this woman state the obvious to me? I didn't need that kind of heckling during this time. Besides, I was really only doing this because I was soft-hearted. That's all it was, I told myself. Adam had needed a favor, and I was coming through. And it was definitely more so for Wolfgang than for Adam.

I smoothed my hand over my hair, hoping the springtime humidity hadn't made it frizz too much. When I was younger, I used to rejoice in being able to let all the wild waves go untended during my summers in California. But I hadn't been able to make that vacation with my dad in a couple of years, and I realized that meant there had not been a day that my hair had not been yanked back into a no-nonsense bun in the last couple of years.

I walked inside to see a handful of patients in the waiting room. Adam had told me yesterday that he had one of his doctor friends take over his more serious cases for the day and that he would try to extend that out for at least the rest of the week, so I had been surprised when he told me he was at his office. I figured there'd been an emergency, but as I told the secretary manning the front that I was there to see Dr. Rollins,

the older woman— Nancy, judging by the name of her desk placard— looked slightly panicky as I started to move my way towards the hall where I knew Adam’s office was. “I’m sorry, ma’am, but Dr. Rollins is in with a very important patient right now.”

From my vantage point, I could hear the laughter of a small child and instantly felt the corners of my mouth lift with a smile. The sound of that laughter did my heart good. I leaned towards the secretary and informed her in a quiet voice, ” I know. I am that important patient’s lawyer.”

“Oh, you must be Ms. Miles. He told me you might be here today. You got your materials, I see,” she said, not unkindly, nodding toward the folder in my hand.

I looked down sheepishly at the folder and nodded. “Yeah, I don’t know how much Adam will use, but I want to help—you wouldn’t happen to have any children?”

She scoffed. “Oh, God, no, that’s part of the reason I love working here. All of Adam’s patients are mostly elderly. Don’t get me wrong, I love being the favorite aunt, but kids were never in my wheelhouse. Sorry, I’m probably not much help.”

“That’s all right. I am assuming it’s okay if I head back there...?” I asked her, wanting to be sure.

She nodded and reminded me which door was Adam’s office. I headed down the small hallway and tried to convince myself that the nerves I was feeling were for Wolfgang. I was worried about the kid, but I didn’t want him to see my

concern. He needed to have confidence in the adults around him.

I sucked in a steadying breath as I faced Adam's door, then knocked softly. "Come in," Adam's deep voice called out, and a shiver of excitement raced through me.

I swung open the door to find Adam sitting behind his desk while Wolfgang sat up on the examination table, batting around a latex glove that had been blown up like a balloon. He was in the middle of lobbing it across the small office to Adam when it flew past Adam's head and hit the floor. Wolfgang announced, "My point. I'm leading by three now, Uncle Adam."

"I'm not so sure the point before this one counted," Adam argued playfully. "I think you might've been using some sort of illegal substance—some sort of spitball action," he teased a laughing Wolfgang.

A warmth spread through my chest to hear the boy's laugh but also to see Adam smiling so much. I'd never seen him smile all that much...except for when he and I were bickering.

"I'm glad to see you two getting along so well," I told them. "Wolfgang, how was your first night with Adam?"

"I got to sleep in a tent," he informed me happily. "Did you know that Uncle Adam plays hockey?"

"I did," I said, nodding my head. I had actually gone to one of his games because he'd talked Brian into playing with him, which I wasn't sure why he thought would be a good idea.

Brian was a runner like myself but otherwise wasn't horribly athletic. He got out on the ice with Adam and his other teammates, and the first time somebody elbowed him, he threatened to sue them. We did not return after that, but from what I'd heard about Adam, he was a good player.

"Yeah, he says he'll teach me," Wolfgang said excitedly.

"Oh, did he now?" I replied, looking pointedly at Adam.

"What?" Adam asked, oblivious.

"Don't you think hockey is a little extreme?" I asked in a quiet voice, hoping that Wolfgang didn't hear me.

"Oh, come on now, don't start sounding like one of those crunchy granola moms," he teased, and I instantly bristled.

"What would you know about crunchy granola moms? And what even is that?" I asked incredulously.

"A mom with crunchy granola?" Wolfgang offered, then added, "That sounds good." He rubbed his stomach absentmindedly.

Adam looked concerned, "I'm sorry, buddy, I told you we would be quick in here, and it's been longer than that. Why don't you go up to Miss Nancy's desk—she's always got snacks in her desk drawer. I bet you she'll give you whatever you want," he smiled to Wolfgang.

Wolfgang happily slid off the table and headed for the door, stopping next to me to ask, "Would you like a snack, too, Rea?"

He really was a naturally sweet child. I smiled down at him. “No, but thank you.”

Wolfgang left the office, heading back towards Nancy’s desk, and I turned to face Adam, who was eyeballing the folder clutched in my hand.

“Don’t tell me that’s the routine stuff you were talking about,” he said, waving a finger at the folder.

“It is actually. I spent all morning working on it,” I said, slapping it down onto the desk and enjoying the thud it made when it hit the wood. That was the sound of productivity, and there was a lot of good information in there—I felt very accomplished.

He flipped through the folder’s contents with widening eyes and a nervous smile frozen in place, glancing up at me periodically until I couldn’t take it anymore. “For God’s sake, just spit it out. I know you want to say something. Do you have a problem with all the research that I’ve done for you?”

He was quiet for a moment before he said, “No, no, this is great. It’s just...there’s so much of it,” he drew out.

“Yeah, well, it’s kind of a big deal taking care of a kid. There’s a lot of information to take in,” I defended.

“I do appreciate all the color coding and highlighting. Is this a key at the beginning outlining the order of importance by color?” He asked incredulously.

“Well, yeah. Yellow is just stuff that you might need to know down the line. Green is stuff that you would want to

implement within the next few months. And pink is need to know information for right this second,” I explained, much to his amusement.

He looked up at me with a grin and didn't say anything at first. “What?” I snapped at him. “Quit looking at me like that, I'm trying to help you out here.”

He shook his head, laughing. “I know, and I really do appreciate it. I just have to ask: you have, like, a specific pair of underwear for each day of the week, don't you?”

I rolled my eyes. “Wouldn't you like to know?” I challenged but immediately regretted the words when I saw the heat in his eyes. He'd sobered somewhat and took advantage of that opportunity to look me over for the first time, and as long as I could remember, I'd never felt so nervous standing in front of a man.

In high school, and even in college some, I had been accused by some of being arrogant. But that wasn't the case. I didn't think I was any better than anybody else. But I had had it drilled into my head by my parents, and my grandmother especially, that constantly comparing myself to others was a waste of time.

My grandmother was always quick to tell me that everybody had their own journey, so worrying about not living like somebody else, or acting like somebody else, would just get in the way of me fulfilling my life's work. I didn't often find myself nervous with people, and it had paid off in droves in my job. But standing there before Adam, I did feel nervous.

This man knew exactly what I looked like beneath my sensible suit, and I knew exactly what he looked like beneath his slacks and button-down. He'd definitely liked what he had seen before, so why was I so nervous now?

The teasing had gone out of his voice when he told me, "I really do appreciate you doing this for me, Reagan."

I dared to look at him and instantly regretted it when I saw how earnest his expression was.

Dammit. Do not fall for the charms of this man. He'll say something sweet one moment, and then start irritating you the next. Remember that, my internal voice warned.

I sniffed haughtily, trying to bolster myself and shake off this strangely fidgety version of myself. "It's no big deal, really. I am still Wolfgang's lawyer, so it's in my best interest to make sure that he's well taken care of."

"Ah, now, come on, don't get all stick-up-the-ass lawyer on me again," he cajoled, rising from his seat behind his desk. "I'm trying to give you my heartfelt thanks."

He stepped closer to me, and instinctively, I took a step back. With the building being so old, the offices were little more than closet spaces. There wasn't a lot of real estate to run away to, and the intoxicating scent of him threatened to overtake me once again, made me act uncharacteristically, like the night with slept together.

He saw my quick step back, though, and he was not about to let it go. "What was that?" he asked, looking me in the face,

brows drawn together suspiciously.

“What was what?” I deflected, trying for a nonchalant tone.

“That little quick step back away from me. What? Do I smell bad?” he asked with a slight smile.

“No, I’d never say anything like that,” I said defensively.

“Really? You said a lot worse actually,” he pointed out.

I rolled my eyes. “That may be true. If you must know, Adam, you smell quite nice,” I told him, then instantly regretted the words.

A grin stretched his lips. “You think I smell nice, huh? Then why are you stepping back—worried you’ll be overwhelmed by my alluring scent...or are you just worried you won’t be able to keep your hands off me?” he asked teasingly, but for all of his joking, I could see the real question in his eyes.

I stiffened my spine and tried to give him a bored look. “What is wrong with you? I came here to do a job—and a favor, I might add, and now, you’re trying to instigate...” I struggled to find the word then added lamely, “stuff.”

“Stuff?” he asked, stepping slightly closer, but this time, I was going to stand my ground. “What kind of stuff do you think I’m trying to instigate, Reagan?”

“God only knows with you, Adam. But I have learned there’s always something up with you.”

“There’s only ever something up with me when you’re around,” he said too quickly, and it took everything in me not

to shove Adam out of irritation. He noticed that, too, and smiled, satisfied at my clear annoyance with him.

I clenched my hands into fists at my sides and gritted my teeth. “You are the most insufferable man. I can’t believe I ever let you see me naked,” I said without thinking.

God, Reagan, why are you saying the word “naked?” Why are you reminding him?

He laughed softly then. “Oh, I think you can believe it. In fact, I think you think about it a lot more than you care to admit,” he said, dropping his voice.

“In your dreams,” I hissed.

His smile dropped, and he turned serious. “That’s right. In my dreams, almost every damn night. And that’s driving me crazy. You are enough to drive me crazy,” he admitted.

I didn’t know what to say to that. There was nothing more disarming than an honest Adam, and I had no clue what to do with him. But as it turned out, I didn’t need to worry about that because he wasn’t done. “I guess I should’ve told you that, but you’re the smartest woman I’ve ever met. I figured you already knew, so why bother hiding it,” he said, edging slightly closer, and some magnetic pull had me leaning in. I didn’t think I could’ve stopped myself if I wanted to.

He saw the action and came in closer, hovering his mouth over mine. And the feeling of his hot breath fanning over my lips nearly made me melt into his arms.

I probably would've done just that if it hadn't been for Wolfie's voice popping up behind me. "Uncle Adam, Miss Nancy has Skittles," he said excitedly, clearly already having consumed a few.

I backed away quickly, dazed and confused and looked at Adam warily. For his part, his face was red, but he smiled at Wolfgang fondly. "Oh, yeah? That's great, buddy."

"Well, I should really get going," I said, starting to back towards the door.

"So soon? You really don't have to," Adam said, the corner of his mouth tilting upward.

I gave him a wide smile. "I need to get back to work. Besides, Wolfie here has consumed Skittles. I think that's probably the best adventure just for you two. If my research is any indication, I've got about two and a half minutes before the kid bounces off the walls." I looked down at Wolfgang conspiratorially. "Isn't that right, kiddo?"

He gave me an exaggeratedly big smile, then proceeded to let out a large squawk and announce, "I'm a dinosaur."

I looked over at Adam, satisfied when I saw his slight look of dismay. But then, he just grinned at Wolfgang, brought his hands to his chest, and hooked his fingers, and said in his best approximation of a dinosaur voice, "I am a T-Rex. Won't you help me, Wolfgang? My arms are too short to scratch my back."

I looked between the two of them, laughing. “And that’s my cue to get on out of here.”

Wolfgang dropped his dinosaur impression long enough to ask me, “Will you come visit again?”

He asked it so hopefully that I couldn’t help but assure him that I would be back soon. “And remember, if either one of you needs anything, I’m just a phone call away,” I said, then mentally kicked myself for offering myself up so easily. What the hell was wrong with me?

Adam just smiled at me and murmured, “I’ll remember that.”

I waved goodbye to both of them and hightailed it out of there. I needed to get back to work, and I needed to get my head on straight. No more near kisses with the grumpy doctor, no more reliving the night that we spent together. It was time to put Adam out of my head once and for all. But I couldn’t help but wonder how I was going to do that when I had just promised to be a part of his life by helping with Wolfgang.

I would just have to suck it up and make sure Adam understood that I was only doing this to help Wolfie...and then I needed to make sure that was the only reason I was actually doing it.

Miserably, I slipped my phone from my pocket and dialed a familiar and much-loved number as I hailed a nearby cab.

“Hey, Amy, I just wanted to thank you again for all the guidance for Wolf. Now, I need to ask for some other advice...”

how do I stop from having feelings for his guardian?"

Chapter Eight

Adam

Wolfie had picked out a race car bed, and the room that I'd used as my at-home "office" was now the home of not only the aforementioned race car bed but a Pokémon bed set, along with everything of Wolfie's that had finally arrived.

The weird thing was that I'd lived in my brownstone for years, I had spent many hours working on cases in this room, but seeing Wolfie in there now was the first time the room looked like what it was supposed to be. It was also the first time the whole place felt homey. Still, it was strange getting used to living with someone else, especially when that someone depended on me for their survival.

"Alright, Wolf-Man, it's time to rise and shine." I poked my head into his room. "The pigeons wait for no one, and they need to be fed," I said, referring to our new routine of wandering to the park where we'd feed the birds and I would show Wolf the nearby sites. He was opening up slowly, but the nights were still rough. That was when he missed his parents the most. So, even though we tricked out his new bedroom, the

air mattress/tent combo stayed up in the living room, just as a security measure for when Wolf was feeling anxious. We'd keep the TV on, and I would snooze on the couch right next to his tent. Often, he would fall asleep in there, and I would carry him to bed, then I would fall into an exhausted heap into my own bed.

As tired as I was, I couldn't help but long for the comfort of someone next to me. Ah, who was I kidding, it wasn't just anyone I was longing for—it was Reagan. I couldn't help but think her annoying pragmatism would be a comfort. Hell, even the little notes and highlighted passages of that damn folder she'd made for me brought me comfort.

I padded quietly into Wolfie's room, singing out in a goofy voice, "Wolfie, time to wake up, buddy. It's Sunday, you don't want to miss out on the old men playing chess and checkers in the park. It's better than an MMA event."

"I'm awake, but I don't want to get up," his voice said, muffled beneath his comforter.

I sat gingerly on the end of his bed. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," came his stubborn reply.

"Come on, Wolfie, you know you can talk to me about anything, right?" I asked in a cajoling voice, hoping that if I said it, then he would believe it. He could talk to me about anything. I wasn't going to judge him. But it had only been a few days, so I knew it might take him a while to trust.

Can you blame him? When, at this very moment, Reagan may be hearing back from one of her leads for another suitable relative to take him?

I tamped down the tendrils of panic this thought caused. I had to think about what was best for Wolfie, and just because I liked the kid, it didn't mean I would be the best person to raise him, even if Veronica had seemed to think so.

Wolfie popped his head over the Pokémon comforter. "Uncle Adam, I don't want to go to school tomorrow," he said, his little brows drawn together in worried consternation. "Can't I just stay out for the rest of the year? I can catch up next year," he said hopefully. We'd been lucky that it was spring break for the school districts in the city right after Wolf arrived, so we'd had the whole week with just us. Nancy had helped me fill out the registration paperwork for the school Wolfie was zoned to attend, and he was set to start the next day. To be perfectly honest, I was tempted to just keep him with me for the moment, but I knew he needed to be around other kids, and the routine of school would only help him.

"I'm sorry, buddy, we can't do that. But just think, you're going to get to play with other kids and do stuff that's way more exciting than watching me fill out patient reports," I told him.

"No, I want to stay with you," he said, and I could see the panic beginning to rise in his eyes.

What was becoming an all too frequent tightening around my heart squeezed yet again. "Hey, listen, I'll never be too far

away. As soon as you're done with school, we'll be together, and we'll watch movies, and eat snacks, and play in the fort—whatever you want," I promised him.

He did not look all that certain about what I was saying but reluctantly shoved back his covers and swung his feet over the side of the bed. "Do the old guys really fight over checkers?" he asked after a pause.

"Sometimes, they'll throw the boards," I told him.

A small smile tugged at his lips. Apparently, he liked the sound of that kind of action because he went to his dresser and picked out clothes for the day, calling out over his shoulder as he headed for the bathroom, "Can I have sugar puffs for breakfast again?"

"Whatever you want, buddy," I called back, thinking I should really get a healthier breakfast option for the kid, but at that moment, I was just thrilled to have something he wanted that transformed that worried expression on his face to one of anticipation and contentment.

My phone buzzed in the pocket of my sweatpants. My heart did a maddening gallop when I saw it was a text message from Reagan.

Reagan: How are things going over there?

Me: We're alright. He's a little—okay, a lot freaked out about school starting tomorrow. Can't blame him, though.

Reagan: What? School is so much fun, he'll love it!

Me: Not everyone was a nerd who liked school, Reagan

Reagan: Jackass

I laughed at her response, but then an idea formed.

Me: Hey, maybe he just needs to be around someone enthusiastic about school—someone who can make it exciting for him.

I told myself it was just because I was desperate to help Wolfie, and I was, but that didn't mean that the rest of me didn't instantly respond to the idea of having Reagan close.

Reagan: What do you have in mind?

Me: We have to pick up some school supplies today, and I'd rather it not be a trip of doom. Maybe you could come along?

The three dots danced across my screen for an interminable amount of time. "Shit, is she writing a novel to tell me to fuck off?" I muttered to myself.

"Are we still having sugar puffs?" Wolfie asked hopefully as he emerged from the bathroom in some of the new clothes I'd gotten for him. He didn't have a lot of clothes when he'd arrived, and let's face it, I wasn't one to hit the laundromat several times a week, which all meant one thing: Wolfgang now had a ton of clothes. It looked like my little plan to avoid having to do the laundry more often was backfiring, though, because when we'd gone shopping, he'd fallen in love with this Batman T-shirt and wanted to wear it nearly every day—including today.

I'd headed to the kitchen as he got dressed. Hastily, I shoved my phone back into my pocket. "Sugar puffs for two, I'm on

it,” I said as I grabbed the box of cereal from the cabinet along with a couple of bowls.

“Can I watch TV while I eat my cereal?” he asked when I handed him his bowl.

“Sure, buddy,” I told him. He promptly headed towards the couch as my phone vibrated in my pocket.

I tried to ignore that annoying rush that shot to my chest. “You’re a grown man, Rollins, you’re acting like a schoolgirl,” I chastised myself as I scooped my phone out of my pocket.

“What the hell?” I mumbled. For all of those three dots taking their time, her message was surprisingly short.

Reagan: What time?

I typed out a response that was more honest than I wanted it to be but hit send before I could think better of it.

Me: What are you doing now?

Reagan: I’m out on a run.

Me: So? Bring your sweaty self over here.

Reagan: Gross.

Me: Hey, I’m a doctor—you think I’m not used to gross?

Holy shit, what the fuck was I saying?

Those damn three dots appeared again, then disappeared.

“Nice, Rollins, way to draw her in,” I grumbled before taking my now soggy bowl of sugar puffs to the couch and

plopping down next to Wolfie. “Okay, Wolf-Man, what are we watching?”

A half hour into Sunday morning cartoons, a knock sounded at my door. “You want me to get it, Uncle Adam?” Wolfgang asked.

“No, buddy, you better let me. Just hold down the fort. I’ll be back,” I said, getting up from the couch. Apparently, wherever he’d lived in Germany had been a fairly small, safe place, but he’d been accustomed to answering the door to just anyone. I’d found this fact out the hard way a couple of evenings before when I’d parked Wolfie in front of the TV so that I could take a quick shower. When I came out, there was a salesman sitting at my kitchen table, asking Wolfie if his “daddy had considered a premium cable package.”

Before I could say anything, Wolfie told the man, “My daddy died.”

I’d be lying if I said I didn’t get a sick twist of satisfaction from the horrified expression on the man’s face. He sputtered, struggling to respond to that bit of that information. Wolfie turned to see me there. “Uncle Adam, this man wants to know if you thought about a package?”

I stifled a laugh at the boy’s earnest expression. “Oh, the only package I’m thinking about is the one I’m going to kick if it doesn’t get out of my apartment and away from my kid,” I said in a pleasant enough tone as to not alarm Wolfie, but I

stared at the stranger at the table with menace. The man hurriedly slid from his chair and grabbed the beat-up briefcase he'd had sitting on the table.

"I'm sorry, I-I-I didn't know," the man stuttered.

"Yet, you still saw fit to sit down with my kid alone?" I said, moving towards him with determined strides.

The man backed toward the door and scrambled to open it for a quicker getaway. "I was only—" he started, but I slammed the door in his face.

Locking the deadbolt, Wolfgang spoke up behind me, "Uncle Adam, was that a bad guy?"

I looked down into his wide eyes. "Probably not, but we do need to have a little talk about safety." I proceeded to explain to him how he needed to be careful here and always get me to answer the door. I'd taken other opportunities as we'd been out and about that day to let him know how to look out for himself. And it didn't occur to me until much later that I'd referred to him as "my kid" to the salesman. Yet, the phrase seemed natural enough. I mean, he was my responsibility and all, but even I knew that reasoning was weak. As the days passed, it seemed increasingly strange to think of anyone else taking care of Wolfgang. It'd only been a few days, and already, I couldn't imagine life without him.

I'd been trying to quell those thoughts as I hurried to the door and looked through the peephole. What met my eyes was much more welcome than any salesman, but it was definitely

the most dangerous person I could think about allowing into my apartment.

I swung the door open. “Well, good morning, sunshine,” I said boisterously, partly because I knew it would annoy her, and partly because I really did feel that excited to see Reagan standing on my doorstep. Though, considering that she was in her running gear, which consisted of a matching tank top and yoga pants with some sort of marbled purple print clinging to her curves, my excitement ran the gamut.

She looked at me wearily, like she was already annoyed, and truthfully, that just excited me more. Maybe I hadn’t screwed up everything by almost kissing her back in my office a few days before. She had the same beleaguered expression that she’d seemed to have at the ready for me ever since we’d met, and a wash of relief went through me at us seemingly returning to our status quo.

Chapter Nine

Adam

“**Y**ou said you didn’t mind sweaty, so I’m going to put you to the test,” she said with an arched eyebrow.

I looked her over carefully, a smile tugging at my lips. “You should know by now I always pass all my tests, Miss Reagan,” I said in a low voice and was delighted with how her cheeks flushed.

“Rea!” Wolfgang sang out behind me, nearly knocking me over in his rush to greet our guest. I watched him as he ran up to throw his arms around Reagan. Even though Reagan hadn’t physically been here the last few days, she still managed to foster a relationship with Wolfie by calling him nightly. I knew it was her way of checking up on him and making sure I wasn’t fucking things up too much, but I didn’t let that annoy me too much because the truth was: I needed the help. Wolfgang seemed comfortable with her, so maybe he would tell her things that she could report back to me with...things I needed to know.

I really did need to get a hold of myself. I'd gone from being a confirmed bachelor to now not only being in charge of a six-year-old kid but also having warm, fuzzy thoughts about my best friend's ex-girlfriend.

First of all, I didn't do warm and fuzzy...and I certainly shouldn't be doing them with Reagan, of all people. A one-night stand was one thing, but pursuing anything more with her would be against the bro code and, more importantly, against my own personal code. I didn't do relationships, even as I kept falling into these little mind traps of wanting to convince Reagan otherwise. How could I think about doing that when I wasn't even fully convinced myself?

I blamed the extreme nature of the situation that we all found ourselves in. It had to make for emotions that weren't normally characteristic of a person.

"How's my Wolfie?" Reagan said, hugging the little boy back.

He was giggling when he pulled back from her. "I'm fine, but," he started, his nose wrinkling, "Aunt Rea, you kind of smell."

I bit back a laugh as Reagan colored furiously. She looked up at me, shooting daggers with her eyes. "I told you."

"Ah, come on, now. He just means you smell like nature. There's nothing wrong with that. All right, you two, enough of the displays of affection out in the hallway. Come on in," I told them, herding them both back inside the apartment.

“Reagan here is going to go back to school shopping with us today,” I announced to Wolfie.

“Yes, but only after I stop by my apartment and clean off really quick,” she said pointedly at me.

I rolled my eyes. “If you insist, dear,” I teased her.

She looked at me oddly, then quickly returned her attention to Wolfie. “Are you excited about tomorrow? I used to love school. In fact, if I could get paid to go to school, I’d probably do it for the rest of my life.”

“Really? That’s weird, Aunt Reagan,” he informed her.

“What? What’s so weird about that? You’re going to get to play with other kids and learn new things. I’m familiar with the school you’re going to, and it has an awesome playground. And I hear,” she said, dropping her voice conspiratorially, “that the Pokémon trade game at that playground is top-tier.”

His eyes widened, but she quickly added. “But you didn’t hear that from me, so don’t go spreading that around,” she warned playfully.

She looked around the apartment. “I hope I’m not interrupting...”

“We were just watching some cartoons and eating breakfast,” I informed her, watching the expressions playing over her features carefully. I was familiar with that look. Usually, it meant she was rounding up an argument. I saw it enough when she was dating Brian. I supposed that was what made her such a good lawyer. Her eyes lingered on the box of

sugar puffs, and I could almost follow her exact train of thought as those eyes then darted over to the stack of pizza boxes. She looked at me pointedly then.

“What? The kid likes pizza,” I said defensively.

She shrugged, unconvincingly trying to affect nonchalance before replying, “I didn’t say anything. I am pretty thirsty, though, after that run. Do you mind if I grab some water from your kitchen?”

I narrowed my eyes at her. She was up to something. “Knock yourself out,” I told her and watched her closely as she rounded the kitchen counter and opened the fridge to get a bottle of water. When she rose, a bottle of water on hands, her lips pressed together into what I knew to be a dissatisfied line.

I looked down at Wolfie, who watched the two of us carefully. “Wolf, will you do me a favor? Go find your socks and shoes. We’re going to drive Reagan back to her place so she can get cleaned up, and then, we’re going to go shopping—we’ll have to save the park for another time,” I told him and was slightly relieved when he seemed excited by this for the first time. I didn’t blame him. I’d be excited about getting school supplies, too, if it meant getting to hang out with Reagan.

Stop it, Rollins.

Once Wolfie was out of earshot, I turned back to Reagan. “Okay, spit it out. What do you want to say?”

“Nothing, it’s nothing. It’s just...you two can’t live off of pizza and sugary cereals. And when I looked in the fridge, it was nothing but sodas and junk. It’s a case of diabetes waiting to happen.”

“Are you shaming me?” I asked in mock horror, putting my hand dramatically on my chest.

She rolled her eyes and shook her head. “Adam, you’re a doctor, for God’s sake. You should know what stuff to feed the kid, much less yourself. God, do you live off this all the time?”

“What if I do?” I asked argumentatively. This was it. This was the good stuff I loved, going back and forth with her—it made me feel alive.

Her eyes bulged slightly in disbelief. “How the hell do you manage to look like that,” she asked, sweeping in her hand to indicate my form, “and eat all that junk?”

I slid up closer to her, breathing in her musky scent. I didn’t know if it was talking about what she thought of what I looked like or merely because she was present, but I could feel a strain in my pants as I neared her, drinking her in. “Oh, so you think I look good.”

Suddenly, realizing what she must’ve implied, she pressed her lips into that stubborn, little line again. “No, no, no, don’t you think about taking it back, you can imply that I look good.”

“I am implying that it’s a miracle you’re not a corpse, considering all of the junk you’re eating,” she snapped.

I moved up next to her as close as I could without touching her, telling her in a taunting voice, “Come on, admit it. You still think about what I look like.”

Her shoulders slumped somewhat in defeat, then straightened in defiance. “I will admit nothing,” she said stubbornly, staring me down.

I relented...a little bit. “Look, I meant to get some healthier stuff at the store. But right now, this is what the kid likes, and I’m just trying to keep him happy. I admit, I am in over my head, which is why I asked you for help.”

She seemed to take my admission as somewhat of an apology, which it sort of was. “Well, I’ll take some responsibility. I should’ve been doing more than just checking in on FaceTime. We’re going to have to make a couple of other stops than just school supplies today, though. We need to get you stocked up with some healthy options. And before you say you don’t have time to cook, I will prep some damn meals and stick them in the freezer. But you two are going to help me. I’m not just going to do this on my own,” she said, waving a warning finger at me.

I put up two hands in a placating gesture. “No argument from me. You are the sheriff in town, and we are just your lowly servants.”

She glared at me, but I could see her fighting back a laugh, especially when Wolfie came up behind me. “We are Reagan’s servants?” he asked, confused.

I looked at him with a wide smile. “I was just joking. But Sheriff Reagan is in town, and you and I have to toe the line,” I told him, waggling my eyebrows, so he understood that I was just teasing Reagan.

Mischief twinkled in his eyes. “If Rea is the Sheriff, then I am her deputy,” he announced. “That means I can lock you up, Uncle Adam,” he informed me.

“I like the way this kid thinks,” Reagan said. “I think that is a fine first order of business, Deputy Wolfie. And now that we have our prisoner, we need to go get you loaded up with some goodies, starting with the school supplies, then with some healthy snacks and such.”

He looked at her suspiciously. “You’re not going to make me eat broccoli, are you?”

She looked at him, shocked. “Nobody’s going to *make* you eat it. You *get* to eat it,” she said.

Wolfie looked at me horrified, but I just shook my head. “That’s what you get for wanting to be her deputy,” I said in a low voice, poking at him.

A short time later, we were all buckled up in my car as Wolfie proceeded to chatter like a magpie to Reagan, telling her all the things that we’d been up to.

I loved the way she asked questions instead of just nodding and smiling like a lot of adults did with children—like I used

to do with children, honestly. She was actually engaged in conversation with him, and I appreciated that.

Working our way through traffic, it almost felt like a family in that car, and it created a warm sensation in my chest that I was not expecting. It also didn't help that Reagan was sitting over in the passenger seat of the car in that tight little get-up that left nothing to the imagination. It just reminded me of everything that I missed. We had been with one another for a few short hours that one night, and yet, I missed her. It was a beguiling sensation, like I was somehow missing a limb.

When we arrived at Reagan's, Wolfie, like most kids, was excited to see how another person lived. Strangely, I found that I was intrigued myself.

Reagan's place was a lot homier than I expected. With that severe bun, and the clean lines she usually wore, I was surprised to see the homemade afghan blanket draped over the back of her couch in bright rainbow colors. A gift from her grandmother, she had explained to Wolfie when asked.

I was also surprised to see just how many pictures she had on her walls. I didn't know what I'd been expecting, some abstract art maybe.

Her walls were covered in framed pictures of friends and family. Wolfie and I inspected them as she disappeared to take a quick shower and change into some clean clothes. I had to focus on those pictures. I had to distract my mind from the knowledge that just a few feet away. Reagan was in the other room completely naked.

I was surprised to find a framed picture of me, Brian, and her there. This one had been taken at a Yankees game. But I was confused as to why it was on her wall. She and Brian had been broken up for quite a while now, but what was more confusing was the fact that Brian looked bored in the picture, while she and I appeared to be passionately arguing about something. What was new?

I remembered that game. Brian had spent most of it scrolling through his phone while Reagan and I took turns yelling at the field over various bad calls.

She actually knew what she was talking about when it came to baseball, though I would've never admitted that to her at the time...or now, honestly, if for no other reason than to get her hackles up.

I did remember thinking at the time that games were more fun with Reagan than Brian. Brian tolerated the sporting events, and I appreciated him trying to support my interests. But it was hard to keep that guy focused on something as long as a sports event. He was too distracted with social media and “networking.”

“Is that you, Uncle Adam? And Aunt Reagan?” Wolfie asked when he found the picture I'd been staring at.

“Yeah—yeah, that was at a baseball game we went to a while back.”

“Uncle Adam?”

“What, buddy?”

“Is Aunt Reagan your girlfriend?” Wolfie asked me sweetly.

I felt the air whoosh out of me for a moment before I sputtered out, “Well, no. What would make you ask something like that?”

“The way you two act around each other. That’s how mommy and daddy acted,” he added.

“What? Your parents liked to argue like that?” I asked before thinking.

He nodded solemnly. “They did, but it wasn’t really fighting. They always made each other laugh, like you and Reagan do.”

I swallowed around the sudden lump that had formed in my throat. I didn’t want to lie to the kid, but I also had the urge to tell him whatever I needed to do to make him happy. *I really need to work on that*, I thought to myself. “Well, I’m glad you recognize that we’re not fighting, we’re just teasing each other. But that doesn’t necessarily mean that we’re boyfriend and girlfriend. We’re just friends.”

Was that disappointment I saw in Wolfie’s eyes? Or was I just manufacturing that in my head? Before I could analyze it too much, he looked back at the picture. “Who is this other guy?” he asked.

“That is my best friend, Brian. You haven’t met him yet, but you will soon. He’s a good guy. Obviously not into the game all that much, though,” I pointed out smiling.

“No.” Wolfie laughed. “But at least you have Reagan for that.”

I nodded, thinking about all the things that I had Reagan for lately.

Brian was my best friend, we had been through a lot together, and though we didn't have all the same interests, I knew I could always count on him. He'd checked in several times during the last week to make sure Wolfie and I were OK, but he kept his distance, not wanting to overwhelm Wolfie. I respected that.

Reagan, on the other hand...well, Reagan was just a whole other entity. It was no exaggeration when somebody called her a force to be reckoned with, as it was the God's honest truth. But at the moment, she was on my side, because that was the side of Wolfie, and I was exceedingly grateful for it.

Wolfie and I continued to look at the pictures as Reagan emerged, hair slightly damp and down around her shoulders. It was nice not to see it pulled back in that severe bun. When we used to go out on double dates, she'd have it straight as an arrow down her back, but that night we spent together, her hair swept down her back in big waves, and I loved sticking my fingers through the softness.

Her hair was already starting to relax into those big waves again as it dried, and though I missed the running outfit, so much so it almost pained me, she filled out that New York Jets T-shirt and pair of worn-in jeans nicely.

“What are you two up to?” she asked, smiling towards her wall of pictures.

“Just checking out the fam,” I said when my eyes snagged on what appeared to be a wedding party picture. I couldn’t stop the smile that stole over my lips at seeing Reagan with her hair down, light makeup on her face, with what looked like a pink halter gown that pushed her perky breasts out before it fell in soft folds around the rest of her body.

The whole family was lined up in what was obviously a beach wedding. I looked at the bride and groom. The bride looked to be about Reagan’s age, and the groom was quite a bit older. And yes, there was a striking similarity between his face and Reagan’s.

I nodded towards the photograph. “What’s the story here with silver fox and his child bride?” I asked teasingly.

She looked at me with wide eyes and said tacitly, “That’s my dad...and my best friend, Amy.”

My eyes widened. “Wow, you have to fill me in on that story,” I said, momentarily forgetting there was a child in the room until Wolfie piped up.

“Yeah, what happened, Aunt Reagan?”

She looked between the two of us, smiling at Wolfie and giving me a go-to-hell look. I smiled sheepishly at her.

“It was no big deal, really. Amy was my best friend in college, we were roommates. I took her to my dad’s beach

house one summer for vacation, and she and my dad...hit it off, to put it mildly,” she said, looking down sheepishly.

“Wow, that had to be a little awkward,” I said, imagining how it must’ve been to discover your best friend and your dad shacking up.

“Only for a little bit. But they really love each other, and I really love the both of them. So, everybody’s happy. Besides, if those two hadn’t gotten together, then I would not have my little sister,” she said, pointing to another picture on the wall of a chubby-cheeked girl, with bright eyes and a big smile. “This is Layla, she’s a couple of years younger than you Wolfie. But I bet you two would get along great.”

Wolfie looked at the picture critically and looked doubtful. “I don’t know. She’s a girl, and she’s a baby,” he said scornfully.

Reagan rolled her eyes playfully at him. “I’ll have you know that baby girl could whip your butt, mister.”

“Nu-uh,” Wolfie insisted.

“Yuh-huh,” Reagan replied, sticking her tongue out at him and causing Wolfie to giggle.

“All right, children,” I said, putting my hand on Wolfie’s shoulder and guiding him towards the door. “Let’s go get this shopping extravaganza started.” I led the two of them back to the car. I made sure that Wolfie was buckled in securely in the back, and then, I made sure I opened the door for Reagan.

She looked at me suspiciously. “You don’t have to do that.”

“I know you don’t think much of me, Reagan, but I’m still a gentleman,” I insisted.

I expected her to give me some snappy comeback, but instead, she just examined my face for a beat, then slid into the passenger seat. I shut the door and tried to tamp down the yearning I felt low in my belly for the woman sitting in the passenger seat of my car.

Those feelings of familial unity that had tugged at me hard throughout the day during our time together would nag at me later as worried about enjoying them a little too much. I tried to bolster myself with reminders of the fact that I was a prime target for this kind of vulnerability.

My family had been cold and distant. Their biggest act of love was passing down their name and paying for me to get out of things. That was one of the reasons they’d been so dismayed when I decided to try to help people.

At first, they thought I was just partying on these long trips I would take. When they found out I was using that money to go to third world countries to help, they bragged about it to their friends, but privately, they questioned me on my motives. “There are other people for that, Adam. Don’t feel like you need to be one of them,” they would say—whatever that meant. What I suspected was proven right: their worry had little to do with any concern about my welfare and everything to do with how it put them out. Every time I came home after a new adventure, I had a broader insight of the world—an

inconvenience that made it harder for them to keep me in “my place.”

I had already spent most of my life not feeling like I belonged with my family. I was the proverbial black sheep. But once I decided to forge my own path, it had been made official.

I heard from the occasional family member, but mostly only knew about what they were up to because of social media. Veronica had been the only family member who I had truly talked to. My parents called on my birthday and Christmas, but otherwise, there was no contact. They hadn't even called me after Ronnie passed, and they knew we had been close. I wasn't sure how much they knew about the aftermath or about the fact that Wolfgang was now in my care. But I hadn't heard one word from them, or Ronnie's parents... Wolfie's grandparents. And the knowledge of that weighed heavily on me and also doubled down my conviction that none of them were worth messing with.

It was little wonder that I was so susceptible to the coziness of true family life. I reasoned that this was the main reason I was having all of these warm and fuzzy feelings about Reagan. That, and the fact that I was fighting a hard-on every time she was near.

As much as I was struggling with her nearness, I didn't regret it for one second. Especially after seeing how jazzed up Wolfgang got about school after going down the school supply aisle with Reagan, who was like a kid in a candy store, picking

up notebooks, colored pencils, and other little doodads that, quite frankly, he probably didn't need. As we worked our way through the store, Wolfie started casually opening up about some of his worries to Reagan. "Aunt Reagan? Have you ever been a new kid in school?"

"Well, sure, and it was scary. I was worried that nobody would like me, and I would be by myself. But you know what? My grandmother pulled me aside and told me that I needed to remember who I was: Reagan Miles. I was somebody," she said. "As somebody, I had every right to be in that school and to carve out a place for myself. So, you know what I did? I walked in that school with my head held high, and my shoulders back, and I acted like I belonged there. The other kids agreed."

Wolfie didn't look too convinced, but Reagan continued, "Just like you, Wolfie. You are most definitely somebody," she said, emphasizing the last word. "You have every right to be there, and you belong there. Do you know why? Not only because you're Wolfgang Townsend, for God's sake," she said, hyping him up, "but because you have people who love you. So, if you ever have a moment tomorrow where you're not sure, just remember that there are all these people who are crazy about you, and that's only after knowing you for a few days. That's pretty powerful stuff, my man."

His response proceeded to split my heart in two. "There are people here who love me?"

She glanced at me, and I could see his answer had had the same effect on her. She bit her lip and swallowed hard, then brightened for him, pasting a smile on her face. “Of course. I know Uncle Adam loves you. I love you. I know Miss Nancy’s crazy about you, and you have Cheri charmed,” she assured him.

He nodded with confidence. “I like them, too.”

“A whole bunch of other people will like you and love you, you just have to give them a chance,” she told him.

“That’s right,” I piled on and added, “and if they don’t, I’ll kick their asses.”

“Adam,” Reagan hissed.

I grinned at her sheepishly and shrugged my shoulders. But it had made Wolfie laugh, and he was in much better spirits as we worked our way through the store and to the checkout.

Once at the checkout, Wolfie proceeded to charm the cashier, and I took advantage of that moment to grab Reagan’s hand to catch her attention. “Hey, thank you for that back there,” I told her in all seriousness.

We shared a long look that quickly turned heated, and she tore her eyes away, shaking her head. “I didn’t say anything that wasn’t true. He’s going to do great tomorrow. All the same, maybe we should have something special planned for him after school tomorrow.”

Her use of the word “we” would have normally freaked me out, but somehow, it buoyed me knowing that she would not

only be there for Wolfie, but that she would be around, period. It was not something I'd ever welcomed before. I hadn't been in a serious relationship since I was in my twenties, and relationships had crashed and burned. I'd had a knack for choosing women who would inevitably become enthralled with the family lore and, what's more, the family money. My lifestyle of work, watching sports, and playing hockey did not appeal to them in the slightest. They wanted me to make amends with my family, so they could get an invite to the Rollins family dinner parties and soirees.

Strangely, I wondered what Reagan would make of my family. She was always so no-nonsense and practical. Still, I'd thought that about others, and they'd still managed to be taken in by my family's opulent lifestyle.

I hadn't realized I was still holding on to Reagan's hand, it felt so natural. But she looked down pointedly, her face coloring furiously, and I reluctantly pulled my hand away.

"Right, what did you have in mind—a parade or something?" I asked, nervously clearing my throat as I whipped out my card to pay.

She looked thoughtful, and when I saw her eyes light up, it caused a stirring in my chest that made me fidget like I was some sort of nervous teenager. It was bad enough that I could barely keep my hands to myself with thoughts of her. Now, she caused butterflies in a forty-year-old man.

"Not quite—I need to do some investigating first, but I'll send you some ideas later tonight," she said, turning her

attention back to Wolfie. I couldn't help but notice the way her eyes dropped briefly to my mouth before she turned to Wolfie.

I swallowed hard around the rising tide of desire threatening to consume me. It wasn't just a physical desire. It was an avalanche of feelings that I was wholly unaccustomed to. I wanted Reagan. I wanted this little family picture that she and Wolfie presented. I wanted this togetherness and harmony—all things I never thought possible, period, much less for me.

Suddenly, my mind harkened back to a memory of a warning conversation I'd had with Brian not long after he'd introduced Reagan to me as his girlfriend.

“I don't know, man, I think you need to be careful around this one—she's dangerous.”

I hadn't known at the time just what kind of danger exactly I thought she presented, and Brian had laughed at me, but standing there in the market check-out line watching her tease and talk to Wolfie, it became abundantly clear. Reagan, along with Wolfie were all sorts of dangerous because they caused stirrings of love—an emotion I'd soundly taken off the table for myself...unless I was talking about my favorite hockey team, of course.

“What is this?” Reagan asked, yanking out packages of cookies and chips that Wolfie and I had snuck into the cart when she wasn't looking.

Wolfie and I exchanged sheepish expressions. “Those are just a few house staples, it’s no big deal,” I defended.

She eyed both of us carefully like we were in serious trouble, but I could see the playful twinkle in her eyes. “I was thinking more fruits and veggies.”

“But, Aunt Rea, aren’t chips made out of potatoes? That’s a vegetable,” Wolfie piped up.

“Look at that. My man,” I said to Wolfie, giving him a high five.

Wolfie laughed, and Reagan rolled her eyes, but she was smiling at the two of us. “You got me there, Wolf-Man, but I am determined to prove to you that healthy food can be tasty, too,” she told him.

Wolfie looked doubtful, but he was excited when Reagan asked him if he would help her prepare dinner.

I finished putting up the groceries, watching the two of them out of the corner of my eye carefully as they put their heads together while they brainstormed dinner.

“What? You two sharing secrets over there?” I asked as I sidled up next to him at the kitchen counter.

“No, we’re just saying what we’re going to put on our homemade pizza,” Wolfie said with a smile.

“Homemade pizza? Is it wise to mess with something that’s not broken?” I asked, eyeing Reagan with a challenging gaze.

She just shook her head at me as Wolfgang told me happily, “But we can put whatever we want on this pizza, Uncle Adam. Aunt Reagan said I could even pick out what veggies go on there.”

I put my hands on my hips and asked him with a serious expression. “Now, why would you watch your precious gummy bears to perish on a pizza?”

He gave a little kid cackle and rubbed his hands together. “It’s all a part of my experiment, Uncle Adam,” he said, with a slightly raised voice, getting excited. I heard Reagan’s soft laughter behind him, and my heart did that thing again. I was starting to feel like the Grinch, with my heart growing visibly.

I should back away. I should put some space between myself and this child, and especially between myself and Reagan.

But even as those thoughts screamed through my head, I moved closer to the two people who I was starting to understand could truly wreck me.

And we spent the next few hours having the time of our lives, cooking, watching TV, laughing, and joking until poor Wolfgang was so tired, he could barely hold his head up.

Score one for Uncle Adam for wearing him out enough that he didn’t seem all that nervous about school anymore.

“All right, buddy, why don’t you go change into your pajamas and I’ll tuck you in,” I told him.

He nodded sleepily and began trudging his way towards the hallway, but then, he stopped short, turning and saying, “Aunt

Rea? Will you be there to drop me off for school, too?"

"I don't know about that, buddy," I interjected. "She's got to go to work." I tried giving her an out, while also trying to soften the blow of her inevitable "no."

She smiled brightly at Wolfie. "Of course, I'll be there. My nasty, old work can wait—it's your big day!"

"Awesome," he said before rushing down the hallway.

I turned to her then. "You don't have to do that, Reagan."

She looked up at me with an unreadable expression. "I know you're saying that to be nice, but I need to do this for Wolfie. Maybe for myself a little bit, too. I am already nervous enough for him, and I want to help make this as easy as possible for him...and you," she added before looking away for me.

Without saying anything at first, I nodded, heading towards the hallway, but then, I stopped short and called over my shoulder, "Do you want to help me tuck him in?"

She looked at me for a long moment like she was contemplating some life-changing decision in her head before she rose from the couch without saying anything and followed me down the hallway.

Wolfie had already gotten into bed and was working on getting his covers arranged the way he liked.

He was excited to see Reagan still there and asked if she could read part of the story that night instead of just me. So, we took turns back and forth, reading him to sleep. He drifted

off quickly, and Reagan and I were both left holding one end of the book.

“Hey, thanks for sticking around,” I whispered to her.

She tore her gaze away from me and nodded jerkily. “Yeah, of course,” she said, slipping off the edge of the bed and setting the book on Wolfie’s bedside table.

I watched her as she looked down at Wolfie with a soft expression. Seemingly unable to help herself, she reached out and smoothed his hair away from his brow and leaned down and gave him a quick kiss goodnight. Part of me felt like I was invading a personal moment, and yet, the other part of me couldn’t help but notice just how right all of it felt.

Come on, Adam, get a hold of yourself. What the hell do you mean “right?”

She turned for the door as I kissed Wolfie myself, then followed her out the room, pulling the door so that it was just slightly ajar. Wolfie didn’t like closed doors, and with everything going on in his life, I couldn’t blame him for that. I, too, now slept with my bedroom door partially ajar, just in case.

When I got to the living room, Reagan was busying herself with grabbing her bag and stuffing her things back into it, avoiding my gaze.

“Listen, I really appreciate all your help,” I started.

“Yeah, well, I didn’t mean to crash your entire day—”

“No. No, it worked out perfectly. He had a blast the whole day. I mean, so did I. But I think he was pretty distracted from the whole school thing. And now, he knows that both of us will be there for him to drop him off in the morning. So that’s...good?”

She looked at me out of the side of her eyes. “I don’t know. I’m as clueless about all this stuff as you are,” she admitted.

“Ah, yes, but you were much more committed to research and post-it notes,” I teased her.

She looked me over then, and I could tell something was on her mind by the way she shifted her weight from foot to foot. I couldn’t help but be a little nervous about it, as Reagan wasn’t normally one that was at a loss for words. Finally, after an extended pause, she said quietly, “I had a lot of fun today.”

“Me too.”

She looked thoughtful for a moment, and that brow of hers furrowed. I knew that meant that she was trying to find a way to water down everything that happened today—to make what was going on between us seem less somehow. I just didn’t have it in me to hear whatever excuse she came up with.

“Adam, I—” she started, but I wasn’t going to let those words come out of her mouth, not tonight, not after all of the fun and ease and comfort we’d had with one another during the day.

I stepped into her space, close enough so that she was forced to look up at me. Reagan was a tall woman, but I was

even taller. She wasn't accustomed to having to look up at people, and I couldn't help the thrill of satisfaction that she had to do it with me. Whatever she'd been about to say died on her lips, and she stared up in my eyes.

This was the part where I teased her or made a joke about it, but I didn't have those things in me, either. Instead, it was just the unrelenting desire to taste her.

I let my eyes fall to her lips, letting her know what I was about to do, letting her have an out if she really wanted it. Then, I slanted my mouth across hers, took her lips, tasting and nipping, then swirling my tongue deep inside her mouth the first chance she gave me access. My arm snaked around her waist, bringing her to me, pressing her soft perky breasts against my chest and molding her hips against mine.

If there wasn't a little boy sleeping just down the hall, I would've led her to the couch, but at that moment, I knew I was lucky just to have this embrace—to hear the moan escaping her mouth as I tasted her, wishing I could brand myself with that flavor, somehow walk around with it all the time and have access to it whenever I wanted.

A pool of desire in the bottom of my gut just clutched at me even tighter as she kissed me back, her tongue dueling with mine in a dance as old as time.

I knew she felt my erection pressed against her, but I didn't care. Let her know just how badly I wanted her, that whatever went down between us months ago obviously wasn't over. I was exhausted from trying to figure out feelings and futures

and circumstances. Now, I just wanted to revel in the comfort and warmth of this woman and follow my body blithely in what the more intellectual part of me knew was sure to be a world of trouble.

Her fingers clutched my T-shirt, bringing me closer. The excitement caused my cock was dizzying, but just as she was about to pull me closer, she pushed me away, breaking our kiss. Her hand went to her mouth, as if I had branded her, just like I had wanted to be just moments before.

She stepped back quickly, reaching blindly for her bag and keeping her eyes away from mine. “I’m sorry, Adam. I’m sorry, I just can’t,” she said, meeting my eyes briefly once more and then turning and making a beeline for my front door.

“Reagan, Reagan, come on. Let’s talk about this.”

She wheeled on me then. “There’s nothing to talk about, Adam. You and I both know that. It’s just all this togetherness...that’s all it is,” she insisted stubbornly.

Her denial of the situation wasn’t unexpected, but it still felt like a bucket of ice water had just been thrown in my face. “Oh, I see, that’s how you’re going to play it.”

“Play what?” she asked, incensed. And then, she added, “I don’t play games, Adam, you know that.”

“No, I don’t know that,” I said fiercely in hushed tones, not wanting to wake up Wolfie. “It seems to me that this has been one big game for you.”

“How the hell can you say that?”

“How the hell could I not? You keep doing this back-and-forth with me, trying to make excuses and tell me it’s nothing when you know that that’s bullshit,” I hissed at her. “You know what? If you want to lie to me, fine. I might even be able to understand that...eventually. But you never struck me as somebody who lies to yourself so easily.”

Her eyes narrowed at me then. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“No? Can you really tell me that you haven’t thought about us since our night together? Can you honestly say that you don’t feel what’s going on between us?”

She looked at me with an icy expression, and yet, as cold as her features were, there was an inferno of emotions going on in those bright eyes of hers.

Come on, Reagan. Fight me, argue with me. Let it all out.

But my wish would be denied. She pressed her lips together and growled out, “Good night, Adam.” Then, she was gone, the taste of her still on my lips, and the sharp stab of her denial piercing my gut.

Chapter Ten

Reagan

I didn't quite remember all the details about how I got home. I knew I called for a taxi, and I'd been grateful that the driver was quiet the whole way. I wasn't fit to be conversing with anyone. On the other hand, the silence left my brain to replay that kiss with Adam over and over again.

The whole day had seemed like some random fever dream compared to what my life usually was. It wasn't like I didn't enjoy my life. I actually loved the hell out of my life. But my day with Adam and Wolfie felt like I had stepped into this whole other world—a world that wasn't controlled by cases and briefs. A world that had more to it than numbers of wins and losses and binging reality TV in the evenings.

I didn't like being the sort of person who longed for something that other people had. I figured that if it was meant for me, then it would come to me in my own good time. At least, that's what I told myself when I saw Lucy so happy with her husband and my dad and Amy with their little family.

I loved that my friends and my father were so happy. But I guessed if I had to really be honest, there had been some envy.

My father had been a fantastic father growing up. Once he and my mom split up, he'd even put dating on hold because he was afraid of how it would affect me. I was the sole priority for the longest time. Once I'd gotten used to the idea that he was with Amy, I was relieved by the fact that he had somebody to share his life with, even if she was one of my best friends. That had taken some getting used to, but I was glad he found that happiness.

My mom, on the other hand, had found that "happiness" a few times. I wasn't sure my mom actually knew what she wanted, but she was definitely in love with the idea of love—hence, the multiple marriages. She was a woman who had been constantly searching, and I guess that's why she stepped out on my dad in the first place. She was always looking for something bigger, brighter, faster.

I loved my mom, I did, but even at a young age, I could see that she had a dysfunctional relationship with herself and with love. Maybe that's why I hadn't pushed too hard on relationships for myself.

Brian had been a bit of an experiment, to be truthful. He checked all the boxes, and part of me thought that if I couldn't make it work with him, then maybe love just wasn't meant for me.

But even though he and I had crashed and burned, I still found myself with this longing.

And Adam Rollins didn't check any of my boxes, for God's sake. He was immature, we constantly argued... and yet, I had been having fun with him and not just from that one time in bed together.

The man definitely knew how to kiss, that was for sure. The memory of the way his tongue had tasted against mine had me in a daze as I unlocked the door to my apartment.

I wandered around my apartment, doing the typical routine that I always did before I went to bed, with the exception of firing off a quick email to the law firm that I would be a little bit late in the morning due to some "personal business."

I had almost typed out "family business," but thought better of it.

The next morning would be awkward, to say the least. Yet, at no time did I consider canceling it. Wolfie had asked for me to be there, and dammit, I was going to be there for the kid—frustrated from the sexual tension with his uncle be damned.

I changed into my pajamas and scrubbed face cream onto my face and briefly considered calling Lucy and Amy, but I forced myself not to. Scrunching up my face, I examined myself in the mirror.

"Really, Reagan, how did you manage to get yourself in such a fine lather?" I muttered to myself.

I longed to hear the comforting voices of my friends and have them help me make sense of this. But somehow, it seemed too private even for them at the moment. I was still

reliving the kiss in my head, feeling both embarrassment and euphoria at the way he had felt against me. If I hadn't pulled back when I did, it would've led to much more than just a kiss. I couldn't quite decide if I was disappointed by this or relieved that I had called it off before things went too far.

I didn't flip through the channels like I normally did at night. Instead, I just slipped beneath my covers and turned off the lights, allowing my mind to go over the image of Adam, the sound of his voice...the way he felt. I didn't try to talk myself out of it or jerk my attention elsewhere. I let him take over everything for a while. And when I did, my hands inevitably found themselves trailing down my skin. I shoved my T-shirt up and my pajama shorts down and let my fingers play at my mound as I remembered how he had felt against me, hard and ready.

Things were so different now. I wasn't just coming out of a relationship with his best friend. We weren't completely at odds with one another. We had a shared interest. Would that change the way things would go down between us between the sheets?

I couldn't help the nagging feeling that just made things more intense. I let my mind wander back to Adam's bedroom and imagined myself falling to my knees before him, taking in the sight of his beautiful body. Rubbing myself furiously to the mental image of his lust-hazed eyes, tracking my movements as I loved him with my mouth, I pictured myself taking him into my mouth, sucking him and reveling in how he tasted. I imagined him spearing his fingers through my hair and

cupping the back of my head, holding me close, making me take more of him in. The idea was exhilarating, and it made my fingers move faster and faster over my clit. My hips bearing down into the mattress, I tried to find purchase as they bucked up. I rode out the waves of my orgasm.

I laid there for a long time, catching my breath, my heartbeat thumping in my ears and trying to empty my mind of the very images that just made me come so hard. I watched the ceiling fan whirring above me, trying to just focus on the silence and darkness of the room.

If I just focused on my breathing, the way that Lucy had taught me, then maybe I could get Adam's voice out of my head.

Breathe in. Breathe out. What was that buzzing noise?

Slowly, I opened my eyes and looked over to see my phone lit up.

Just ignore it, Reagan.

I tried to focus on my breathing again, and then, I couldn't take it. I sat up in bed and snatched up my phone, seeing that I'd got a text message from none other than the man who just made me orgasm...even if he didn't know it.

Adam: I'm hoping you'll still be there for Wolfie in the morning, despite everything that happened. Here's the address to his school. Drop-off time is at 7:30.

Below his text was a link to Wolfie's school. I wasn't sure why he was texting me the address. I had given him this

information myself and helped him register Wolfie. But then again, I supposed he was just making sure I would still be there.

I typed several messages and then deleted them before I sent them out. I had never been speechless before, but Adam Rollins seemed to have that effect on me.

Frustrated, I sent him a thumbs-up emoji and sent it out before I could stop myself, even though I instantly regretted it, clenching my teeth in embarrassment.

“What the hell, Reagan?” I put the phone back on my night table and rolled away from it. Any sense of self-control and self-assurance seemed to be out the window with Adam, and I hated it. Yet, I could not wait to be around him again.

The next morning, I threw myself into my routine of getting ready and mentally rehashing the cases that I would be working on for that day.

I had a to-do list a mile long, but my first priority was making sure that Wolfie made it to school okay. I had taken part of the morning off to not only ensure that his first day of school was successful, but to also investigate my idea for his after-school surprise.

I had found a spot in Brooklyn, a place called the “Pokémon Café.” Supposedly, it not only had games and memorabilia, but you could also grab burgers and drinks. It seemed right up Wolfie’s alley. After deciding that pretending like the kiss

hadn't happened and forging ahead as usual, I texted a link to the café to Adam, asking him if it sounded like a good idea for Wolfie's after-school surprise.

Much to my chagrin, he texted back a thumbs up emoji.

"Well, I guess that's appropriate," I mumbled to myself as I gathered up my things and headed out the door. I left a little early to make sure that I could beat the traffic to Brooklyn and managed to arrive at Wolfie's school at 7:15.

I looked around, but there was no Adam or Wolfie to be found. Pacing in front of the school building, I watched as parents dropped off their kids and checked my phone nervously. Not too long before 7:30, Adam and Wolfie pulled up, rushing out of Adam's car and up the steps.

"Aunt Rea, you're here!" Wolfie said, throwing his arms around my waist and giving me a hug.

I hugged him back and told him, "Of course, where else would I be, buddy?"

Adam caught up with us and gave me a curt nod.

"Okay, we're supposed to go to classroom 2G to meet Wolfie's teacher, Miss Henderson," Adam informed me.

I looked down at Wolfie with a reassuring smile. "Well, then, let's go meet Miss Henderson."

We navigated our way through the halls and quickly found room 2G. The door was open, and there was a petite, red-haired woman moving in between desks.

“Miss Henderson?” Adam called out.

The woman turned and smiled brightly. She looked warm and friendly, but I could feel Wolfie stiffen next to me. I squeezed his shoulder reassuringly and looked down. He glanced up at me with wide, scared eyes.

Adam squatted down next to him. “Hey, it’s going to be okay. And remember, we got a big surprise waiting for you after school. Just a few more hours, all right, buddy?” Adam asked him, but Adam seemed just as nervous as Wolfie did.

“I’m so pleased to meet all of you,” Miss Henderson said, looking kindly down at Wolfie. “You must be Dr. Rollins?” She reached out her hand.

“I am actually, just call me Adam,” he said, returning her handshake.

“Adam.” She smiled warmly, then turned to me, her smile widening. “And you must be...?”

“This is Reagan. Wolfie calls her Aunt Reagan. She’s a good friend of the family and also happens to be his lawyer,” Adam rushed to explain awkwardly.

I smiled at the woman, who looked at me with alarmed eyes, even as she kept her pleasant expression kept firmly in place. “I’m here as a family friend, not as a lawyer,” I assured her.

“Oh, I see. Well, Wolfgang, we are so excited to have you here. If you have any issues at all today, please don’t be afraid to talk to me,” she said, looking down at him, and then looked

at the both of us. “And that goes for Adam here and family-friend Reagan as well.”

Suddenly, a little boy wedged in past us through the door, shouting, “Miss Henderson, you’ll never guess what happened. I lost another tooth.” The little boy’s eyes fell to Wolfgang, who had shrunk behind Adam’s leg. “Who is this?”

“This is our new student, Wolfgang. Wolfgang, this is Tyrek,” she said, introducing the little boy.

The little boy bounded up to Wolfgang, smiled brightly at him, and then looked up at us. “Are these your parents?” he asked.

Before Adam and I could say anything, Wolfgang answered, “Yeah, they are. How much did you get from the tooth fairy?”

“Twenty bucks,” the boy said.

Wolfie’s eyes were wide as he looked up at us.

Adam looked at him with a laugh. “Twenty dollars, wow. Is that tooth made of gold?”

“You wanna see our classroom pet?” Tyrek asked Wolfie.

“Yeah!” Wolfie said excitedly, following Tyrek across the classroom, then stopping short to turn around and look at Adam and myself. With a small smile, he called out, “I’ll see you all after school,” then he turned and followed his new friend.

“Yeah, buddy, I’ll be right here,” Adam said, looking a little forlorn.

“Well, then, I guess we’ve been dismissed,” I said softly with a laugh.

Adam smiled a little nervously, then looked to Miss Henderson. “Miss Henderson,” he said quietly, “you know about Wolfie’s situation, I mean... about his actual parents.”

Her expression softened as she nodded. “Yes, the registrar informed me of Wolfgang’s tragic loss, and let me just tell you how sorry I am for your loss as well.”

“Thank you,” Adam said, his eyebrow furrowed as he rubbed an anxious hand over his head, “but he just called me and Reagan his parents. You’re around kids all the time, is that normal to call somebody else your parents so soon?”

Miss Henderson let out a measured breath. “Grief comes out in all sorts of ways. If it just happened, he may just not be ready to tell other children that he has a different kind of home than most. Or it could be his way of proving to himself that he does have two people still in his corner—gives him a sense of permanence somehow.”

Adam and I looked at each other with worried expressions. Miss Henderson added, “I suspect he’ll eventually start talking about what happened—it takes some time. But at least he knows he has you in his corner and that you’re not going anywhere.” She smiled.

“Yeah,” Adam stuttered. “Listen, if he shows any kind of anxiety, or anything seems off, please don’t hesitate to call me. I’ll be here in a flash.”

“I don’t think we’ll need to do that, but I will keep that in mind, thank you both,” she said before turning to face the rest of her students. I felt like we had been effectively dismissed again.

Adam lingered, looking at Wolfgang, who was talking excitedly to Tyrek next to a terrarium housing what looked to be a bearded dragon.

Adam looked like he could stand there all day, so I hesitantly grabbed his elbow and started guiding him for the door, giving Wolfie one last small wave. “Adam, he’s going to be fine... That’s one tough boy there.”

Adam nodded, though he didn’t look so sure. “I know he’ll probably be fine. I’m not so sure about me,” he said as he let me guide him through the halls between the bustling groups of children.

The bell rang as we walked back down the stairs. “You headed back to the office?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Not until noon. I have a couple of things I need to check out first. I thought I might head home and sneak in a run really quickly, though.”

“Well, at least let me take you home. You shouldn’t have to pay for a taxi all the way back to your place,” he offered.

“I don’t know if that’s such a good idea.”

“It’s not like I’m going to bite you, Reagan. You made yourself clear yesterday, you don’t need to worry about it,” he said, leading me back to his car. I wasn’t so sure about what he

just said. Maybe he could behave himself, though that was questionable, but I wasn't trusting myself at that moment.

All the same, I got into the passenger side of the car and resigned myself to an awkward drive back to my apartment.

But as soon as he got in the car, he looked at me and said, "I think we have a problem here."

I looked at him and knew instantly that it didn't have anything to do with our kiss or the undeniable attraction to one another he was talking about. It was about what Wolfie had said back there. "Adam, I don't think you need to worry. You heard about Miss Henderson said..."

"Exactly. She said he doesn't have to worry because he's got people in his corner, no matter what. And I am in his corner, no matter what. But here I am, having made other plans to find him somebody else, and..." he trailed off looking helplessly through his windshield as he started up the car.

"And what?"

He was shaking his head to himself as he pulled out into traffic. "I don't think I can do it, Reagan. I can't let the kid down. I should've never asked you to look for somebody else. Is there any way you can take it back?"

I sat there, stunned. I wasn't really surprised I had fallen for Wolfie—he was a hard not to fall for. But I was a little surprised at how quickly Adam had come to the realization. Adam was stubborn as hell on a good day and stuck in his

ways. I was shocked to hear him admit so quickly that he wanted to give Wolfie a forever home.

At the same time, I was a bit leery. It hadn't been that long, and they were still getting to know each other. What would happen after the day in and day out grind of raising a child fully set in? It seemed a little soon to be making such a huge decision, and I expressed that to Adam. "There's not really a way I can take back the inquiry once it's out there. Now, we can always say that you changed your mind and you all have found a suitable living situation with one another. But Adam, I want you to really think about this before you pull the trigger on that," I cautioned him.

"What is there to think about? I love the kid, and I think he loves me. We get along, and yes, this situation is tough as hell, but I can't take away the only other people he knows. Not now."

"I understand what you're saying, Adam. But what happens when the newness wears off? I'm not trying to be cruel. I just believe we need to think a bit more rationally about this," I argued.

We were at a stop light when he turned and looked at me, hurt all over his face. "There goes that 'we' again. You know you don't have to be a part of this, Reagan."

The light turned green, so he hit the gas, weaving his way through morning traffic. "That's not what I'm saying, Adam. Of course I want to be a part of his life. I care a lot about him.

But it does have its complications if I'm being honest," I admit it.

"Complications? You don't say? Exactly what are the complications for you in this situation, Reagan?" he asked angrily.

"Um, hello, being close to Wolfgang means being close to you," I pointed out heatedly.

"Oh, and God forbid you would have to be close to me. God, do you really think I'm that terrible?" Pain flashed in his eyes as we drove closer to my apartment.

"No!" I shouted. "That's the problem, Adam, I can't trust myself around you." I wished I could take back the words as soon as his eyes jerked to look at me, disbelief written all over his face.

I saw him swallow hard as he just looked at me, and I felt my face flame at his inspection. A horn honked behind us and forced us to pay attention again. Adam went through the intersection and eased the car into a parking spot in front of my building.

He turned off the ignition, and I rushed to unbuckle myself. I just wanted to get out of there.

"Reagan, come on, don't run out on me again. Let's talk about this," he said and followed me as I hurried out the door.

"No, there's nothing to talk about. I'm tired of making an ass of myself in front of you. Just forget I said anything," I

said, whirling around towards the stoop of my building and rushing up the steps.

“That’s not fair, you don’t get to put that bomb out there and then just walk away. Hasn’t my life been upended enough? Now, you’re going to add some kerosene to the flames?” he asked, gently grabbing my arm and forcing me to turn to him.

“Fine. What do you wanna talk about, Adam? Do you want to talk about the fact that I can’t quit thinking about you? Do you want to talk about the fact that I keep touching myself to the memory of the last time we were together? Do you want to talk about the fact that I keep questioning all of my plans all of a sudden, because of you?” I asked through gritted teeth.

He studied my face for a long moment, then said quietly, “As a matter of fact, I want to talk about all of those things, but there’s something that we need to do first.”

I stared up at them, that familiar and scary clutch of desire tightening around my middle as I inhaled his scent. I knew that look he was giving me, but dammit, I was powerless to stop it. So, I didn’t wait for him to bend down and kiss me this time. This time, I rose on my toes and I kissed him myself, cupping his stubbly jaw in my hands and holding him to me as if I was getting breath from him.

He wasted no time in gathering me to him, and we were locked in each other’s arms, tasting and nipping at one another like starving animals right there on the front stoop of my building.

My hands traveled down to his chest, rubbing over his hard pees through his button-down and gliding over his abdomen.

He growled into my mouth, and dimly, I was aware of somebody calling from the sidewalk, “Holy hell, get a room, you two!”

That was enough to make us pull apart, but we only looked at one another, breathing hard.

Tired of second-guessing myself, I acted before I could overthink and grabbed his hand, pulling him inside the building, and telling him, “Come on.”

He held my hand and followed obediently as I led him to my apartment and opened the door with trembling hands.

As soon as we were inside, he shut it behind us with a resounding slam, then gathered me up in his arms again, twirling me around so my back was against the door, hitting it with a soft thud. His mouth hovered over mine, and he stared at my face before saying in a low voice, “There’s no fighting, Reagan. There’s no fighting this.” He pressed against me, and I could feel his erection through his pants, and a jolt of excitement traveled up my spine.

He kissed me again, and my fingers developed a mind of their own, ripping at his buttons, needing to get skin-on-skin contact as quickly as possible. Once I’d undone the buttons, Adam shrugged off the shirt that fell to the floor, then my hands went to the fly of his pants, undoing them, then shoving his pants down.

We became a tangle of limbs and clothes, struggling to get out of them and leaving them strewn about the floor until we were finally free of most of our outer barriers and left in our underwear. By then, we had managed to make it to the hallway, and I stood in the opening of that hallway as he looked me over hungrily.

Maybe I should've been nervous about what he was seeing. Maybe I should've been self-conscious, but at that moment, I felt proud and wanted. Somehow, I knew that Adam was seeing me. Not the body that had run for so many years and kept in shape. Not the woman who knew how to put on a face full of makeup and make it look good. Not the woman who was always in charge of every situation. God dammit, there was no way I was in charge of this situation, and for once, I did not care. No, he was seeing me in all of my vulnerable glory, and he looked like he was going to swallow me whole, and oh, how I wanted him to.

“Adam, if you don't come over here in the next two seconds, I'm going to—” I never got a chance to threaten him because he was on me then, stalking me down the hall as I giggled delightedly, running into my room. He chased after me playfully and tackled me to my bed.

“Don't toy with me, Reagan,” he threatened.

“Or what?” I challenged. This is what I loved about us together, the arguing. Even as he drove me crazy, he turned me on more than any man had ever been able to. I could admit that to myself, at this moment, even as part of me knew I

would have to work it out in my head tonight later. But right then, laid out across my bed in my lacy underwear with this beautiful man looking at me so severely, like one little move on my part would untether him, I had to admit to myself just how turned on he made me in every way.

“Or I’m gonna make you finally realize that you might just like to be told what to do in the bedroom—by me, of all people— make you admit that you want me, Reagan.”

“Didn’t I already admit that?” I said, arching an eyebrow, referring to my blurted confession in his car.

“You did, actually.” He smiled and said in a low, seductive, voice, “But I’m talking about making you scream it out loud.” Before I could answer, he covered my mouth, teasing and nipping at my lips as his large hands wedged beneath my back and my mattress and expertly unhooked my bra. He tore the lacy scrap of fabric away from me, drinking in the sight of my bare breasts.

“Okay, you want to prove that I like being told what to do in the bedroom so much. Then tell me what to do, Dr. Rollins?” I told him in what I hoped was a seductive voice.

He looked at me, his eyes dilated, looking feral as he rose off the bed. He kept up that eye contact as he rolled down his underwear and kicked them off to the side. I bit my lip as I eyed his engorged manhood. He really did have a beautiful cock. Before, a dick was just a dick, right? But Adam was a sight to behold.

He caught me staring at him hungrily, a mischievous smile overtaking his lips. “I think I have an idea of what you want to do first, even if you would never admit it, so we’ll start there.”

He looked around my room, seemingly truly seeing it for the first time since he’d been inside it. Then, he spotted the overstuffed chair I kept in the corner for reading. His eyes lit up when he saw that, and he strode over to it and plopped down, his knees spread and his erection bobbing, tempting me closer. “Come here,” he ordered.

My mouth watered as I grew closer, remembering the very images I had orgasmed to the night before and wondering how he knew what I had been craving so badly.

I went to him, standing in just my panties.

“Get on your knees,” he said. I did as I was told, holding eye contact as I dropped to my knees before him. He then looked at me as I dared to look at his throbbing dick jutting proudly at my gaze. Admiring the thick vein running along it, the engorged purple head, I couldn’t help but lick my lips.

“Reagan?” he called, drawing my eyes back to his, seeming to need some sort of confirmation that this was what I wanted. I bit my lip, smiling at him and his brown eyes darkened to almost black. I saw his fingers dig into the arms of the chairs as he bit out, “Be a good girl and suck my cock.”

My smile widened as I leaned over his lap and slipped out my tongue to flick at the tip of his dick. He let out a hiss, and I held his eyes as I proceeded to lick the tip of him like a

lollipop, moaning at the taste of pre-cum that had already erupted.

“Jesus Christ, Reagan,” he hissed in a barely contained growl.

I just let that encourage me more, taking the tip of him into my mouth and then slowly working inch by inch, as my hand reached down and cupped his heavy balls, massaging them.

I could feel the muscles in his thighs tense around me as I let myself go. I loved the way he felt, the way he sounded as I pleased him, so much so that I was almost ready to come myself. But I wasn't about to lose out on what it felt like to have him inside me, though that wouldn't mean I wasn't going to thoroughly enjoy this give and take of control. For all of his giving me orders, I knew down in the tight heat of my pussy that I was in charge right now, especially with the way he bucked up his hips and his breathing became ragged.

I lost myself in the sounds of his moans when his hand dug into my hair and pulled me back. I let out a protest, but before I could express too much outrage, he gathered me up in his arms and propelled us both towards the bed. “You like sucking my cock, Reagan? Tell me.”

I nodded my head enthusiastically. “Yes.” I moaned as I spread my legs before him. “I fucking love it, now, get inside me.”

He let out a tortured laugh as he positioned himself in between my knees. Though I often fantasized about how good he had been at eating me out during our time together, right

now, all I could think about was the feel of that thick shaft filling up my pussy. I needed it...bad.

He put his weight on his forearms and stared into my eyes as he positioned the tip of his cock at my sopping entrance. An arrogant grin overtook his lips, a grin that both annoyed me and tugged at my heart. "I see it really does turn you on, naughty girl," he said, shoving inside me, and we both groaned at the way his cock stretched me tight around him.

"Enough small talk, please, just fuck me." My hands clung to his shoulders, and he began moving his hips.

There was nothing slow and gentle about the way Adam moved inside me, and yet, I loved it. I loved the intense way he looked at me the entire time, I loved it so much I didn't even realize that I had given Adam exactly what he had aimed for. I hadn't even realized that I had been screaming out my pleasure. "Yes, fuck, yes, Adam. Fuck me harder," I told him, and he happily obliged. "That's it, fuck me like I'm your toy, yes, yes!"

"Oh, my God, you are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, with the tightest, sweetest pussy," he growled against my neck. I reveled in his words, gasping for air, but it was his next words that left me completely breathless. "That's it, Reagan. Goddamn, I never want another pussy...just yours...just you. Oh, my god, that's it, I'm gonna come."

I should've been freaked out, I should've stopped things right there, but his words sent my body over the edge. My pussy tightened around his cock, milking it for all it was

worth, and I screamed out as I came hard around him. Adam quickly followed, shouting out his release.

He collapsed on top of me in a sweaty mess, and I rejoiced in the feeling of him there. His weight was comforting and having him in my arms just fed the euphoria of my post orgasmic bliss.

We lay there for long moments, letting the ceiling fan dry our sweat and catching our breath.

I tried to shut my mind off. I just wanted to enjoy this moment of closeness with him. But my mind kept yanking me back to trying to figure things out. Being analytical and rational was essential for my job, but there were a lot of times that I really resented it in my personal life, especially now.

Adam's words kept boomeranging back to me.

"I never want another pussy...just yours..."

That had to be a just in the moment kind of statement, right?

Slowly, Adam pulled back to look down at me. His brow furrowed. "Oh, no, no, no, come on, Regan. You can't be back in your head already."

I bristled. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

"Well, it's definitely a mood killer," he argued.

"That's not fair. You can't deny that we probably shouldn't have done that," I insisted, hating myself as I said the words.

"And why the hell not? I think I can deny that all day long because it's bullshit."

“You’ve got to be kidding me, Adam. You and I are not well-suited for each other. We just happen to be really good at sex together,” I said, even as my heart questioned my words.

“You don’t believe that,” he said flatly. “You don’t believe anything that’s coming out of your mouth, do you? You’re just trying to say whatever you think you need to say to get me out of your hair, so that you don’t have to face complicated feelings. God forbid you have to do something complicated.”

“You don’t know me that well,” I argued, “so don’t act like you even have a clue of what I’m thinking.”

“Yeah, well, here’s a newsflash for you, Reagan. Do you wanna know why I can tell that you’re full of shit and that you’re lying to yourself? Because it’s just what I would normally do. That’s why we argue so much, right? Because we’re so much alike. But you don’t wanna see that. I guess you want to think that your problems are special—that your nerves about relationships aren’t all that different from anybody else’s. Or I guess I didn’t check the correct boxes, right? I mean, not like Brian did...for all the good that did.”

“Shut up,” I told him angrily. “You don’t get to come in here and throw all that stuff in my face like you fucking have a clue. Do you know what? Get out!”

“You’re kicking me out? Really? Just because I have the balls to call you on your bullshit?”

“My bullshit? You’re getting after me about my hangups, Mr. I-never-do-relationships. ‘Love is a crock of shit.’ Did I

get that right? I mean, I know I'm not putting it verbatim per se, but that's pretty damn close, isn't it?"

He nodded. "It's pretty close, yes. But here's another news flash, Reagan. Things change. I never thought that I would be so involved with my best friend's stuck-up ex-girlfriend."

I felt my mouth drop open. "Stuck-up?"

"That's right, stuck-up, but then I got to know you. I saw how you worry and take care of that sweet little boy, and things changed. You can't tell me that nothing has changed for you," he said, breathing heavily, his brown eyes open and bright with emotion.

We looked at each other for a long moment, and I didn't know what to say. I felt like he had cornered me, and I was fighting the urge to give my typical response. Yet, I didn't know what the right thing was to say.

My worries would be set aside, though, when his phone started chirping furiously. He went to check it immediately, surely worried that it was something to do with Wolfgang. I was worried about that myself. But as I straggled behind him and saw him look at his messages, I noted how his shoulders slumped in relief. "It's a patient, I gotta go. Congratulations, Reagan, you get your way...for now," he said, gathering his clothes and hurriedly pulling them back on. "We're not done with this conversation. We're just pressing pause on it."

"Adam—" I started, but he just turned around and said, with finality in his tone, "I'll see you after school," and stomped out of the apartment.

If the circumstances had been different, I might've laughed at the petulant way he stomped out of my building as I watched him through the window, but my heart was torn up by the words he had thrown at me.

He wasn't the first person to accuse me of repressing my emotions, but somehow, it was more disturbing coming for him, considering that I knew him to also be a person to regularly repress his emotions.

I had a lot of thinking to do before school pick-up.

"Shit, Reagan, you also have a job," I reminded myself as I hurried to my bathroom to get in my suit.

The weight of my personal world would have to remain suspended for the moment.

Chapter Eleven

Adam

I cursed Mr. Hodge's love of salty meats and his inevitable angina flareup as I raced towards Brooklyn Hospital to meet with my patient who was experiencing chest pains.

I'd almost gotten Reagan to admit that there was something between us and why she fought so damn hard.

I realized that she and I didn't always get along, but there was something else going on. She had the same sort of reticence in her relationship with Brian. Granted, I told them both from the jump that they wouldn't work out, but there was something very specific holding Reagan back, and I was intent on finding out what it was.

But as I made my way through the familiar doors of Brooklyn Hospital, I saw a little boy sitting on an examination table through a slightly ajar door. He was about the same age as Wolfgang.

I wondered what Wolfie was doing at that moment—if he was having fun, or if he was scared. And as I rushed towards

my patient, I began to realize some of Reagan's reticence was because of Wolfie. Not that she didn't adore him, but the fact was that Wolfie and I had a hard road ahead of us.

Reagan was nothing if not practical, so my guess was she was trying to not make an already complicated situation with me and Wolfgang even more complicated, especially, when she wasn't sure if I had made up my mind about Wolfie staying with me.

Maybe it didn't seem practical, but I was beginning to think that Veronica had been right. I knew she and her husband would've never planned to leave their wonderful son, but they'd both decided that if they had to choose, he should stay with me.

"So, that settles it. He stays with me," I said to myself in the middle of the hallway.

After all that agonizing, all that worrying, and all of that doubt, the decision seemed simple now. Wolfgang and I were a team—in a matter of less than two weeks, I knew that down in my bones.

My steps felt lighter as I continued down the hall, and it took me a while to realize that I was smiling like a fool. I felt a huge weight roll off my shoulders. Me and Wolfgang against the world. Now, I just needed to convince Reagan that I was sure and steady, and I needed to figure out what it was that was holding her back so much.

After spending the rest of the day catching up with cases, I continued to feel lighter and more relaxed. I knew that Reagan was pissed at me, but I'd win her over, of that, I was sure.

I was new to this whole maintaining relationships thing. It wasn't a strong suit of the Rollins family. But I had the realization that I had broken away from the family in a fundamental way a long time ago. Maybe it was time to really start making some new traditions of my own. Just because I was a Rollins, it didn't mean I had to be in a cold, transactional relationship. I had managed to figure out my own path in life. I could figure that out, too, especially with somebody as intelligent as Reagan.

I just needed to get her to listen. Though, that was going to be highly unlikely while we were picking up Wolfgang. It was just something that was going to have to wait. Our full attention needed to be focused on how his first day went and then making sure he had a fun time tonight.

Reagan had found this great Pokémon café where we would be surprising Wolfgang tonight. We couldn't stay out too late, of course. It was a school night. I was hoping if I played my cards right, I could get her to stay like she had the night before, so I could talk to her after we tucked in Wolfgang.

All of a sudden, everything seemed so much clearer. A successful doctor and a successful lawyer, raising their newfound son. But any fantastical vision I had of our imagined family skipping off into the sunset was dashed when I saw Reagan at the drop-off line at Wolfie's school.

She was dressed in one of her crisp, business suits. It was perfectly tailored to hug all of her curves, and I briefly entertained the notion of what I thought it would be like to have sex in her office. God, that would be hot.

“Heel, boy,” I muttered to myself as I grew closer to her. “Remember where you are.”

As I approached, she turned to me with a determined expression, “Look, if you think we’re going to continue that conversation you were trying to start earlier, you are out of your mind. I am here for Wolfie, and we both need to remember our places.” I wasn’t sure who she was trying to convince more: me or her.

I straightened my posture and gave her a salute. “Yes, ma’am.”

She rolled her eyes and started to light into me, but Wolfie bounded down the steps, a huge grin stretched across his face. “Uncle Adam! Aunt Rea! What’s my surprise?” he asked, slightly out of breath, as he nearly ran smack into my legs.

“Whoa there, buddy. How about a ‘hi’ first?” I teased him.

“Hi.” He laughed at his own silliness, then asked, “what’s the surprise?”

I smiled at him. “You’ll see soon enough, but first, you gotta tell us about your first day,” I told him, leading him towards the car. I couldn’t help but notice how he reached out and grabbed Reagan’s hand as we started toward my car. I also couldn’t help but notice the startled smile that curved Reagan’s

lips. The sight of their interlocked hands caused a pang of longing in my chest.

I didn't even recognize who I was anymore. Who was this guy whose throat was clogging with emotion? Who was this guy mooning over potential family life?

Wolfie started talking excitedly about his new friend Tyrek, the classroom pet, and all the games he played at recess. By the time he even bothered to take a breath, we were halfway to the cafe that Reagan had texted me the directions to earlier. "Oh, I almost forgot," Wolfie said, and from the vantage point of the rearview mirror, I could see him digging in his backpack. A sheath of paper was pulled out and slid across the center console between Reagan and me.

I was driving, so I couldn't examine the paper at first, but I could tell from the quick intake of breath from Reagan that it must have been something pretty important.

"Woflie, you drew this?" she asked haltingly.

"Yup, do you like it?"

To an outsider, and I'm sure to Wolfie, the brief hesitation on Reagan's part would not have been noticeable, but I felt it—that startled moment that hit whenever Reagan was not sure how to handle an unexpected emotion. "Wolfie, this is amazing," she enthused. "You've got a real talent, bud."

We pulled up to a red light, and I took the moment to look at the paper in Reagan's hand. It was a crayon drawing showing three people. At first, I thought Wolfie had drawn himself and

his parents, but then I saw my name beneath the crayon man and a misspelled version beneath a crayon woman. The man and woman were each holding a hand of Wolfie's depiction of himself. There was another sucker punch to the gut, this kid really knew how to deliver those. "She's right, buddy, that's fantastic," I told him truthfully. As much as that drawing warmed my heart, I couldn't help but be concerned about the reticence I felt in Reagan.

But that concern would have to be shoved aside once we made it to the cafe. To be fair, the look of joy on Wolfie's face served as a perfect distraction, and for her part, Reagan did a good job of concealing whatever was bothering her—for the most part, that is.

At one point, after we had finished eating and Wolfie was playing the Pokémon-themed pinball machine just a few feet from our booth, there was a distant, troubled expression on Reagan's face as she stared off at something behind me. When I followed her line of vision, I could see she was staring right at Wolfie.

What was there to be troubled by? He was obviously happy at that moment, but when I looked back at Reagan to ask her what was up, I found her staring at me with that same expression. Whatever words I'd planned on teasing her with died on my lips when I saw the open fear in her eyes.

I realized a lot had taken place that day, but the look in her eyes cut to the quick, and there was no amount of teasing words to handle it. This was serious. "Reagan? You're starting

to freak me out—what’s going on in that head of yours?” I asked her, but before she could respond, Wolfie came bounding back towards our booth. Reagan was quick to shield her expression and put on a cheery smile for the boy.

“Come on, Aunt Rea, come play with me.” He grabbed her hand and pulled her to one of the games.

I knew there was no way she would deny him that request, just like I knew there was no way she would deny him when he asked on the way home if she would stay and help tuck him in that night. He had her wrapped around his little finger, and even though I knew it would be a struggle for her stubborn pride to hang around my place after the morning we’d spent together there, there was a part of me that was not-so secretly pleased that she would be there. Maybe then she would see just how right all of this could be.

“Alright, so what crawled up your butt?”

Her mouth pressed into a tight line before she sighed and said, “Always overly concerned about what’s in my butt, huh, Adam?”

I smiled at her. “Of course. I find anything that has to do with your backside intriguing.”

She shook her head as she headed towards the kitchen and began pulling things from the fridge. “I just don’t think—” she started quietly, then stopped for a moment, looking down at her hands.

“Go on, counselor, spit it out,” I coaxed her softly.

She looked at me furtively, then busied her hands again with making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. She sighed before finally saying in a resigned voice, “I just don’t think it’s a good idea to give Wolfie the wrong idea. I mean, I love being around him, but at some point, you all will just want to get into your own routine. I won’t be a part of that, and—”

“Why not?”

“Why not, what?” she asked, stopping her frantic peeling of an orange.

“It seems like the answer is simple: just be a part of the routine. He’s happy, you’re happy, I’m happy—case closed,” I explained simply.

She sighed unhappily. “It’s not that simple, and you know why.”

I dared to move closer to her as she sectioned up the orange and plopped the pieces into a little plastic bag. “No, I don’t know why, so enlighten me,” I prodded. I moved in beside her like I was approaching a skittish deer.

Her eyes shot daggers at me. “Don’t play that game with me, Rollins, you know exactly what I’m talking about.”

I widened my eyes dramatically and slowly shook my head. “No, see that can’t be possible because just a few hours ago, a beautiful woman informed me I was to act like—let me see, how did she put it?” I asked, tapping my finger against my chin thoughtfully. “Ah yes, I believe the words were: we

‘remembered our places, after an amazing night of sex, of course.’”

I could see her jaw clench at the reminder before she looked at me with defiance and asked, “Who said anything about amazing sex?”

A laugh escaped me. “Are you really about to suggest otherwise?”

She stopped then, a satisfyingly deep blush staining her cheeks before she admitted reluctantly, “No, I wasn’t about to say anything like that.”

“Good,” I warned her in a teasing tone, “because then I would have to accuse you of being a filthy liar. I realize that’s part of your trade, but I like to think you couldn’t spit out such a grievous lie.”

“I just don’t think it’s a good idea to keep getting closer.”

The words stung, though I was not one bit surprised that she had said them. That didn’t mean I wasn’t going to fight her on them.

“Oh, God forbid you get close to anybody, right?” I baited her.

Her head came up sharply. “What the hell is that supposed to mean? I’m close to people...”

“Sure, your friends, your family—but we both know that when it comes to relationships, you’ll only go so far,” I pointed out.

She shook her head, angrily packing up the sandwich and snack she had made presumably for Wolfie's lunch tomorrow. "You really are insufferable, Adam," she fumed.

"Insufferably sexy?" I pushed.

She wasn't taking any joking at this point, though. "Just because we slept together a couple of times, you think you've got me all figured out."

I barked out a laugh and covered my mouth quickly, trying to catch the noise just in case it woke Wolfie. Once I was sure the boy was still asleep, I looked at her incredulously and said, "Reagan, I promise you, that is the last thing I think. You are the most mystifying person I've ever met, in fact. But I would like to know you better. I think I figured out some stuff, despite your attempts at pushing away the opposite sex."

"You have got to be kidding me. Push away the opposite sex? Where do you get off? Since I've known you, you've never been in a relationship, and you want to talk to me about pushing away people." she spat out.

"I have always been very open about pushing away people, and with good cause. I've told you about my family, so you know what grifters they are," I reminded her. And that was true. I was fairly open about my feelings about the Rollins family. I had made many a joke about it during my time spent with her and Brian. It was no secret that I was the black sheep of the family—well, me and Ronnie.

But there was obviously something holding back Reagan. I knew she had strong friendships with her girlfriends, and I

knew she was really close to her family. But there was something holding her back with me and with Wolfie, and I didn't quite understand it. She had everything going for her. I understood her thinking that she wanted one thing and then being completely surprised by another. I got that better than anybody she knew, but the troubled look on her face every time Wolfie or I showed any kind of affection toward her ate at me.

I could see that she was starting to shut down. Reagan was so far in her own head that at this point, she wasn't even willing to argue with me. I couldn't stand that. I'd seen her do this a couple of times in the past, when she got so upset about something that not even her argumentative instinct would pull her forth to fight it out.

She put Wolfie's lunch into the fridge, and it was then that I noticed that her hands were shaking slightly. I rushed closer to her, worried that she was hurt, but when she looked up into my eyes, it wasn't hurt I saw, but anger and determination. "Quit psychoanalyzing me, Adam. I made myself clear this morning," she said through gritted teeth.

Stepping closer to her, I pushed a strand of hair behind her ear, looking down into her eyes, which were glittering with anger and passion. "Did you, Reagan? Because I'm confused. You cried out my name and told me you wanted more one second, then the next, you tell me we can't talk about it. Well, I want to talk about it. I want to talk about us, no matter how inconvenient that might be for you."

She glared up at me and bit her lip at the same time before spitting out, “There is no us,” she said, shaking her head. “There could never be an ‘us,’ Adam,” she insisted, even as she moved closer to me, her warmth pulling me in.

I shook my head, not even daring to blink. There was no way I was letting her get off this easily. “And why is that, Reagan? Are you scared of me?” I asked her point-blank, my mouth hovering over hers.

I saw that flash of anger in her eyes and that quick press of the lips before she huffed out a laugh. “Why the hell would I be scared of you?”

“Because of the way I make you feel,” I said, my breath fanning over her lips. A surge of satisfaction shot through me when I saw the way her lips parted at our closeness.

“You are one arrogant son of a bitch,” she muttered.

I felt the corner of my mouth tilt up into a twisted smile as I asked her, “Yeah? And do you want this arrogant son of a bitch to kiss you or not?”

She shook her head and hissed out, “I hate you,” before throwing her arms around my neck and forcing my mouth down on hers. The kiss was quick and fevered, our mouths meeting in our now familiar dance of lust, anger, and passion.

We stayed in one another’s embrace for long moments, just tasting one another, until she finally pulled back and whispered, “We can’t do this.”

I nodded at her gravely and agreed, then said, “You’re right, we can’t do this...here. Come with me,” I told her, pulling back and snatching her hand, then leading her to my bedroom, even though I knew she remembered the way.

I closed the door softly behind us and pulled her to me, taking her mouth again and letting my hands roam down her back over her high and tight little ass. There was a hush over the whole apartment, exaggerating the sounds of our heavy breathing, but I took comfort in the fact that we were far enough away that we were unlikely to be heard, yet still close enough that we could bolt out of there in case Wolfie needed us.

Much like our time together that morning, there was a sense of urgency that drove us to quickly rip away one another’s clothing. That urgency led to little foreplay and heightened the unspoken knowledge that we just needed to be connected as quickly as possible.

When my mouth closed over one of her hard nipples, a small moan escaped her lips, and her head came up suddenly, her eyes looking startled.

I knew how loud Reagan could get, and I could tell she was worried about that, so I halted my movements to lift her up into my arms, her legs wrapping around my waist and carrying her further into the bedroom towards the bathroom.

The light in my bathroom was bright and unforgiving, but it let me see every part of her, and I was grateful for that. God, she was gorgeous, long and lean and strong.

I lifted her on the counter, letting my eyes drink in the beauty of her, my smile twisting my lips when she breathed out in a quiet, urgent voice, “Adam, I need you inside me, please, for the love of God, fuck me now.”

Our eyes met. I grinned at her in smug satisfaction. “You know, I have always appreciated your directness.”

“Yeah?” She leaned forward slightly on the counter, then reached down and grabbed my engorged manhood, positioning it at her opening. “Well, then, I hope you appreciate this directness,” she said as she guided the tip of me inside her. I let out a little growl, then leaned forward and captured her lips as I pushed the rest of the way in, smothering her mouth with my own.

“You’re going to have to be a good girl and stay quiet, Reagan,” I warned her softly as I moved back and forth slowly.

“I’m not going to be a good anything if you don’t start moving faster,” she said impatiently, bucking her hips upward. I let out a husky chuckle at her needy impatience. I fucking loved it.

“Patience, now, sweetness, you know I’ll get you there,” I promised her, running my lips down her neck as my hips started to pick up the pace.

“I know, but Adam?” The tone of her voice had me looking up into her eyes, slightly concerned. “I don’t know if I’m going to be able to...hold back completely. I think you’re going to need to put a hand over my mouth,” she told me, and

even though the words sounded slightly uncertain, I could see the fiery challenge in her eyes.

“Would you like that? Me holding my hand over your mouth as you scream into my palm as I make you come for me?” I asked her seductively as I moved my hand down, my thumb quickly locating her swollen clit.

She bit her lip at the contact, and a low, feral sound escaped her throat. I had to fight back my own chuckle of satisfaction. I loved how she was so responsive, always willing to play.

She nodded her head furiously. “Yes, dammit, that’s what I want. That’s what I need, that and your cock,” she told me with a ragged whisper, and it took everything in me not to come right there.

I had no way of knowing how she was going to act after this go round, but I would hang on to her telling me how badly she needed my dick, how badly she needed me inside her.

As requested, I placed my palm over her mouth firmly, my other hand still working her sensitive flesh. Her finger dug into my shoulders as I quickened my thrusts, her eyes never leaving mine the whole time.

Even though we couldn’t have been there long, the walls of her pussy were already squeezing around me, and I was grateful since I was so close to spilling my seed.

Her hot breath rushed over my hand as her hips bucked up harder, chasing after her orgasm. “Come on, that’s it. Come for me, come like a good girl,” I coaxed her quietly.

She tightened around my hardness, and I saw her eyes widen and her hips begin to shake as she came hard around me. I was right behind her, pistoning my hips hard against hers as I spilled myself into her tightness, reveling in the long, low moan that vibrated against my palm.

I slumped over her, spent and breathing hard, my face tucked in next to hers as we waited for our heart rates to slow down. Even as I softened inside her, I didn't want to release her.

I was already dreading the awkward conversation that was sure to follow, and I was at a loss for what it would take to make her see that there was clearly something here that needed to be explored. But to my surprise, she said this instead: "Don't get too comfortable, Mr. Insufferable. We're not done yet."

No, no, we were not.

I didn't know what time it was by the time we made it back to the bed where we collapsed, exhausted, in one another's arms. And I lost count of how many orgasms I'd had by then, but I was excited in a way that I had never felt before in my life, and not just because of physical pleasure or how not being able to make any noise intensified the situation.

Reagan and I kept our eyes on one another throughout our encounters, especially now, since we couldn't really emote, at least, not at the high volume like she was accustomed to. But

staring into her eyes as I came again and again, and as I felt her give herself over to me again and again, it had me even more sure about the conclusion I'd come to earlier in the day.

Especially when she fell asleep in my arms. Never had I welcomed such closeness, but somehow, it seemed like I'd been waiting for this woman. Somehow, it didn't seem like such an out-there idea that I had this beautiful woman sleeping through the night with me, cuddled up next to me and softly snoring as I watched her, amused and grateful.

All I wanted to do was get up the next morning and do this day all over again, the highs and lows, and that was not something I'd ever expected for myself.

It felt like I'd just closed my eyes when I heard the scream. A bloodcurdling, heart-chilling scream that would stay in my head for hours afterward.

“Mom! Mommy!”

I jolted into an upright position. “Wolfie?”

The screaming continued, and I was up and out of the bed, yanking on my pajama bottoms as Reagan came to, confused. “Adam?”

I ran to Wolfie's room, where he was sitting up in bed, looking wild-eyed, tears streaming down his cheeks. He took one look at me and wailed, “My mom...when is my mom coming back?”

I went to bed and took him into my arms and held him as he cried. Wolfie had managed not to have any big nightmares

since that first night he'd been here, and it broke my heart that he was having to go through this again, but I couldn't say I was too surprised. "It's okay, buddy, I'm here. And so is your mom. She's always with you. Remember that, okay?"

He cried into my shoulder. "But I want her right here with me, not up there. She needs to be with me...and so does my daddy. It's not fair!" he cried.

"I know. I know it's not fair. And I wish I could snap my fingers and have them here. You know I would if I could. But I can't. I can just be here for you, and I will always be here for you. No matter what, buddy, you got me, and I'm not going anywhere."

It took a while to calm Wolfie down. Eventually, he wore himself out and fell back asleep.

When I stepped out of his room, Reagan was sitting on the floor with one of my hockey jerseys on, covering her down to her knees. She looked up at me with her bedraggled hair, her eyes puffy from crying. I reached out a hand and helped her up. We looked at each other and wordlessly embraced, her sniffing into my neck, and then, I found myself soothing her, too.

I was able to lead her back to the bedroom, where we stood quietly. "I hate that he has to go through this."

I nodded wordlessly. She wasn't saying anything I hadn't thought. "Adam, did you really mean what you said? About sticking around for Wolfie?"

I nodded again. “Ronnie and her husband appointed me, and I’m still not sure why, but it’s me and Wolfie now—no take backs,” I said with a slight smile.

I could see her swallow hard as she sat down next to me on the edge of the bed. “Well,” she said, sucking in a long breath, “maybe it’s time to look into some counseling for Wolfie to help him process his feelings. Somebody that’s done this sort of thing before,” she suggested.

If this had been earlier in my life and someone had suggested that to me, I would’ve told them that I could handle it just fine on my own. But this was Wolfie we were talking about, and for the first time, I found that pride had no place in my decision making. I nodded in agreement with her. “I’ll start looking around for some reputable therapist, somebody that will make him comfortable.”

She nodded emphatically. “I can research some, too,” she said, looking into my eyes for a long second, and in that moment, I felt like we were in this together, truly together. But then, she ripped her gaze away and glanced over at the clock on my bedside table. It was 5:15 AM.

“I should go,” she said, moving from the bed, but I snatched her hands, stopping her.

“It’s still early, Reagan, you should stay.” I wondered if she understood that I meant those words for more than just that morning.

Her fingers fiddled with the hem of my hockey jersey. “I should really go before he wakes up again. He’s going through

a lot, and I don't want to confuse him more," she said gently, pulling her hand from mine and moving to gather up her clothes.

I didn't argue with her. Wolfie was going through enough without me having to explain what an adult sleepover was. He was much too young for that. So, I watched miserably as she got dressed, and then, I walked her to the door.

She smiled at me awkwardly as her hand rested on the doorknob. "I'll let you know what I find out about the therapist. Would you keep me filled in on how school goes for him today and how he's doing when he gets up?"

"Of course," I told her, and then, she started to turn, but I caught her chin with my fingers before she could make her exit. "Hey," I told her softly.

"What?"

I answered her with a soft kiss, lingering on those lips that still tasted like sex, comfort, and untold excitement. When I finally released her, I told her, "I'll call you later with the updates."

She just nodded her head and made her exit.

This caring for people thing isn't easy, I thought to myself as I went to my kitchen and started devising a plan for a special breakfast for Wolfie.

There were sure to be nightmares, tears, and long nights ahead. But there are also colorful family pictures drawn in crayons, joyful noises, fun and games, and the smell of fresh

pancakes met with a little boy's voice, uttering, "Pancakes, sweet!" as he made his way down the hallway.

I had felt more emotions in the span of twenty-four hours than I probably had my whole life put together, but I wouldn't change any of it. Now, if I could just convince Reagan to go all in with me.

Chapter Twelve

Reagan

My leg muscles were burning by the time I got to the office that morning. I had run extra hard after I left Adam's place, hoping the ramped-up speed would drown out my worry...or the sounds of Wolfie's screams.

I understood that what he was going through was just a natural part of the loss. But listening to him cry to his uncle made me want to move heaven and earth to make everything okay for him. It took everything in me not to go in there and comfort him myself, but I was terrified that my presence in the middle of the night would just confuse an already terribly difficult situation even more.

So, I stayed just outside the doorway, hoping that my support could somehow pour through the walls by some sort of magic osmosis.

I couldn't keep getting swept up by Adam's charm. At the very thought of those words, I had to laugh to myself. At no time would I have thought in the past that Adam was charming. To be perfectly truthful, it was a bit of a stretch

now, yet somehow, he seemed to so easily ensnare me in his web.

I liked his frankness, his unwillingness to blow sunshine up my skirt. But somewhere in the last week, he seemed to have developed the wrong idea about us...mainly that there was some sort of “us.”

I couldn't trust his feelings in this situation. Not with everything else going on. Everything was confusing at the moment. And there was no way I was about to go rushing in with this guy when he was bound to decide once the dust settled that he made a mistake in declaring a desire for a relationship. I mean, Adam Rollins in a relationship?

Although, after having spent so much time with him, I really didn't understand what his hang ups were. I knew his family life was...challenging. But the man was obviously more than capable of love and nurturing, that much was obvious just from watching him with Wolfie. Plus, I couldn't deny the care he took with me, even if I really wanted to.

Between all the fun that I'd been having with Wolfie and Adam, and the amazing sex I was having with Adam, anyone looking in from the outside would be thinking I was nuts to be questioning this so much. But I was trying to do the smart thing here and keep my mind on the person who mattered the most: Wolfie.

I didn't particularly enjoy the thought of Adam eventually tossing me to the side, but what worried me more was what it might do to Wolfie.

I knew what it was like to grow attached to somebody and then have them disappear seemingly overnight. While my father had barely even dated while I was growing up after the divorce, my mom went about it like it was her job.

I've had more stepfathers than I could count, and I learned the hard way after the first two to not get attached. I mean, it wasn't like I was ever as close to them as I was to my own father—nobody could compare to Julian Miles. But the first couple of guys, I thought were going to be a part of my life forever. They clearly loved my mom. They claimed to have loved me, and maybe they did, but my mom was searching for something, trying to fill some void. She would get bored, I'd blink, and those stepdads would be out of there.

The constant revolving door was exhausting and, frankly, a little embarrassing after a while. But I had the backup of my dad and my amazing grandmother to be my steady rocks throughout my childhood.

Wolfie had already lost his parents. That meant that whoever was in his life at this point needed to be beyond steady, and it appeared that Adam was ready to do that, but it was no time to be throwing a relationship into the mix, especially between two people who were historically bad at relationships.

I abhorred the idea of Wolfie getting hurt because of something I was involved with. To be honest, I couldn't stand the idea of him getting hurt, period.

But there was something about the way Adam had looked at me that terrified me, and I wasn't sure any relationship could sustain that kind of intensity.

For me, the casualty would be my heart, but what about Wolfie? The moment I'd seen that drawing he made at school today, alarm bells went off in my head. I loved being close to Wolfie, but I didn't want to risk hurting him. I didn't want him to feel one more ounce of pain than he already had to.

Trying to get my mind off Adam was proving more and more difficult. I stopped at my office later that morning with a grim determination. I would look doggedly for the perfect therapist for Wolfie. I knew that wouldn't necessarily make the pain go away, but if it could help him process more easily, I would do whatever was necessary, even if that meant taking him to the Pokémon café every day of the week.

I would do anything for that kid, I realized.

Shit, Reagan, you're already in way too deep.

I was getting set up in my office when Cheri popped her head in the door. "Good morning, Cheri, I am so glad to see you. Listen, I need some advice. I really think Wolfie could benefit from a good therapist. Would you or any of your mom friends happen to know any around here who are good at making kids feel comfortable?"

"I can certainly ask around. But Reagan, there's something I needed to tell you—"

“I just want to make sure that he has all the resources at his fingertips. I mean, the poor kid is going through so much, and now, he’s having all these awful nightmares. I don’t want him to be scared to go to sleep, for God’s sake,” I babbled on, not noticing at first the look of discomfort on Cheri’s face, but eventually, she broke in.

“Reagan, I’m guessing you haven’t looked at your messages yet,” she said, eyeing warily.

“No, I really want to get on this therapist thing for Wolfie first. What’s going on? Something urgent?” I asked.

She let out a sigh. “There is a relative who has come forth and expressed interest in taking custody of Wolfie.”

I didn’t know why I was surprised. I guess the three of us had just been in our bubble for the last several days. It was a bit jarring to hear about an outsider. “Oh, I see. Well, as it happens, Dr. Rollins has made it clear to me that he has changed his mind on the issue. He intends to be the sole caregiver for Wolfie moving forward.”

“That’s wonderful,” Cherie said with a slight smile. “But I think you want to look at that message, Reagan. This woman is very determined to get Wolfie.”

I felt my brow furrow as I looked down through my messages on my desk.

“Get Wolfie? It’s not like he’s a family heirloom. This is a little boy we’re talking about,” I huffed as I located the

message Cheri was talking about and skimmed through it, feeling a chill go down my spine as I read the words.

Cheri gave me a quick synopsis, filling me in on what her shorthand didn't cover. "She said that she's upset that she was not contacted sooner and that she is the right caregiver for Wolfie...and his estate. She also informed me that she's been doing a little snooping around on Dr. Rollins and that she thinks he's the absolute worst candidate to be a caregiver, that she will make this known in her bid to get custody of Wolfie." Cheri moved further into the office and sat down in the chair across from my desk. "Reagan, she was already talking to me about getting child protective services involved if she doesn't get her way. I think we might have a real fight on our hands."

Dread wove its way through me, and I felt the urge to kick the wall next to me. It was bad enough that we had to go through all this upheaval and change, and now, we had some other random person throwing their hand into the mix.

How the hell was I going to tell Adam about this? How the hell was I going to assure him that everything would be just fine when I couldn't shake the sense of dread worming its way through me?

I straightened my posture and sucked in a deep breath through my nose before leveling Cheri with a determined look. "Well, then, we will just have to make Miss... Baker," I said, checking my notes for the woman's name, "understand that there is nothing for her to worry about. Adam is an exceptional guardian for Wolfie, and he is the appointed guardian by his

parents. So, there's really no argument here. We will just have to straighten out the misunderstanding."

Cheri nodded at me with a small smile, looking doubtful. "Reagan? Do you think she'll back off easily?"

I shook my head. "I don't know," I admitted. "There's no need for us to get worked up now. She may just be coming in hot, but maybe we can calm her down and make her see the situation for what it is. If she truly wants what's best for Wolfie, then we won't have a problem. But if you're right, and we do have a fight on our hands like you say, then they have messed with the wrong uncle and honorary aunt."

By the time I got off the phone with the lawyer for Miss Baker, I had chewed every nail, and I was pretty sure I cracked one of my back molars with as hard as I was grinding my teeth.

The nerve of that woman.

I had some strong suspicions about Miss Baker, who'd heard about Wolfie's inheritance and got greedy because there was really no other reason for her to take such an interest.

She had been an aunt on Ronnie's mother's side, her non-Rollins side, who had only seen Ronnie a few times in her life but claimed to know the true intentions of Veronica Townshend's heart, especially when it came to her child.

The woman claimed that Adam was nothing but trouble and that she would set about to prove it. What was more, she went into extensive detail about how Adam was not to be a trusted conservator of Wolfie's estate. In fact, the bulk of the conversation centered around Wolfie's estate. Every time I tried to steer it back to Wolfie's well-being, Miss Baker and her lawyer managed to drag it back to his inheritance, how it would be dealt with, and how some doctor that worked in the grungy part of Brooklyn could hardly be considered an appropriate choice for such a role.

Not only did I not like what the lawyer was spitting out law-wise, but I also didn't like those people, period. Even though it probably wasn't so, I couldn't help but think more than once that I could practically hear the heavy breathing that came over the line every time Wolfie's healthy inheritance came up.

Threats of child protective services were thrown about, and I assured them with authority that they could go down that road if they thought it necessary because my client would be more than ready, but more than that, I implored them to think about the hardship they would be putting Wolfie through unnecessarily.

It was not met with any kind of sympathy, which not only hurt my heart, but it made me want to kick a hole through a wall. I nearly did just that when I hung up on them.

"Well, none of that sounded good," Cheri commented.

"Nope," I said with a frustrated sigh. "We need to find out everything we can about this woman—I'm not sitting on my

ass on this one. If she thinks she's going to take that little boy out of a home that he has grown to feel safe and cared for in, she's got another thing coming."

Cheri grinned and clapped her hands together. "All right, I love it when you turn into a legal shark. There's blood in the water, look out, here you come," she encouraged, laughing.

I rolled my eyes at her with a smile. "I just don't know how I'm going to tell Adam. I don't want him to be blindsided, but I am not looking forward to it."

"I don't blame you. I don't know if this is a conversation you want to have over the phone, especially as close as you seem to be with the formidable Dr. Rollins lately," she said with a lopsided grin.

I looked at her, alarmed. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Mm-hmm, play it down all you want, Reagan. But I've known you for a while. Tell me, how many orgasms has the good doctor prescribed you lately?" she teased with a smile.

"Cheri," I hissed, hoping she wouldn't press for more. "I don't kiss and tell," I told her trying to make light of it.

"Girl, who said anything about kissing?" She asked.

I laughed, grateful for the moment of levity.

I sobered as I remembered the task at hand. "I guess I should go rip off this band-aid and tell him what's going on," I said and sighed.

“Just assure him that he’s in good hands because he is— and not just the hands you’ve been giving him when y’all have knocked boots,” she said with a wink.

I rolled my eyes at her as I gathered up my stuff. If this had been any other client, I would be having this conversation over the phone, but I couldn’t drop this metaphorical bomb on Adam like that. I’d listened just hours before as this man comforted a crying Wolfie. I’d cried tears myself at knowing that not only was Wolfie heartbroken, but so was Adam.

So, as much as it pained me, I would have to face Adam this morning and let him know about Miss Baker. “Wish me luck,” I said to Cheri as I headed towards my door.

“Reagan, haven’t you figured it out? He’s nuts about you. You don’t need luck.”

I laughed off her words, but they hung over me as I rode down to Brooklyn towards Adam’s office. Adam had made it clear that he was having stronger emotions about us being together. I had been chalking this up to everything being turned upside down in his life. I thought maybe he was clinging to me as a form of strange comfort because he was familiar with me. He knew what to expect from me.

But what if Cheri was right? What was more, what if I really did feel the same way? That couldn’t be possible. I’d never felt that way about anybody before—and it scared the shit out of me.

“Miss Miles, it’s so nice to see you again.” Adam’s secretary smiled at me as soon as I came through the door.

“Likewise. Is Dr. Rollins available to talk really quick?”

She shook her head. “Not right at this moment. Can I take a message?”

I smiled politely. “Actually, it’s really urgent. Would it be possible to squeeze in there as soon as he’s done with his patient? I promise I’ll be quick, and I don’t want to get in the way of his other patients.”

She looked concerned but kept her composure. “Of course. If you just want to take a seat, I’ll go let him know that you’re here.”

I managed to find an empty seat in the small, crowded waiting room. As crowded as it was, everybody there seemed to be patient enough. I already knew that most of Adam’s patients were elderly, but it became obvious as I looked around the waiting room.

I sat down next to a small, older man, who smiled at me pleasantly. “You are a little young to be one of Dr. Rollins’s patients,” he commented.

“Oh, I’m not a patient—I’m just a...friend,” I corrected him.

The man wagged his eyebrows at me and then winked, and I couldn’t help the furious flush that overtook my face. “No, nothing like that. Actually, I’m—” I cut myself off, not sure

what to say. The man wasn't completely wrong considering I'd spent the night before in Adam's arms.

"I'm a lawyer for...close constituents of Dr. Rollins," I explained lamely. At least I knew without a doubt that was true.

"Oh, are you the one helping with Wolfie?"

"You know about Wolfie?"

"Oh, sure. I had to be here yesterday to get a refill on my meds. He's real proud of that boy. I'm happy for him. I know he said he was never big on the idea of kids before, but I always had a feeling deep down that he would make an excellent father."

"Yeah, that seems to be the case. Although, if I'm honest, it surprised me. How did you know?" I asked him, curious.

"Well, the way he takes care of people, of course. He could have had one of those big, fancy medical complexes, but he stays here and stays humble. He takes care of all of his patients. When my late wife, Edna, was going through chemo, we were buried in medical debt. Then, one day, we went to the oncology center, and they said that our whole bill had been taken care of. Well, I did some investigating, and it was Dr. Rollins. He never said a word about it, either. Come to find out, he's done that for several of his patients. I told him thank you, and he just shrugged me off. You know that sort of stuff makes him uncomfortable, but he's a good man."

I felt warmth suffuse through me at this bit of information.
“Yes, yes, he is.”

“Miss Miles?” Adam’s secretary called. I looked at her, and she waved me over. “He can see you now.”

“Thank you,” I said to her as I hurried down the hall, dreading what I was about to do.

Here was this truly good man, who was already in love with this little boy, as Wolfie was with him...and I was going to have to tell him that all of that was going to be thrown up into the air, at least for a little while.

My strides were determined as I walked to Adam’s office. Miss Baker had no idea what kind of hornets’ nest she had just kicked.

Chapter Thirteen

Adam

I felt my phone buzz inside my pocket as I listened to my current patient explain to me, once again, how the pains shooting through her hip bones were caused by the satellite dish on her neighbor's roof. I'd heard this story multiple times before. At this point, I just nodded and smiled, then proceeded to give her advice on how to take care of her hip pains...even though she clearly did not want to do that.

I dared to glance at my phone. It was a text message from my secretary. Gone were the days of pagers for quick notes. Now, she texted me whenever something was up. Normally, I would just ignore it, as most things could wait, but I figured it was something about Wolfie.

Nancy: Guess who has five feet, ten inches of beautiful woman come to visit him?

I really should talk to her about appropriate messages, but at that moment, I didn't really care all that much. My heart launched into my throat like I was a teenage boy all over again.

Reagan was here.

I texted back furiously:

Me: I'll be through shortly, as soon as you see this patient leave, send her back.

I managed to wrap up with the patient and gave her instructions on how to take her medication and what to do to ease the pain in her hip. I might have felt bad for rushing her out the door if it wasn't for the fact that we had discussed the same issue time and time again. As the patient left, I smoothed a hand over my hair, suddenly wondering if I looked okay. It had been a long night. I knew they were circles under my eyes, but I still wanted to look like the man Reagan couldn't keep her hands off of.

She appeared in my doorway, and it took every muscle in my body to fight back the stupid grin threatening to overtake my face.

Damn, Rollins, when you fall, you fall hard.

How could I not, though?

"You just couldn't stay away, huh?" I teased her. She gave me a slight smile and stepped into the office and closed the door behind her.

"You might say that," she said. Alarm bells went off in my head that she was so quickly giving into the flirtation. It was not like her. Where was her scathing retort? Where was her biting response? Something was up.

“You know, it might take me just a little bit longer to get going after last night, but give me a few minutes, and I’ll be ready for ya,” I told her with a smile, hoping against hope that whatever it was she came to talk to me about was something simple, even though something in me knew deep down that it wasn’t.

That worry I had seen in her eyes before was even worse now, and it was exacerbated by the fact that she kept biting her lip. Reagan Miles did not get nervous. Why the fuck was she so nervous? “Why are you looking like that?” I asked her.

“Like what?”

“Like you’re about to deliver really bad news. That’s usually my job.”

“It’s not bad news, per se. It’s just a little bit of a hiccup,” she assured me.

“Okay, well then, spit it out, what’s this hiccup?” I asked, moving closer to her. I couldn’t help but notice that she didn’t move back.

She stood her ground and looked into my eyes when she said, “Another relative has stepped forward for Wolfie.”

I didn’t know why that felt like such a punch to the gut. It was the very thing I had asked for not that long ago. Yet, somehow, it felt like a violation.

I shook my head. “Okay...okay,” I sputtered out, still processing what I’d just heard. “Well, then, just tell them that I changed my mind—that it was just the shock that made me ask

for that. They've got to understand that. But Wolfie—he's happy, I'm happy, and we're making this work."

I saw her swallow hard before she continued, "I made that clear, but this woman is not taking no easily."

I shook my head in disbelief. "Who is this person? Where were they when Ronnie was still alive?"

Reagan laid it out for me. "Her name is Linda Baker. She is one of Veronica's aunts on her mother's side. She admits that she didn't see her all that often, but she claims it was because of the Rollins family's interference. She says that otherwise, she would've been close to her niece."

"Bullshit," I spat out. "The Rollins don't mess with stuff like that. If it doesn't concern day drinking, stocks, or the country club, they don't give a shit. They don't trouble themselves with meddling into other people's family lives, obviously, since none of them even reached out to me since Ronnie has passed and Wolfie has been with me."

Reagan nodded. "I suspected that from what she had said in the past. But she's got a pretty good story cooked up about how she was kept away from her niece and that she would've been there for if she'd been able to. She said she wants to make it up to her with her child."

I collapsed into my office chair and rubbed a frustrated hand over my face. It felt like somebody had just dumped a bucket of ice water all over me. "Well, you're a smart cookie, do you think she's telling the truth?"

Reagan shook her head and then took the seat across from me. “I had a long conversation with her and her lawyer this morning. When she was done talking about how she’s been kept away from Veronica, she spent most of her time talking about Wolfie’s estate and the monthly allowance that’s given to his guardian to see to his needs.”

“His estate? He’s a little boy, who gives a crap about his estate? That’s for him when he’s an adult. And that allowance they give, I haven’t even touched that. I was just going to throw it into a bank account for him to do what he wanted with when he was of age.”

“I remembered you saying that, and that’s something that I will bring up when we meet with the judge,” she assured me.

I launched forward in my seat. “We’re going to have to meet with a judge? This is ridiculous, Reagan.”

“I know,” she said. “But as long as Miss Baker pursues custody, we’re going to have to iron it out with the judge. There’s also a likely possibility that child protective services will be called in to evaluate who will be a better match for Wolfie,” she explained.

“Child protective services? Is this lady going to try to prove that I’m, like, an unfit parent or something?”

“That looks to be her strategy so far,” Reagan admitted. “But Adam, I don’t want you stressing over this. For one thing, she hardly has a leg to stand on. From what I can tell, she has only been around Veronica a handful of times, and they were not close at all. At this point, it doesn’t really matter

whether that was due to family interference or not. What matters is that Veronica and her husband chose you to be Wolfgang's guardian, and that was for a reason. We just have to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that they were in the right mindset to choose you."

I shook my head. "I know I said to look for somebody... God, if I could go back and punch past Adam in the face for saying that," I muttered.

Reagan leaned forward and placed her hand gently on my knee. "Don't do that to yourself. It was and still is a crazy situation. You were in shock. But the important thing is that Wolfie gets what he needs. Now, we know without a shadow of a doubt that he needs to be with you. So, we're just going to show the court that he's thriving where he's at and that it would just do more harm to take him from a place that he's gotten comfortable with. I realize this is uncomfortable and inconvenient, but I want you to know I'm throwing everything I got at this. It's not just me working on this case now. I pulled in my senior law counsel, and they have dealt with cases much more bizarre than this. They'll be able to give some good insight on everything that we need to prepare for."

The warmth of her touch on my knee comforted me almost immediately. But not even Reagan would be able to comfort me enough to calm the tornado of emotions swirling inside me. I felt a lump forming in my throat. "This is my fault. This is my fault for wishing for somebody else to take care of him. I brought this on us."

Reagan looked at me with watery eyes, and then, to my surprise, she got up from her chair. She came over and sat on my lap and wrapped her arms around my neck, looking down into my face meaningfully. “You’ve got to quit doing that. It’s nobody’s fault. It’s just a snag, admittedly an ugly one, but one that we will get through. But listen, you’re going to have to find a way to put a good face on this before you see Wolfie. He’s already having a hard enough time, and if he senses that you’re this stressed out...” she trailed off.

I nodded my head vigorously. “Of course, of course. That poor kid doesn’t need to know about this crap. I’ll get my game face on for him,” I promised, thinking in my head how on earth I was going to keep my shit together when I saw him next. It was only after a couple of minutes that I realized that somewhere in our discussion, I’d put my head on Reagan’s chest. She stroked her fingers through my hair. I sucked in a deep breath, inhaling the scent of her sweet perfume and letting that comforting smell work its wonders.

“It’s going to be okay Adam,” she said softly in my ear, and I wanted to believe her. I dared to tighten my arms around her, bringing her closer and lifting my head, looking into those beautiful, bright eyes of hers.

“Thank you for coming all the way down here to tell me. I think I would’ve lost my mind if I heard that over the phone,” I admitted.

She gave me a small smile. “I figured. Plus, I wanted to make sure you were in a good frame of mind. I know you’ve

got it in you to play ball, Adam, and that's what we're going to have to do in this case. Just remember that we're all on team Wolfie."

I felt my lips stretching into a grin at her sports euphemisms.

God, how had it taken me so long to see that this woman was everything I never knew I needed?

She looked into my eyes for a long moment, and once again, there was that confusion, but there was also a heat...that undeniable heat that had been instrumental in getting us into trouble lately. She looked at me thoughtfully, and then, she seemed to make a decision because I saw her expression physically soften. She leaned down and pressed her plush mouth against mine. There was so much in that kiss: comfort, reassurance...at least, that's how it started out. But like it always was with us, it quickly turned to more, and when her tongue gently probed at the seam of my lips, I opened gratefully to her, needing the taste of her to serve as a balm for this new fear.

I moaned into her mouth, and I could've kicked myself for it later because it was that noise that seemed to remind her of exactly where we were.

She jerked back and looked at me, startled as if she hadn't just been sitting on my lap making out with me. She bit her lip hard, then jerked her gaze away, sliding from my lap and straightening her clothes. She cleared her throat and said, "I should really get back to work. I gave Cheri a task to start

investigating Miss Baker before I left, so I should go see what she's found so far and see what I can dig up, too."

"Dig up?" I asked with my eyebrows raised.

"I don't like the sound of this woman. She focused entirely too much on Wolfie's money. As far as I'm concerned, that gives me license to play hardball, and it can serve as a warning to anybody else who tries to come after him just because they see how much money he has," she said, her voice hardening.

I grinned at her. "I like this side of you. It's sexy as hell."

She laughed and looked faintly dismayed, smoothing a shaking hand down her front as she backed towards the door. "I'll call you with updates. You call me with updates about Wolfie, and don't forget to ask that colleague of yours about a therapist for him," she reminded me.

"On it, captain," I said to her with another mock salute.

She smiled. "I might just get used to being addressed that way," she said as she walked out the door.

Standing in my doorway, I watched that tight ass sashay down my hallway. There were such confusing emotions going on inside of me: fear, worry, but also a determination to face down this metaphorical monster—and a whole hell of a lot of gratitude that I was not facing it down alone. It would appear I had Reagan by my side. I had no clue if she was softening on her stance towards "us," but I knew down in my soul that there was nothing that would keep her from fighting for Wolfie and

me as a duo. I almost had to feel sorry for this Miss Baker person...almost.

Chapter Fourteen

Reagan

I had important things to be focusing on, namely, making sure that Wolfie could stay in the home that he belonged in. I could not afford to keep running over in my head again and again the soft way Adam had been looking at me and how I had unthinkingly plopped myself into his lap. I mean, really, what the hell had that been about? I didn't even realize I was doing anything until, all of a sudden, I was in his lap, my arms around his neck, just needing to feel him. To comfort him in any way I could think of.

My top priority is Wolfie, I reminded myself as I strode back into my office.

Cheri rushed to catch up with me with an excited smile on her face. "I have great news, Reagan—" she started.

"That the Baker woman decided to drop all the bullshit?"

Cheri's smile faltered. "Not exactly. But I have been informed by her lawyer that Ms. Baker isn't even going to be able to come to court for the next several weeks."

That stopped me. “Several weeks? Why?”

Cheri gave me a triumphant smile. “Apparently, she’s in the Maldives and just cannot get out of this trip, at least according to her lawyer.”

“Are you kidding me? She had the nerve to call Adam an unfit parent when she didn’t even know him, but she can’t be bothered to come back early from her vacation. I guess she’s not that worried about Wolfie,” I ranted.

“That’s the point, Reagan. I know this means it’s going to draw it out a little bit longer, but it only makes our case that much stronger, don’t you think?”

I sighed. “I know, I know, we can definitely use the advantage. I’m still just so pissed that she’s trying these games. I know I’m the one who put the inquiry out there, but I wasn’t expecting some money-hungry sea witch to pop up in the mix. I mean, hasn’t Wolfie been through enough?”

Cheri put her hand on my forearm in a comforting gesture and made me stop and look at her. “Hey, stop, look at me and breathe. Remember who you are and what you’re capable of, Reagan. And correct me if I’m wrong, but I get the distinct impression the doctor is quite the formidable opponent himself.”

I nodded. “I know, I know it should be an open and shut case, but you and I have both seen things like this go sideways before. We just need to make sure that we don’t take any chances or leave any stone left unturned.”

She nodded. “That’s what you have me for. I’m not finished digging on this woman, and by the time I’m done, Adam will look like a veritable mother goose. Plus, I almost forgot, Mr. Tate wants to call a meeting with you and Adam to go over a game plan for how we want to approach this.”

My boss was a very busy man, and typically, he would’ve told me to deal with my own caseload, but when I walked into my boss’s office that morning, it must have been obvious how invested I was in this case. Mr. Tate agreed to look over the particulars of the case while I went to talk to Adam, and I was grateful for his help.

I pulled up my digital calendar and saw that Mr. Tate had blocked out 1:30 for a chat with a note to make sure that Dr. Rollins was present.

“Do you want me to call Dr. Rollins to set up that meeting, Reagan?” Cheri asked.

I was about to tell her no, I would take care of it, but then thought better of it. Seeing as how I seemed to have such a difficult time controlling myself with him, maybe I needed to actually follow through with my plan of backing off. “I would appreciate that very much, Cheri, thank you.”

I tried to ignore the uptick in my heartbeat at the thought of seeing Adam again. *I am not a teenage girl, and these are very adult proceedings*, I reminded myself.

“Keep your eye on the prize, Miles.”

I felt ridiculous trying to play cool when Adam appeared in the boardroom.

“Dr. Rollins, thank you for taking time out of your day,” Mr. Tate said, gesturing for him to take a seat.

“I’ll do whatever I need to do for Wolfie.”

“I’m glad to hear that. That sincerity will take you a long way in this case. While I am confident that Miss Baker will fold before we can even get to trial, but I understand how important this is to you and how important it is to our own Ms. Miles here. We are family here, so we take care of our own. Since you and Ms. Miles are so...friendly, you’re a part of our family, too. Now, we need to talk details about making sure that your home is ready for a child protective services visitation and what they will be looking for.” Mr. Tate proceeded to list a number of things, and my heart ached for Adam and how overwhelmed he looked.

“I’ll make sure that you have a list of all these things, Adam,” I told him softly, trying to reassure him.

“Oh, of course,” Mr. Tate chimed in. “Now, onto some of the more delicate matters. You are a single male taking care of a child. And while I know that you are more than capable, that is perhaps the only thing that might sway the court’s opinion.”

Adams shook his head. “But what about what I do for a living? I mean, I’ve never been to jail, I pay all my bills on time, I’m not Mother Teresa, but I’m not a bad person.”

“Nobody here thinks you’re a bad person, Dr. Rollins. Remember, we’re on your side. We’re just giving you the logistics of what they sometimes look at in these situations. And I think it’s only fair to warn you that they tend to favor couples, or any situation really, where there’s a female presence.”

“So, what are you saying? I’d have a better shot if I was married?” Adam asked.

“Or engaged,” Mr. Tate confirmed. “But since we don’t have that, we’re going to play to our strengths,” Mr. Tate went on, and even though Adams was nodding his head in all the right places, I could see the wheels spinning in his head.

Mr. Tate and I went over all the bullet points for things that could be done to help tighten the case. I also shared with them that I would continue to look into Miss Baker. “If you don’t have any questions, Dr. Rollins, I have a client I need to meet with, but as always, if you have any concerns or think of any questions later, feel free to reach out,” Mr. Tate said, shaking Adam’s hand before leaving.

Now that Adam and I were alone, I turned to him. “It’s going to be okay, Adam. Don’t let this overwhelm you—remember, we’re on the right side of this.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know that,” he said, but I could tell he was still worried. I started to reassure him again, but he looked up at me sharply, as if suddenly remembering where he was, and said quietly, “I should really get back to the office,” before rising from his chair.

“Of course,” I murmured, fighting the urge to say something else that would keep him there.

Miserably, I watched him go and then gathered up my folders and headed back to my office. I had only been at my desk for a few minutes when I heard a firm knock at my door. “Come in,” I answered.

The door opened, and it was Adam looking determined as he stepped inside and shut the door behind him. “Listen, I know this is insane to even think. Oh, hell, what am I saying? This whole situation has been fucking insane, so I don’t know why I should stop now,” he rambled.

“Adam? You’re starting to worry me. Just say what you want to say.”

“That thing that Mr. Tate was saying about it looking better if I was in a stable relationship—somebody who could be a mother figure to Wolfie. I just—I mean, come on, Reagan, we both know that the kid loves you, and you’re around all the time. Plus, you have a soothing presence over him. And come on, I am a doctor, you’re a lawyer, that’s got a look really good to those CPS workers, right?”

“Adam? Are you really suggesting that we pretend we’re, what? Married? It’ll look fishy, don’t you think?”

“Not married, you heard Mr. Tate. We could say that we’re engaged, we’ve just been wanting to keep it quiet so as not to overwhelm Wolfie. That’s fair, right?” He was now pacing the small expanse of floor in front of my desk, running a nervous hand back and forth over his head. “Reagan, I know this is a

big ask, but I meant what I said back there when I said that I would do anything to make sure he's okay, that he's in the right spot, and despite everything, I truly believe that his rightful place is with me.”

“Adam, I get it, you're freaked out, and I don't blame you. But what you're suggesting is risky as hell. I mean, we barely tolerate each other, and now, we're supposed to act like a soon-to-be-married couple. Don't you think they're going to see right through that?”

He laughed then. “Are you serious? Do you really think that we can't pull off looking like a couple? You really are delusional, you know that?”

I struggled to stutter out a response, but he was quick to continue. “Come on, Reagan, you and I are constantly touching each other every chance we get, and I know...I know,” he said, stepping towards me, “that we're just playing this game like we don't know what's going on. If you want to keep playing that game behind the scenes, that's fine. But why don't we use this...thing,” he gestured between us, “to our advantage...to Wolfie's advantage.”

I sat there with my mouth open. Everything in me wanted to argue with him, and yet, he wasn't really wrong. Not to mention the fact that I would do whatever I could to help in the situation. If this act could truly put Adam and Wolfie in a better position to make sure the right thing happened, how could I really say no?

I snapped my mouth shut and looked at him for a long moment before I finally said reluctantly, “Okay.”

“Okay? Really?”

I nodded. “Okay, but we need to establish some ground rules, some boundaries. Just because we’re going to be acting like a couple doesn’t mean that we are. At the end of the day, we go to our own corners, and we’re still two single people, got it?”

He nodded furiously, so much so that it looked like his entire body was shaking. “I owe you my life for this one.”

I felt an eyebrow raise. “Yes, yes, you do.”

Fidgeting nervously, he tried to suppress the smile playing at the corners of his lips. “I feel a lot better, and I want to make sure that the deck is stacked against this lady. Reagan, I am so grateful,” he said, and in a fit of impulse, he moved forward, snatched me to him, and laid his mouth across mine in a long, appreciative kiss. When he finally broke away from my mouth, I was dazed and breathless.

I stepped back, straightening my suit jacket. “That’s the sort of thing I am talking about,” I said, pointing a finger at them.

“Right, right, sorry about that. As a matter of fact, I better go before I do something else, so...I’ll see you later?” he asked, a tinge of hope in his voice.

I nodded. “Later.”

I sat back down at my desk, wondering what the hell I had just gotten myself into, but not sixty seconds later, Adam was

back through the door, shutting it behind him.

“I’m sorry, Reagan, I just...I forgot something,” he said, quickly coming around behind my desk and pulling me from the chair.

“Adam, what are you—” I was cut off by his mouth on mine once again. He held me tightly against him, and once again, I was helpless to resist the heat of him.

His tongue stroked against mine, and the taste of him unraveled the tightly wound knot of self-control I’d been trying to form since the last time we’d been together. When we finally broke the kiss, he looked at me slightly dazed and confused. “I’m sorry, I just couldn’t help—”

“Oh, just shut up and kiss me,” I told him, yanking his mouth back down to mine. It wasn’t long before his fingers were unbuttoning my suit jacket and then my blouse. I pushed him away. He looked slightly confused but quickly understood when I went to lock the door.

“Are we about fuck on your desk?” he asked with brightness in those brown eyes. “Because I have been having this fantasy about you for a long time,” he confessed, gathering me up in his arms.

I didn’t answer him at first, at least not with words. Instead, I grabbed the hem of my tight skirt and yanked it up over my hips, then turned around and bent over my desk, looking over my shoulder at him coyly.

He bit his lip as he took in what I was offering.

So what if it was a little whiplash? So what if I was mixing signals? At this point, I didn't care—my body just needed him.

He moved toward me with an inferno in his eyes, his fingers reaching for the waistband of my panties.

“All about making dreams come true again?” he asked with a husky chuckle. And then, his fingers were inside me, and any response I'd been about to say died on my lips with a sharp gasp.

I bit back a moan and told him in a ragged whisper, “Adam, I need you now, don't toy with me.”

His voice was in my ear, his breath hot on my skin as he said, “I thought I was the one who was supposed to give orders in this situation? Now, be a good girl and spread your legs for me.” I could hear him unfastening his pants, the hiss of the zipper going down, and then, I felt the tip of his cock was against my opening. I swear I almost orgasmed right there.

“So wet for me,” he said as he teased my opening. I bucked my hips back, rubbing myself against him, desperate to feel him inside me. I was sure he was going to continue to toy with me, but in one fell swoop, he shoved inside, filling me until it almost hurt. Letting out a low moan and burying my face into my arm, I gloried in the sensation, trying to muffle any sound before it escaped my mouth.

“Gotta be careful, don't want the whole office to know how hard you come for me,” he said, working himself deeper inside me.

With my hips pressed against my desk, I didn't have a lot of space for movements, but I didn't care. Adam didn't seem to, either, as he drilled inside me. Our coupling was quick, dirty, and hot, and I loved every second of it. I loved the way he whispered in my ear, ordering me to come for him, and I loved the way he bit into my shoulder when he came hard, quaking against me as his release shot through me. I wanted so badly to scream out, but I managed to bite my lip hard enough to abstain from the noise.

As we fixed our clothes, he looked at me hungrily as if we hadn't just had rough sex—as if he was only just beginning. I laughed and said, “Boundaries, right?” With that, he cupped my jaw and gave me a rough kiss before releasing me and heading towards the door, giving me one small, satisfied smile over his shoulder before he walked out.

“That arrogant son a bitch,” I cursed quietly, but I could feel myself smiling as I did so.

You're in for it now, Reagan.

Chapter Fifteen

Adam

Despite the risk of losing Wolfie, my steps were lighter for the rest of the day. We had a plan in place, and I still had the taste of Reagan on my lips, so I was flying high by the time I picked Wolfie up from school.

But the high would come crashing down when I noticed a change in his attitude. Usually, he bounded out of school, excited to tell me about everything that happened. But at the end of the day, he was quiet, withdrawn. I wondered if the nightmares were getting to him during the day now.

After Reagan had left my office, I had managed to track down a sought-after child therapist who'd made space for Wolfie as a professional courtesy to me. He now had an appointment the following week, and I was hoping that this therapist could help settle some of his anxieties.

As he drove home, I explained to him that I would be taking him to a friend the following week to talk about things—how he was feeling, if he was liking New York.

“But how come I can’t just talk to you about those things?” he asked.

“You can always talk to me about things, Wolfie—don’t ever think you can’t. But this is a special kind of friend. You know how I went to school to be a doctor to help people with their boo-boos and things that make them sick?”

“Yeah,” he responded.

“Well, this friend of mine went to school to help people out with things that are bothering them, like things that make them sad or confused or scared. A lot of times, people will talk to my friend about dreams they have or nightmares.”

I glanced over at Wolfie. He looked at me with big eyes. “Am I in trouble?”

“What? No, no, Wolfie, it’s nothing like that. You’re not in trouble, and you haven’t done anything wrong. I just really care about you, and I want to make sure that you feel good about things going on right now. And sometimes, it’s nice to talk to somebody who’s not your family, even though you can always talk to me about whatever. You know that, right?”

He nodded. There was a long silence as we made our way home, and Wolfie was still quiet as we headed up the stairs to the apartment. But in the middle of dinner, he swallowed hard and asked me, “Do people ever come back after they die?”

I stopped for a moment, trying to think of what the right thing would be to say, but ultimately, all I could do was tell him the truth, “No, I’m sorry, they don’t.”

I saw his eyes welling up with tears, but he just nodded and said quietly, “That’s what I was afraid of.”

I didn’t say anything. I didn’t know what to say, and I was terrified that I was royally fucking this up, but then, he looked at me again and asked with bright eyes, “Uncle Adam? You’re not gonna leave me, are you?”

I shook my head. “No, I’m not leaving you,” I reassured him before leaning over and squeezing his shoulder, “You’re stuck with me, kid.”

A quick laugh escaped him, but then, his expression sobered, and he said quietly, “I miss my parents.”

“I know you do, buddy, and it’s okay to miss them. I miss them, too.”

“Is it bad when I’m happy, even if they’re not here?” he asked solemnly.

“No. In fact, they want you to be happy. You know they’d be here if they could, but since they can’t, they want you to be happy, buddy. *I* want you to be happy. It’s okay to be sad, it’s okay to feel a lot of things, but you don’t need to feel guilty about that.”

He nodded, and after a beat, said, “I’m glad I’m stuck with you, Uncle Adam.”

I fought back tears, but one slipped free. “I’m glad you’re stuck with me, too.”

We spent the rest of the night flipping between games, but it made my heart swell when he expressed interest in the hockey game. I gave him the ins and outs of how the game worked, and he asked when I would teach him. “Soon. In fact, if you want to go to one of the rinks Friday night after school, we can do that—maybe go grab some pizza before. Just don’t tell Aunt Reagan.” I teased him.

“Can she come with us?” he asked hopefully.

“Yeah.” I smiled at the thought of it. “That would be fun. How about I ask her? I don’t know what her schedule is like, but maybe she’ll come,” I told him, not wanting to get his hopes up.

I thought he was going to let the subject drop, but it became evident that he expected me to call Reagan right at that moment, so I dialed her up and put her on the spot. “Hey, Reagan, just to let you know you’re on speakerphone.”

“Hi, Aunt Rea,” Wolfie chimed in.

“Hey, Wolfie, how’s my favorite guy?”

“Well, I am just dandy,” I answered.

Wolfie laughed. “No, she’s talking about me.”

“See? The kid gets it,” she said.

I rolled my eyes, even though she couldn’t see me. Somehow, I knew that she knew exactly what I was doing. “Hey, the Wolf-Man here and I are going to do some hockey lessons Friday night, and we want to know if you would like to come with?”

I could hear her pause, and evidently, so did Wolfie because he chimed in, “Please, Aunt Rea, it’ll be more fun if you were there, too.”

I heard her laugh. “Well, how can I resist that? Just let me know where I need to be.”

“Will do,” I said and looked at Wolfie, “Hey, do me a favor. Go brush your teeth and put on your jammies. I’m going to talk to Aunt Rea right here for a minute.”

Wolfie ran towards the hallway. I took Reagan off the speakerphone, “Hey, sorry for the sneak attack, but he had his heart set.”

“It’s okay, but Adam, you know what happened earlier...”

“I know, I know, it can’t happen again,” I said in a sing-song voice. “You know you’re starting to sound like a broken record, Reagan.”

“Adam,” she said in a warning voice.

“I’m just saying, at some point, you got to quit denying that there’s something here.”

“The only thing I’m worried about right now is pulling this off for Wolfie, so I will come to your hockey lesson because he asked me to. Plus, it would probably look good if we did family stuff together if we’re going to convince people we’re engaged,” she pointed out.

“I don’t think I’m going have a problem convincing people we are a couple, you just have to get on board,” I told her.

“I already said I would do it.”

“You know what I mean, Reagan,” I said, in a softer voice. “But obviously, something’s holding you back.”

There was a long silence, and I thought for a moment that she’d hung up on me, but then, her voice came over the line, quiet but sure. “Adam...did you know that I’ve had five stepfathers?”

“No, damn. Your mom was busy,” I said, trying to make a joke of it because I could sense that she was uncomfortable.

“That she was—she broke my father’s heart, and then, she proceeded to break even more, all in the name of trying to make herself feel better. And I get that I didn’t have anything to do with that, and neither did my dad, but it didn’t mean that it didn’t affect us. It never failed. She would meet some guy, and with stars in her eyes claim that they were the great love of her life, but it didn’t take long before she got bored and went on to the next thing.”

It felt like somebody kicked me in the stomach. Reagan had never shared this kind of stuff with me before, but the pain in her voice made me want to reach through the phone and hold her.

“Reagan, do you really think you’re the kind of woman who could keep tanking relationships like that?” I asked her, because as long as I’d known her, I knew her to be sure and steady with those that she cared about. Even with Brian, even though the relationship hadn’t worked, they were still friendly with one another.

There was a shaky sigh. “I’m not worried about leaving people, Adam. I worry about being like my dad, being the one who’s blindsided. I don’t want to get left just because somebody decided they were bored.”

There was another punch to the gut. “Reagan,” I drew out, “anybody that would leave you is a fucking idiot—you know that right?”

She laughed humorlessly, “Yeah, but I’ve heard it before. And it sucked, but I don’t know if I could handle it if I heard it from you. So, that’s me laying my heart bare, and now, I’m going to close it back up, thank you very much. At least now you understand why I am so insistent on these boundaries.”

“Reagan,” I started, but Wolfie’s voice rang out behind me.

“Uncle Adam? I’m ready to be tucked in,” he called from his bedroom.

“You better go to him,” Reagan said. “I’ve said my peace.”

I opened my mouth to answer, but the line went dead.

Friday couldn’t come fast enough. I couldn’t wait to show Wolfie the ropes with hockey, and I couldn’t wait to see Reagan.

The words of our last conversation rang in my head constantly. But I was determined to show her different. I got it that her parents’ relationships had really fucked her up—nobody knew that better than I did. But just like I needed to

prove that I wouldn't leave Wolfie, Reagan now needed to know that I wouldn't leave her, that I was in this for the long haul.

After I picked up Wolfie from school, we grabbed a quick bite at a pizza place and then went to a sporting goods store to get all his gear. I had Wolfie looking like a regular team hockey player by the time we went to the year-round rink on the other side of Brooklyn.

I was worried he might fall over with all that gear, but my man stayed steady. Reagan had gotten dropped off by a rideshare after work, then disappeared into the ladies' restroom to change into her street clothes.

For the next two hours, she and Wolfie struggled to stay on their feet in their skates, laughing the whole time as they helped one another out.

"Look at that," I called after Wolfie, who very quickly was able to skate laps around Reagan. He took to that rink like a duck to the water, and I was proud. "Like an old pro." I clapped my hands and whistled.

I turned to Reagan, who was struggling to stay upright. "Don't look at me," she warned. "I will figure this out, but I'm not going to be able to do it with you looking at me." I could hear that competitive edge in her voice, the same one that turned me on so damn much.

"Listen, Miles. Don't tell me you're one of those uncoachable athletes," I teased her.

“Oh, don’t pretend you’re my coach now, of all the insufferable things,” she began to rant as I skated close by.

“Do you want my help, Aunt Rea?” Wolfie asked.

I saw her bite her lip, so I jumped in. “Don’t you worry, Wolf-Man, just keep practicing. I got Aunt Rae,” I said, grabbing her hands and then placing my other hand against her back to help keep her steady.

“Now, I know you don’t like directions from me, except for very specific situations,” I said, only loud enough to where she could hear.

“Adam,” she hissed in warning.

“But this is kind of my sport, so at least let me give you a few tips. First, you gotta relax,” I coached.

“Oh, you would say something stupid like that at a time like this,” she snapped, and I had to bite back a laugh. Reagan did not like not naturally excelling at something.

“Yeah, well, it’s true in this case. Secondly, you’ve got to quit trying to go so fast. Remember, slow is smooth. Smooth is fast.”

She rolled her eyes at me, but then, I saw her look towards the ice and her feet, willing her feet to glide easily back and forth, as she sucked in a determined breath. I could feel her stance change beneath my palms as she started to glide slowly and smoothly across the ice. “There you go, that’s it. You’re doing great. Look at that—you’re a natural.”

“Quit being so patronizing,” she muttered.

“I’m not. I am encouraging you, dammit. Do you always have to be this stubborn?”

“I am not stubborn,” she insisted. “I just know my own mind, and I do not want to hear that ‘atta-girl’ stuff from you.”

We continued to bicker back and forth for a while, then suddenly stopped when I heard a clear, joyful sound across the ice. Guiltily, we looked away from each other and back at Wolfie. He was watching us, laughing his head off of us arguing with one another.

“Hey, peanut gallery, what are you laughing at?” I asked him in a teasing voice.

He pointed at both of us. “You two are funny.”

“How dare you laugh at my pain, Wolfie.” Reagan moaned as she continued her slow glide across the ice. It just made him laugh harder. “I’m struggling here, little man, and you’re laughing. You’re just like your uncle,” she called over her shoulder while I chuckled behind my hands at her outrage.

By the end of the evening, Wolfie was confident in his skates. Reagan, not so much, but she has improved greatly.

I’d offered to drop Reagan off at her place, but Wolfie popped up and asked her sweetly if she would help read him a story tonight. I saw the expression on her face and knew she was not going to be able to resist that, so she came back with us. I was secretly pleased.

After we tucked Wolfie in, Reagan lingered around the couch. “I’m going to be sore for days,” she whined as she

plopped onto the couch.

“Well, I would prefer you saying those words under different circumstances, but I’ll take it.”

She made a face at me. “You never quit, do you?”

My expression sobered as I shook my head, “No, I don’t. Once I decide on something, there’s no stopping me—remember that, Reagan.”

The teasing light in her eyes went out, only to be replaced by a sorrowful one. “You’ll have to excuse me if I find it a little hard to believe.”

“Why is that so hard to believe? Because I haven’t really been in a long-term relationship since you’ve known me? I don’t waste my time on people I’m not interested in spending a lot of time with, Reagan. That’s all that means.”

She shook her head. “I really don’t wanna talk about this anymore, Adam. Can we please change the subject? You were really good with Wolfie out there tonight,” she told me earnestly.

“Thank you, but the kid makes it easy. I’m feeling better about our situation—he opened up about some of the stuff that is bothering him.”

“He did? That’s great.”

“Yeah, I think so, too. But I’m keeping his appointment with the therapist. I want him to know he always has somebody to talk to, even if it’s not me he wants to talk to.”

She gave me a curious look for a long moment, and for once, I showed some self-restraint and just let her stare. It would typically be the spot where I try to fill in the space with some stupid joke or tease her, but maybe it was time we just let some reality sink in between us. I didn't know what she was searching for her as she gazed at me, but suddenly, she tore her eyes away and said, "I guess I should get going. It's getting late."

"It is getting late, and I don't like the idea of you out there by yourself on a Friday night," I told her honestly.

She shook her head and rolled her eyes. "Don't you start that he-man shit with me, Rollins."

I thumped my chest with my fist lightly in response when a loud growling sound filled the room. "What in the world was that?" I asked.

Reagan's cheeks reddened slightly. "I didn't have time to eat before hockey practice, it's just my stomach."

"Well, let's get some food." Getting up from the couch, I stalked over to the kitchen before she could argue with me.

I had a leftover piece of pizza in the microwave getting nuked before she could tell me again that she needed to go home, and when the fragrant smell of garlic and tomato sauce hit the room, I could tell I had won her over. I presented the plate to her like it was some fine cuisine. She took it gratefully and proceeded to wolf it down. I smiled at her appetite, glad to see that she was so comfortable around me after some of the awkward conversations we'd had lately.

I got another slice of pizza for Reagan as I sipped on a beer and we watched the basketball game. Time got away from us as we both got involved in the ball game, and when the game was finally over, she cursed when she saw the clock. “Shit, I really didn’t mean to stay this late.”

“I know, but it is really late, Reagan, and I would feel a lot better if you just stay put,” I told her in a quiet and hopefully convincing voice.

She looked at me sharply then, and I was completely prepared for her to tell me that I just needed to get over it. Was there a yearning in her eyes for just the briefest of seconds? I could see the struggle going on in her head.

“Boundaries tomorrow, Miles.”

She smiled faintly and rose from the couch, looked at me meaningfully, and headed for my bedroom.

I did a little victory dance in my head—another night in Reagan’s arms. And despite the fact that we were both so exhausted, and despite the fact that she was sore from her hockey lessons, that didn’t stop her from stripping out of her clothes as soon as the bedroom doors closed and pointing to the bed. I dutifully followed her directions and sat down facing her. She helped me out of my clothes. “Just want you to know, I find it really obnoxious how easy it is for you to get me to take my clothes off,” she said in a husky whisper as she straddled my already naked lap.

“Lucky for you, the payoff is worth it,” she said, reaching down and stroking my already hard cock. I bit back a groan.

She worked her hand over me slowly. It wasn't like our little tryst in her office. We took our time with each other this time, tasting and laving at one another, reveling in the quiet moments. But by the time I slid inside of her tight, hot pussy, she was grabbing my hand and putting it over her mouth, the sounds of her pleasure reverberating against my palm.

I rocked into her, trying to hold my release back, wanting us to last as long as possible, but the fervent thrusting of her hips to meet mine were my undoing. I collapsed on top of her, my face in her neck, growling out my release as I felt the walls of her pussy squeeze tightly around me and a long whimper against the palm of my hand as she orgasmed.

Despite how tired we were, we didn't go to sleep right away. And I was surprised that she didn't start coming up with excuses as to why she should go or how we had crossed more boundaries. No, instead, we stayed in each other's arms, and she looked up into my eyes as she stroked her fingers over my five o'clock shadow.

I spent that night trying to memorize the feeling of her soft skin with my fingers and my mouth, drinking in every little sigh of pleasure, trying to figure out how I would make this happen again. Because I needed it to happen again. Because I needed her.

Chapter Sixteen

Reagan

*O*ver the next few weeks...

That hockey night was supposed to be a one-time thing, but it quickly became our routine.

A lot of it was done in the name of establishing ourselves as a “couple.” But somehow, we had taken the “couple” business too far.

I always left before Wolfie woke up. He was still too young to answer questions about me spending the night. But I couldn't seem to stop myself from ending up in Adam's arms. He was like a drug that I just couldn't resist, no matter how hard I tried, or how much I talked myself out of it. Even though I knew things were irrevocably complicated, I couldn't help but feel anything but right when I was with him.

Miss Baker had extended her trip to the Maldives, only extending the timeline of our case. As she claimed, it was essential that she get as much rest as possible before she'd take on the charge of a small child. This presumptuousness irritated

me to no end, but let her take her time, it only helped Wolfie's cause.

I had a rare night to myself, and I was on video chat with both Amy and Lucy. Lucy was still in her office working late but had decided to call in, not wanting to miss our weekly catch-up.

"What's going on with you, girl? You look different," Lucy noted.

"I was going to say anything, but you have this kind of glow about you," Amy added.

I shook my head. "What? No, that's ridiculous. I'm just still hot from the shower I just took."

"Yeah, sure," Lucy said. "It doesn't have anything to do with the fact that you have canceled our plans for the last couple of weeks because you were with Wolfie and Adam?"

"Oh? This is a new development," Amy said from her little zoom window.

"I told you all that I am just helping out with the whole fake engagement thing, so we're just keeping up appearances," I explained calmly, hoping they would drop the subject.

"Does keeping up appearances involve getting busy on a regular basis?" Amy asked.

"Because if it does, I am in full support of that," Lucy said.

"What is wrong with you two? What, are you all just bored, married ladies now?" I huffed.

“No,” Lucy insisted at about the same time that Amy enthusiastically said, “I’ll have you know, my sex life with my husband is better than ever.”

Lucy laughed as I made a gagging motion. Considering that Amy was married to my father, that was not a comment I needed to hear.

“Look, I know you guys would like to think that there’s something there, but—”

They were not having it. “Because there’s obviously something there,” Amy said with raised eyebrows. “Come on, Reagan, out with it. You’ve been especially cagey about Adam. You, the girl who used to give me way too much detail about her conquests.”

“Well, doesn’t that tell you something that I’m not giving you any details?” I pointed out.

“Yeah. If I know you, it tells me that he’s really important to you,” Amy said.

“It does not,” I answered lamely.

“Methinks the lady doth protest too much,” Lucy chimed in.

I sighed. “Look, I’m not saying that there aren’t...feelings. But it’s no big deal. I just enjoy being in his company. He makes me laugh, and he makes me crazy. Quite frankly, he gives really good orgasms.”

“Gee, is that all?” Amy asked sarcastically.

“I don’t know, Rea, sounds like love to me,” Lucy said.

“Love? Who said anything about love?”

“You didn’t have to say anything,” Amy said. “It’s written all over your face. You love him, don’t you?”

I felt cornered, and it must have shown on my face. While I had a decent poker face in the courtroom, I wasn’t so good at hiding things for my two best friends. I had a sudden urge to burst into tears honestly.

“Oh, hey, Rea, I’m not trying to upset you,” Amy said. “I just don’t want you to miss out on something great because you’re scared.”

“It’s okay to be scared, too,” Lucy added. “But it’s not okay to let it keep you from doing something that might make you happy.”

“I know, I know, it’s just...” I trailed off.

“Reagan, look at me,” Amy said gently. “I know that you’re worried about getting left,” she said, and I had to fight back tears. “I know you had to watch your dad go through that, and I know how badly that hurt you. But things turned out okay for him, if I do say so myself.”

I gave her a watery smile. “I know, I know that, Amy. I just, there’s a lot to be mindful of, it’s not just about me and Adam.”

“Let’s play devil’s advocate, Reagan,” Lucy said. “If things crash and burn, would you dip out of Wolfie’s life?”

“No,” I answered emphatically. “No, I would never do that to him.”

“Exactly,” Lucy said. “Look, there are no guarantees, and it might not work. But then again, it might work out great.” She smiled. “And if you’re worried about that little boy, even if it doesn’t work out between the two of you, I know you—you’ll still be a part of his life, and he’ll appreciate that.”

We were all quiet for a moment until all of that settled in. Finally, Lucy looked at me meaningfully. “So, the big question is, Reagan: are you in love with this man?”

I bit my lip as tears started flowing from my eyes. “I think so,” I whispered.

Shrieks emitted from my computer screen, and I plugged my ears for a moment until the two of them calmed down.

“I am so excited for you,” Lucy said.

“Me too,” Amy agreed. “It’s about time.”

“Don’t get too excited, I haven’t decided what to do yet,” I said.

“Sounds pretty simple to me. You’ve got to tell him how you feel. Lay your cards on the table, can’t go wrong with that,” Lucy coached.

“That could so totally go wrong,” I countered.

“She just means you need to be honest, especially since there is a child involved—everybody involved needs to be honest,” Amy reminded me.

I nodded. They were right...as usual. They gave me some more encouragement, then we said our goodbyes, and when I

flipped my laptop closed, I had a new conviction in my heart to tell Adam how I really felt.

There weren't plans to see Wolfie and Adam until next Friday for what had become our weekly hockey lesson at the rink in Brooklyn. I checked in daily with Adam and Wolfie, but I kept my confession to myself. I figured after our hockey lesson and getting Wolfie to bed, Adam and I would have some alone time, and I would lay it all out for him. I was trying to be brave and share my feelings. But as the week went on, I wasn't so certain about my plan—mostly because I felt off.

I tried having a conversation with the girls again after not feeling so sure of everything, thinking that maybe it was just the stress of everything getting to me. I had been working doggedly to make sure our case against Miss Baker was airtight, and that was on top of all my other workload. Between work and having long nights with Adam and all these play dates with Wolfie, I was exhausted.

It was to the point that it took everything I had not to fall asleep in the middle of meetings at work. I just needed some more energy, but I found that I didn't have much of an appetite lately.

I was sitting at my desk, nodding off when Cheri burst in with a pack of chips from the vending machine and a bottle of juice.

“All right, I have been seeing you move around like a sloth around here these last couple of weeks. And you never eat, so here,” she said, plopping down her vending machine finds in front of me. I looked down at the bag of chips and the bottle of apple juice. Suddenly, I felt like everything I’d ever eaten in my life was surging upward. I saw her eyes widen as I lurched for the trashcan and let go of the meager contents of my belly.

“Oh, my God, I did not sign up for barfing at the office today,” Cheri said from behind me.

I sat up, hugging the wastebasket to my chest. “I’m sorry, I knew I was feeling weird lately, but that was unexpected,” I told her as I wrestled with my stomach, willing it to go back down.

Cheri, ever the mom, rushed towards me and put a palm to my forehead. “Well, you’re not warm,” she said, moving her fingers down to my lymph nodes and feeling around. After her careful inspection, she looked at me for a long moment and then went to close the door behind her, turning back to me with cautious eyes. “Reagan, I don’t mean to get up in your business, but I did just see you barf into a trash can, so I think we’re past that. When was the last time you had a period?”

I stared at her. “You don’t mean to suggest that I’m—” Except, as I started to say it, my head was counting back. When was the last time I had my period? Too long.

Panic built up inside me, but I gave her a reassuring smile. I just shook my head. “It’s nothing like that Cheri, don’t worry. It’s probably just a bug going around. In fact, I should

probably stay away from you. You don't want to risk giving this to your kids," I told her to shoo her away.

She looked at me doubtfully but did heed my warning and left me alone. As soon as the coast was clear, I flipped through my planner, counting back the weeks. "Shit, shit, shit," I muttered to myself.

I took a look at the clock. It was almost quitting time for the day, so I grabbed my bag and got the hell out of there to the nearest drugstore.

The women's restroom in the drugstore was occupied, of course, so I took my purchase and hailed a cab, fidgeting nervously in the backseat. The drive back home was tediously long, and when the cab finally pulled up to the curb next to my apartment, I shoved some bills at him and made a beeline for the door.

Those three minutes waiting for the test results were the longest three minutes of my life as I paced back and forth next to my bathroom counter.

But finally, the timer on my phone went off. I sucked in a deep breath as I looked down at the pregnancy test: positive.

I waited for tears to come, anger, joy...anything really. But mostly, I was just shocked.

I went about my nightly routine, willing myself to move methodically, terrified I would somehow just split apart. I

didn't know what to think, but one thing kept coming back to me. If I went to Adam now and told him how I felt, would he think I was just saying that because he knocked me up? I didn't want him to think that I just conveniently grew feelings for him because now I was carrying his child. He and I both had serious trust issues, and now, here we were, complicating matters by throwing a baby into the mix. As if things are complicated enough.

So, I did what I always had when I was freaked out and didn't know what to do. I clammed up. I didn't talk to Amy or Lucy, and I didn't talk to my grandmother or my dad. And I most certainly did not talk to Adam. I just kept walking by that pregnancy test, and I kept it to myself.

I just needed some time to figure out what the right thing to do was. *I just need some time*, I kept telling myself.

Chapter Seventeen

Adam

“Wow...just wow. I was not expecting that,” Brian said into the phone.

I laughed. “Yeah, well, I wasn’t expecting to feel this way,” I admitted.

In all of the melee of everything going on with Wolfie, I hadn’t been talking to Brian as much. He checked in periodically to see how I was holding up in my situation, but I had failed to mention just how involved Reagan was. I knew there were no lingering feelings from either one of them, but I still hadn’t been looking forward to sharing with Brian how I was feeling. At this point, however, it had to be said. I called him up and laid it out for him, and his response was understandably shocked.

“I appreciate you telling me,” Brian said awkwardly.

“Yeah, I know this is weird. And I hope you don’t feel uncomfortable with it.”

“Listen, just because it didn’t work out between me and Reagan doesn’t mean that I don’t know that she’s a beautiful, intelligent, funny woman. In fact, I can’t believe I didn’t realize sooner how perfect she is for you, but saying that out loud, it makes sense now,” he said.

“Well, I’m glad to have your blessing then.”

“I don’t know what I’m more shocked by, honestly: the fact that it’s Reagan or that you’re wanting to put down roots at all. I guess having the whole family thing going on really changes things, huh?”

“It has, but having Reagan around changed things for the better. I never knew I wanted this, but now, I can’t imagine my life without either one of them, and I don’t want to, man.”

“And Reagan feels the same?”

“I think she does, though she’s still fighting me a little bit. She’s got some hang ups that I’m not going to get into, things from her past.”

“Yeah, I knew there was some weird stuff that happened between her parents. She never got into it with me, but nothing like your parents to screw you up, right?”

I laughed. “Tell me about it. But that’s exactly what I want to avoid with Wolfie. I want to make sure he has a stable home with people who love him and always put him first.”

“I know you’ll always do that, man, and if Reagan’s involved, I know she will, too. I wish you the best of luck, and you know if you need anything from me or just to talk, I’m

here. I know you're busy with your new life, but don't forget about your best friend," he joked.

"Never."

I felt relieved after my conversation with Brian, as I hadn't realized how much I'd been worried about that until we were done. I felt like another boulder had rolled off my shoulder. Now, if I could just get the annoyance of this Ms. Baker off my back, things would be going really well.

As far as the Reagan situation, I was trying not to worry about it too much, but it felt too damn good to have her in my arms most nights. What had started out as just Friday nights spent together had quickly morphed into most nights. And I'd warned her more than once that I was prepared to put up a fight before I let this all go. I couldn't be sure, but I couldn't help but feel like she was starting to realize that, too.

Lately, she had been a little quieter, a little more reserved, and I was starting to suspect that she could see the writing on the wall. I just didn't know if she was trying to tamp down her insecurities once and for all, or if she was trying to figure out how to let me down gently. I was ready to fight for her, though, just like I was ready to fight for Wolfie.

Speaking of Wolfie. "Hey Wolf-Man? Are you ready to go? We still need to go pick up your aunt Rea."

We had plans to go to the park that morning and feed the ducks and then take Wolfie to a natural history museum close by. I'd been a little skeptical about the museum part, but

Reagan had assured me that there were exhibits that would interest Wolfie, so I was going to trust her on that.

We were running a little late getting to Reagan's apartment, but when she answered, she still wasn't quite ready, which was unlike her. She looked a little green around the gills. "Are you okay?" I asked her, concerned.

"Yeah, yeah, I think I just ate something bad. But I'll be good to go, just let me finish getting ready," she assured both of us.

I watched after her, concerned, as she went down the hallway towards her bathroom, but I had the task of keeping Wolfie occupied for however long it took her to get ready.

We had a running game going anytime we had to wait somewhere for Star Trooper battles. If we were in a restaurant, usually, we'd find some straws or utensils to sword fight with, and I could see Wolfie eyeing the contents of Reagan's living room, trying to find something to choose as a make-believe weapon.

He disappeared around her kitchen counter. He came out with a paper towel roll that he must've pilfered from her recycling bin and looked at me challengingly. "Are you ready to battle, Uncle Adam?"

I looked around frantically, trying to find something suitable before finally settling on the remote control. We dueled around her coffee table, gently whacking the remote to the paper towel roll and taking points. We chased each other all over that living room and around the kitchen.

“Do you surrender, Sir Wolfgang?” I asked him dramatically as I outscored him.

He clutched his little hand to his chest in a dramatic gesture and yanked his shoulder back, saying, “Never!” But as he did so, his shoulder bumped into Reagan’s bag on her kitchen counter, accidentally knocking it over, causing all the contents to spill out onto the floor.

“Whoops,” Wolfie said, making a face.

“It’s okay, buddy. Here, let me help you,” I said, squatting down to scoop up the mess and shove it back into Reagan’s bag.

“Look at this stuff: lipstick, eyeliner, ketchup packets...” and then my hand scooped up a bottle of pills.

It was a little orange bottle with a prescription label on it addressed to Reagan Miles. Blame it on my doctorly curiosity, but I read the label and saw that they were prenatal vitamins. It looked like they’d been prescribed a couple weeks ago.

Wolfie looked at me curiously. “Is Aunt Rea sick?”

I shook my head. “No, that’s not what this kind of medicine is for. She’s fine, I’m sure.”

I didn’t know why I said what I said next, but I told Wolfie. “Hey, how about we don’t tell her we knocked over her purse, okay?”

He nodded solemnly.

Confusion and shock washed through me. Wolfie said something else to me, but I wasn't sure what.

Reagan was taking prenatal vitamins?

I knew enough as a physician to know that there were more than just the obvious reasons to take prenatal vitamins. A lot of women took them because they helped make their hair and nails stronger, so maybe that's why Reagan was taking them.

As she emerged from the hallway, I couldn't help but notice the dark smudges beneath her eyes. She'd been tossing and turning quite a bit when she'd been with me, come to think of it. She'd also been making multiple trips to the bathroom, but I'd figured maybe she just had a small bladder.

Part of me wanted to stop everything right at that moment and grill her, but the other part of me said that no, this just couldn't be...could it?

We had a good time in the park and the museum, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't distracted. I kept watching Reagan carefully, looking for signs. Suddenly, a lot of things made sense.

The fact that she had just been picking at her food for the most part, and yet, there'd been a couple of times I called her while she was at work where she told me that she couldn't get enough of this brand of chips and apple juice of all things. I was just glad she was eating. Then, there was the fact that she'd looked a little pale lately, but she had a stressful job, and we were in a stressful situation, so I had no reason to suspect anything different.

But she had been a little quieter the last couple of weeks. Reagan was not quiet, so that should've been a clear sign to me right from the beginning. How come I'd never noticed this before now?

As we left the museum and began to head back to my place, I got super nervous but anxious to get home and get Reagan alone long enough to ask her what in the world was going on. Anxiety pooled at the bottom of my stomach as we worked our way through traffic. Nerves tightened at the base of my skull as we ascended the stairs to the second floor and made me almost feel like I was about to lose my lunch, but as we neared the door of my apartment, the nerves faded, only to be replaced with slight panic.

A small woman was standing on my doorstep, dressed in professional attire with a folder clutched to her chest. When she spotted us, she smiled warmly and asked, "Dr. Rollins?"

"Yes, that's me. May I help you?"

"I am Anita Abrams." She looked down at Wolfie pulled a card from her pocket. "Is it okay if I come in and chat with you all for a little while?" she asked pleasantly, and I looked at her card to see that she was an agent with child protective services.

I glanced at Reagan, who gave me a faint, reassuring smile, and said, "Of course, come right on in."

I was relieved that Reagan had it together, because just seeing that card made me want to run away. But this was the part of the process that had to happen. As long as this went

well, we were one step closer to making sure that Wolfie stayed put.

I was relieved that the social worker hadn't announced where she'd come from in front of Wolfie. Even though the little guy was doing great in therapy, and he was opening up to me a lot more about his nightmares and his worries, I didn't want to send him into a tailspin by letting him know where this woman came from.

"Who are you?" Wolfie asked as we went inside the apartment.

"She's a potential patient, buddy," I told him, eyeing Miss Abrams meaningfully.

She smiled. "That's right. I heard such good things about your uncle, I just wanted to come see for myself," she explained.

"Oh, okay," he said unfazed and then marched to the table, none the wiser. "Aunt Rea, will you help me sort through my cards again? I got them messed up yesterday, and Uncle Adam doesn't know what order they're supposed to go in," Wolfie asked Reagan, referring to his Pokémon cards. They sat down at the kitchen table and sorted through Wolfie's cards as I steered Abrams to the couch, so that we could chat for a bit.

"Thank you for playing along about the whole patient thing," I told her. "I just worry that he's been through so much. I don't wanna freak him out."

“That’s all right, I understand. I think it was very kind of you to spare him like that. I will do my best to stay out of your way. I just need to look at a few things and ask you a few questions. I will try to do it as unobtrusively as possible. As far as Wofie is concerned, I am a potential patient/friend just trying to get to know everybody.”

I nodded nervously. “Okay, that sounds good.”

I was lying, of course—none of it sounded good. I knew it was part of the process, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t any less freaked out. I had to credit Reagan, though, she was cool as a cucumber.

“I’ll need to look around the residence. If Wolfie asks, I just needed to use the restroom, okay?” she asked.

“Right, got it.” I moved over to Wolfie and Reagan’s organization of his Pokémon characters. I didn’t even know if this was an official order, but Wolfie seemed to have a system for who went where, and I was forever trying to figure out what that was. Reagan, meanwhile, had it all figured out and sorted through them quietly with him without any issue.

I sat down and started asking questions about his methods, trying not to constantly look towards the hallway toward Ms. Abrams.

She wasn’t gone for long, coming back down the hall and glancing thoroughly over the various aspects of the table with us.

She asked Wolfie what he was doing, and he explained his organizational system and how Aunt Reagan was helping him. “If you don’t mind my asking, how do you know Wolfie?” Ms. Abrams asked Reagan.

“Well, I knew his mom, and she asked me to take care of some legal things for her since I am a lawyer. And—”

“And Aunt Reagan and Uncle Adam are in loooove,” Wolfie broke in giggling.

It was completely unexpected. Reagan and I had talked extensively about how to approach this, but we decided that less was more. Wolfie was used to having Reagan around. He knew that she and I were good friends, and he loved her, and we didn’t want to confuse him more with everything else going on. We kind of played down the whole “fake engagement thing” to him while telling all the adults around us.

A week and a half before, Miss Abrams had called my office and done a phone interview with me, just asking me some basic questions. I had mentioned that Reagan and I were engaged. She’d been intrigued by this information, but I explained to her that I hadn’t gotten into too much detail about what an engagement was to Wolfie because of everything else going on. It had seemed like a satisfactory answer to her, and I was grateful that she didn’t press, even after Wolfie’s strange outburst. “Is that right? Well, love is a great thing, isn’t it, Wolfie?”

He nodded. “Yeah, I love Uncle Adam and Aunt Rea, so I’m glad they love each other.”

Tears pricked my eyes, and when I caught Reagan’s gaze, I could see that she was holding back tears herself. Then, I could see her turn pale. “Excuse me, I just need to go use the restroom,” she said, rising from the table and hurrying down the hall.

I smiled awkwardly at Miss Abrams.

“Is she okay?” she asked, concerned.

“Touch of stomach bug she’s still getting over,” I explained.

Miss Abrams just nodded and didn’t question further. She stayed for a while and talked casually enough with all of us while still getting plenty of information. Thankfully, Wolfie seemed unfazed.

By the time she left, Reagan had managed to engage in a conversation with her about learning how to surf in southern California. And I was reminded again about how smooth Reagan could be when she wanted. I didn’t think for a second that she was trying to win over Miss Abrams, as she was the one who told me that we just needed to be as natural as possible, but I could see that she was steering the conversation that way, figuring that it might relax me.

“Thank you for letting me spend the afternoon with you all. It was nice getting to know everybody,” Miss Abrams said pleasantly as I walked her to the door.

I stepped outside the door, closing it softly behind me, leaving Reagan and Wolfie at the table as I faced Miss Abrams. “Thank you for taking the time to come visit us. I hope you got the answer you needed.”

She just smiled and said, “I think I did. I’ll be writing up my report, and they should be sent to the judge sometime in the middle of next week.” She shook my hand and then walked away without another word.

I walked through the door and let out a long breath, looking questioningly at Reagan. She just smiled, and somehow, with that one look she gave me, I felt instantly better. It had gone okay, and I felt good about where we stood at this point.

I had been so consumed with the visit from Ms. Abrams that I almost forgot about the conversation that I needed to have with Reagan about the pills I had found. At this point, however, there was no way I was going to try to start a conversation with Wolfie still awake. I would have to bide my time. Every second I had to wait was killer.

I watched Reagan carefully at dinnertime, and I noted how many times she rushed to the bathroom—and it seemed like I had my answer. It didn’t change the fact that we needed to talk about it.

Later, after Wolfie fell asleep, I came to sit on the couch with Reagan. She had turned on the game and was idly scrolling her phone as I sat down next to her.

I looked at her profile for a long moment before I finally cleared my throat. “Hey, I don’t really know how to approach

this, so I'm just going to lay it all out there—Wolfie and I accidentally knocked over your purse earlier and a bunch of stuff fell out...including a bottle of prenatal vitamins.” She looked up sharply, and judging by the look in her eyes, I had my answer. If I'd had any doubt before, I didn't any longer.

“So, is it true? Are you pregnant?”

She blinked rapidly. I could see a couple of tears already threatening to spill over. She shook her head. “This is not how I envisioned this going down, Adam.”

I had to laugh. “Yeah, well, I guess the whole last couple months of our lives is not how I envisioned any of it going down, but we're here...and pregnant?”

She nodded shakily.

“How long have you known?”

She swallowed hard, then admitted, “A couple of weeks.” At my expression, she added, “I've been trying to figure out the best way to tell you with all of this going on and, I don't know, I guess I've just been freaked out.”

My mind was a whirl. I guess I was still in shock. I had to be, because as chaotic as the inside of my head was, there was no way that anything good was about to come out of my mouth. At least, that's what I would tell myself later when I would think back to how everything began to unravel. Why I would sit there next to this woman who I have been trying to get to take me seriously and just blurt out, “Well, then, I guess that settles it: we have to get married for real.”

Her mouth fell open for a second, then snapped shut, and I saw a familiar indignant expression take hold of Reagan's face. "Excuse me? Adam, no."

"What do you mean, no? It's the most sensible thing. We're already supposedly engaged. We're around each other all the time, anyway. I mean, for God's sake, you're having my baby. We'll be around each other even more if anything, and it makes sense. We should just get married," I blathered on.

There was this part of me that was so excited. And the more I went on, the more excited I got. A baby, with Reagan. We had created this other living thing, together—evidence of our love for one another. But none of those words came out. Instead, I rambled on about how this would be best for everybody involved, including Wolfie, and on and on. All the while, Reagan just turned paler until she finally stopped me.

"Adam, absolutely not!" she said she rose up from the couch. "I'm not going to be a part of your warped sense of responsibility. I get what you're trying to do, I guess it's honorable, but we don't live in that era anymore. We don't need to be married to take care of this baby together. We don't need to be together at all. And I'm not going to marry you just because I'm having our baby. I'm sorry, I just want more than that for both of us. If we get married because of this baby, you'll just grow to resent me or the child, and I won't have it."

"Do you really think that little of me, Reagan? Come on, you see me with Wolfie. I love that kid, and I love the baby,

and for God's sake, I love you. Isn't that reason enough to be together?"

Shaking her head, my words only seemed to add to her panic. "No, no, you don't mean that. You're just in shock. Clearly, you're saying whatever it is you think you need to say to get me to say yes."

"Why do you find it so hard to believe that I feel that way about you?"

"Do you know what? Maybe you believe that now, because you know I'm carrying our child, and that changes everything, right? But what happens when everything finally calms down? When we're just finally settled? And you realize you're over the idea of a relationship, that you were not really all that into before, it just seemed like the right thing to do. I don't think I could handle it if you just tossed me aside. I know you feel like you would never do that right at this moment, but you have to admit, you have been under extreme circumstances the last several weeks. That makes people do strange things, like get married several times, and I clearly have no business being in a relationship."

"Reagan, I'm not your mother. If I was anything like your mother, then I would have been in one relationship after another. But in the time since you've known me, I have never been in a serious relationship."

"Exactly. So, why the hell would you want to start now? With me, of all people?"

I moved closer to her, unable to help myself. Her vulnerability was shining brightly in her eyes, and as I moved toward her, wanting to pull her to me, she backed away.

“I know you think that it’ll be different for us, but every time I look at it pragmatically, it just doesn’t make sense. None of this makes sense.”

“Reagan—”

“No, no, I don’t—I just need to be by myself for a while,” she said, rushing past me, snatching up her bag.

I struggled to think of words to get her to stay, to believe me when I told her I loved her. So, I reverted back to our old pattern of picking at each other. “Ah, come on, Miles, don’t run away just because you’re scared. I’m scared, too. I’ve been terrified this whole time, but I’m pushing ahead because loving you is worth it.”

She stopped momentarily at the door, her back still to me, and then, I heard her utter the words, “You don’t really mean that. I know you think you do, but you can’t really mean that. You’re just saying that because of the baby.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me - denial doesn’t look good on you,” I tried to tease but it just came out desperate.

She just shook her head and before I could respond, she was out the door.

Chapter Eighteen

Reagan

Tears flowed down my cheeks the whole way home. I sat miserably in the backseat as I headed back to my apartment, replaying Adam's sort-of proposal. Once inside my apartment, I paced the floor, not knowing what to do with myself. I felt like my life was falling apart, and I had no clue how to move forward, paralyzed by heartbreak.

The cat was out of the bag with Adam, so maybe it would be safe to tell my best friends. I needed to talk to somebody.

I dialed Lucy, but it rang and rang and went to voicemail. It just showed how out of my mind I was that I unthinkingly FaceTimed Amy. Amy was always a comfort, but I didn't think twice about hitting the FaceTime button or who might also still be there with her. When she answered, I just started unloading on her, telling her about the baby, walking out on Adam, and about the proposal.

Amy sat there, her expression shocked and then concerned. When I finally took a breath, she smiled at me kindly. "First of all, Reagan, I know you're freaked out, but there's a baby in

there, and that's wonderful. When you calm down, I know you'll be excited, too. Secondly, I didn't get a chance to tell you before you started talking about it—but I'm not alone here," she said sheepishly.

The screen moved over, and my father's face appeared, his brow furrowed, looking worried.

"Is it true, Reagan? Are you about to make me a grandfather?"

I didn't know what it was—some six-year-old girl still living inside me who turned into a needy child at the sight of my dad, but I started really crying then.

I could hear Amy's voice distantly trying to comfort me, but it was my father's voice that penetrated—the same voice that knew how to pick me up and dust me off for as long as I could remember. "Reagan, Reagan, take a breath. Calm down," my dad coaxed.

"Now, tell me honestly, do I need to go find this man who knocked up my daughter and kick his ass? I mean, what exactly are we working with here?" he asked calmly. At that moment, I wished more than anything that I could go through that screen and hug my dad. I could hear his calm, measured voice, the same voice that he would use with one of his own clients as a lawyer. Except when it was directed at me, it was full of love. He was doing the same thing he did when I was a kid, and I was upset: calm me down and ask me to calmly look at all the details before I rushed to any conclusions.

So, I did what he trained me to do since I'd been in diapers: I laid out the information and as I did so, the whole situation became less scary. Suddenly, I felt a little more capable of handling what was to come, even if I had to do it with a broken heart.

“I can already tell that you're reaching some conclusion, though I'm not sure what,” my dad said. “But I will say this, Reagan—this Adam guy has a lot going on between Wolfie and this new baby. And I am not defending this man, but it sounds to me like he was struggling with a bit of shock, maybe.”

“But he's been hinting at being more than just friends for a while now,” Amy added.

“Yeah, that's true,” I acknowledged.

“So, let me ask you this, my darling: why do you find it so hard to believe that this man might be telling the truth?”

I was silent for a long moment before I finally admitted truthfully, “Maybe I don't find it so hard to believe now that I stop and think about it. He's not the kind of man to say things just for the hell of it. In fact, it's rather obnoxious, but the fact is that he only says what he means.”

“But something is holding you back,” my dad pushed.

“So, he loves me...now. What happens when he decides he doesn't anymore?”

I saw an expression cross my father's features, and it struck me deeply. I had felt that very same expression cross my

features every time I got even the barest hint that Wolfie was upset. Here I was, an established professional, a grown woman, and my father still had that worry for me.

My father's tone was measured as he said calmly, "Sweetheart, you can't go into relationships constantly worrying about being left. I understand why you do, and if I could fix it for you—if I could have made that easier for you, don't you know I would go back in time and do it? That could not have been easy for you, everything that went down between your mother and me. But it did end up working out exactly the way it was supposed to, even as hard as it was for a while. You're going to have to take a leap of faith and trust that it will fall into place exactly the way it is supposed to. I mean, you have to admit the circumstances that brought you two together do feel a little..." he trailed off, struggling to find the right word.

"Meant to be," Amy supplied.

I saw an expression pass over my father's face, and I knew he wasn't exactly thrilled about talking about "meant to be" and all that stuff with his daughter, but he reluctantly agreed with his wife. "The only other thing I can tell you, Reagan, is that when it's the right person, it's worth the risk. Ask me how I know that?" he said, looking down fondly at his wife. "And there are a lot of times that it doesn't make sense, and it's an inconvenience, and it threatens to upend your world, but somehow, it's all worth it—but only if you put yourself all in."

“He’s right, Rea,” Amy chimed in. “And regardless of what happens with Adam, you also need to remember that you have all of us behind you and supporting you in any way that you need or want, don’t forget that.”

“That’s right, whatever you decide, we’re here for you. If you want us to cheer you on so you can go after this Adam guy, we’ll do that. If you want me to fly out to New York, so I can kick his ass, I’ll do that, too,” he offered.

I huffed out a small laugh. “Thanks, Dad. I love you both more than you can ever know.”

“I love you more,” my dad said.

I assured them that I would be okay, and we said our goodbyes. My mind was still a swirl, but at least my stomach quit rolling back and forth. I felt a little stronger to pick myself up and make it to my bedroom. The last couple weeks, carrying around the secret, and the whole day and all its events crashed down on me. Suddenly, all I wanted to do was crawl into bed, I was so exhausted.

I tossed and turned, but in between that, I had dreams about Adam and Wolfie, and the giggling chubby cheeks of a baby who looked just like his father.

The next morning, I trudged to work.

Amy and Dad definitely made me feel better, but I was still unsure as to what I wanted to say to Adam because I was

sticking to my guns about the whole marriage thing. There was no way I was up for it unless I was one hundred percent sure that he was asking me because he actually wanted to spend the rest of his life with me, and not out of any sense of obligation.

I was walking through the lobby doors of the office when I saw a familiar face, Brian.

“Hey, Reagan,” he said with a bright smile. “I owe you a congratulations.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Yeah, Adam told me the big news. It’s exciting, a little out of nowhere, but I fully support both of you,” he added.

“Adam told you? That’s not his information to give out at the moment,” I said through gritted teeth, irritation rising in me. Adam had no right to share the news about the baby just yet.

Brian’s brow furrowed. “Um, considering that you and I used to be an item, I guess he thought it was just a courtesy to let me know that he’s in love with my ex-girlfriend—I didn’t know it was this big secret.”

Everything in me halted. “Wait, what?”

Brian looked at me as if I had grown two heads. “Yeah, Adam called me a couple of days ago and told me that he was in love with you. He just wanted to let me know, so it wouldn’t be awkward. Honestly, it is a little awkward still, but the more I think about it, the more it makes sense. All that bickering you all used to do was just massive foreplay, I guess.”

“He told you he’s in love with me? Two days ago?”

Brian looked at me strangely. “Yes,” he drew out. “I thought you knew this. He told me the plan was to talk to you the next day and tell you how he felt. He said you were being stubborn, no surprise there, but he was determined to convince you that you should give him a shot. Which, I got to warn you, Reagan, when Adam gets his mind fixed on something, there’s no stopping him. Be prepared for him to try to win you over.”

Hope bloomed inside my chest. Adam had been having this conversation two days ago before he knew about any baby and before he felt any obligation towards me.

I felt a silly grin stretching across my face, and Brian tilted his head and smiled back at me. “I think I just saw fifty emotions cross your face in the span of thirty seconds. Is it, like, that time of the month for you?”

I rolled my eyes at him. “Okay, nice chat, Brian. I’ll see you around,” I said, walking past him and hurrying to my office.

As soon as I was in my office, Cheri was right behind me. “Girl, I do not know what happened between you and Adam, but he has been blowing up your phone.”

Panic seized me. “Is he okay? Is Wolfie okay?”

Cheri looked at me a little oddly. “Yes, they both appear to be fine, but he said that you shut off your cell phone and he hadn’t been able to get a hold of you. I sent him to your voicemail, so that he could say whatever it was he wanted to

say in private, although I wouldn't mind hearing it for myself," she said with a mischievous smile.

Whatever look crossed my face caused her smile to drop. "Oh, hey, are you okay?"

I gave her a small nod. "I think so, but I'm doing what I can to get better. Thank you, Cheri, I'll listen to his message and call him back when I can."

She looked like she wanted to ask more but seemed to think better of it and left me alone. I closed the door softly behind her, then rushed to my desk and dialed my voicemail on my office phone.

"Reagan? Reagan, please call me back. I'm out of my mind worrying about you. I know I did everything wrong...said everything wrong—I just...it's a lot, you've gotta admit that. But none of it changes how I already felt about you, which happened long before I knew about a baby. Although, I am really excited about this baby. I know you're scared, and I'm scared, too. Let's be scared together—please call me back. All right, I'll quit whining on your voicemail. Oh, and you may wanna ignore the other voicemails. I love you, Reagan."

I plopped into my office chair and let the tears flow again. I didn't think I had any tears left in me after last night, but these were happy tears. This man really did love me, so why was I being so stubborn and fighting him so hard? God, sometimes I was my own worst enemy.

I was about to pick up the phone and at least let Adam know I was okay and to tell him I wanted to see him when there was

a knock at the door.

I hurriedly wiped the tears from my face as Mr. Tate strolled in. “Reagan, I’m glad you’re here. We got the report back from the caseworker for the Rollins case.”

I sat up straighter. “Really? That was fast,” I said worriedly. It could either be a really good thing or a really bad thing that the report came back so fast.

Mr. Tate gave me a comforting smile. “Yeah, well, the caseworker said that she wanted to help expedite this case, so that we wouldn’t worry. She suggested to the judge that Wolfie stay exactly where he is—she left a glowing review.”

A flush rushed through me. “That’s wonderful. I mean, I’m not surprised one bit, but that’s such great news.”

“It is. Now, we need to decide how we want to approach this next. I think that Miss Baker’s attorney might want a call and the report of the good news. Remind them that with the caseworker’s testimony, and the fact that the defendant’s mother specifically appointed Dr. Rollins to care for the child, that’s it’s going to be next to impossible for her to win her bid for custody. Let’s see if we can’t squash this case altogether.”

I reached for my notes for Miss Baker’s attorney and started dialing. “You don’t have to tell me twice, sir.”

I realized that I had been practicing law for a long time, and in that time, I had seen some wildly unexpected things and had

some strange conversations. Despite all that, the conversation I had with Miss Baker and her attorney still surprised me.

Once I laid out the reports for both of them, Miss Baker's attorney asked if we could mute the conversation while she had a quick word with her client. But Miss Baker herself spoke up, "There's nothing to talk about. I am still going to fight for this child. You cannot convince me that Dr. Rollins is the suitable person to be handling his estate."

"Miss Baker," I started, "might I remind you that Dr. Rollins, nor anybody else for that matter, is going to be able to squander Wolfie's estate. In fact, nobody can legally touch that money until Wolfie is of age, and even then, it's only going to be Wolfie."

"What? Isn't somebody going to have to oversee it?"

"Of course. Somebody at the bank oversees it, somebody that Veronica and her husband chose specifically to do so. That somebody is not Adam—it's a financial professional."

There was a pause, and then, Miss Baker's attorney got on the line once more. "Miss Miles, may I put you on mute for just a moment? I need to discuss something with my client really quickly."

"Of course," I told her, shaking my head at the fact that Miss Baker was still so consumed with Wolfie's estate. Although, I was kind of surprised that she still hadn't understood quite how that worked. I had assumed that she was hoping that being his caretaker would ingratiate her enough to have him give her a cut when he turned eighteen. I guess I

hadn't realized that she thought she would have instant access to all that money from day one.

After a brief pause, Miss Baker and her attorney came back on the line. "In light of the recent developments, Miss Baker has agreed to drop her bid for custody," the attorney said.

A grin stretched across my mouth, and I punched the air with my fist in silent victory, even as I said in a professional voice, "Of course. I will have my secretary fax over some papers that say you all agreed to drop the bid. Miss Baker, if you would sign those as soon as possible, this will all be behind us."

After I got off the phone with them, I sat back in my chair. In the breath it took to explain that she would not have any kind of access to Wolfie's money, all of the drama and strife was gone. I shook my head in disbelief and relief.

I had to get to work to get those papers signed. I wanted everything to be buttoned up and taken care of by the time I saw Adam and Wolfie again—I had so much to tell them.

I wrapped up Adam and Wolfie's case as quickly as humanly possible. It wasn't until late in the afternoon that Miss Baker's attorney finally faxed over the signed forms, and I held those papers like they were made of the most precious gold.

Once everything was officially taken care of, I finished up a few other items for the day, and then, I got the hell out of

there. I had to get to Adam's place, but first, I had to make a slight detour.

Just a little while later, I sat on the top step just across from Adams's door. A pizza box, warm in my lap, caused an aromatic fragrance to float in the air and made my mouth water.

I was past the nauseous point for the day, and now, I was just ravenous. The cravings were intense.

I knew that any moment now, Adam and Wolfie would be coming up the stairs. Hunger fought with the nerves in the pit of my stomach. I tried to distract myself by making a list in my head of all the things I needed to do for this sweet baby on the way.

Finally, I heard the door swing open downstairs and then the sure steps of someone big and someone smaller coming towards me. Before I could overthink anything else, Adam and Wolfie were there.

Adam looked at me surprised and relieved, while Wolfie just looked excited. "You got pizza, Aunt Rea! I thought you didn't like us eating this stuff?"

I smiled at Wolfie as I stood up. "Yeah, well, I was having a craving, thought I would share it with my two favorite guys," I told him.

Adam gave me a questioning smile as he moved us all toward the door and unlocked it. Adam didn't say anything just yet, so I just watched him carefully as I opened up that pizza box and prepared a plate for Wolfie behind the kitchen counter. "Hey Wolf-Man," he said to the boy, "how about you go turn the game on and start without us, we'll be there in a few minutes."

Wolfie was happy to take his pizza and drink and rush to the couch so he could turn on the game.

"Hey," Adam said awkwardly.

"Hey. Just so you know, this is an 'I'm sorry' pizza," I told him, looking sheepish.

He gave a small laugh. "You mean it's not a pregnancy craving pizza?"

"Well, yeah, kind of a two-for-one deal. Adam, I'm sorry I reacted the way I did to your proposal."

"No, I don't blame you—it all came out wrong, and I should've approached it differently and not sprung that on you with everything else going on—"

"No, you said what you were thinking, and I still doubted you, and I'm sorry. I'm going to have to learn to trust that you mean what you say. It's funny, I never doubted that before. It's one of the things I found so annoying about you, quite frankly. But the moment you started saying things like you cared about me or that...that you loved me," I said quietly, "all of the sudden, I started doubting that you were serious."

“Listen, I realize that you and I both have some skewed views of relationships and love. We’ve been carrying this baggage, but what if we just let it go? Would you be willing to let it go? And start over with me?” he asked softly, moving toward me but seemingly nervous to touch me.

I didn’t answer for a moment, consumed with the way he was fidgeting. He always did that when he was uncertain about something, and for some reason, I found it completely endearing.

I grabbed the hand he had been tapping on the counter and smoothed it over my belly. “I am willing to let go and start over for all of us,” I told him with a smile, delighting in the way his expression softened and his eyes went to my stomach. I definitely wasn’t showing yet, but just knowing that this child we created was in there had his expression turning sweet. “But Adam, the reason I freaked out so much is that. Well, it wasn’t just because I was afraid to get left, but because I knew it would hurt so bad since I’m in love with you.”

His eyes rose to mine, and a big grin stretched across his beautiful lips. “I knew it,” he said happily.

“Really? I pour my heart out to you and tell you I love you and that’s your response?” I asked, playfully annoyed.

“Yep, this is where I tell you I told you so,” he said, moving to me then and taking me into his arms. “And this is also where I tell you that I love you, too. I know neither one of us ever expected this, but now that we’re here, I couldn’t imagine going on this wild ride with anyone else. As it turns out, it’s

you who I've been waiting for and hadn't realized it. But now, you're finally here in my arms. You're finally home with your family, Reagan." His lips hovered over mine.

I smiled up at him, warmth flooding my chest, and so much love and excitement bursting at my seams. "It's good to be home," I said, throwing my arms around him and laid a kiss on his lips that had me stumbling back for a moment as we laughed against each other.

"I have some good news," I told him.

"What could be better than what you just told me?" he murmured against my mouth.

"How about Baker dropping the case?"

"What? That's fantastic!" Twirling me around excitedly a couple of times, he whooped like an overexcited kid before I pounded on his shoulder.

"Oh, right, nausea, sorry," he said, laughing.

"I'll settle for a kiss instead," I told him, and he happily obliged.

We stayed in that moment in each other's arms, absorbed in one another, until we heard a, "Eww, you're kissing, gross," from Wolfie.

"That's right, Wolf-Man. That's what two people do when they're in love with each other," Adam told the boy with a smile.

Wolfie looked between the two of us. “I knew it. Can we eat pizza now?”

I laughed along with Adam as we followed Wolfie into the living room to have our “family dinner.”

For the first time ever, I let the fear of rejection go. I let the fear of the future go as I watched these two guys who I loved more than anything in the world. Dr. Adam Rollins had always proven to be a huge pain in my ass, but as we locked eyes, I smiled. He was my pain in the ass, and I loved him for it.

Epilogue: Adam

One year later...

“That’s it, buddy, keep your eye on the prize—you got this!” I called from the stands as Wolfie moved the puck with a stick, leading other little boys in the charge.

Reagan had expressed a little bit of concern about Wolfie joining the kids’ hockey team, but as we watched our boy skating on the ice and running laps around all the other kids, she was visibly relaxed—something that I was not only grateful for, but I knew our son was also immensely grateful for.

George Julian Rollins had entered the world three months ago, and if I thought I had felt love before, it was nothing compared to holding that baby in my arms and having him look up at me with his mom’s bright eyes.

He was a fairly chill baby, which kind of surprised everyone involved, considering who his parents were. Wolfie adored him and loved being a big brother to him, and this kid had

everyone wrapped around his little finger. But at the moment, his mother had been rocking him maybe a little too enthusiastically as she watched from the sidelines as Wolfie navigated the ice in his hockey gear.

“It’s okay, you can say it,” I said to her with a smile.

She rolled her eyes, letting out an annoyed breath. “Fine, you were right—he’s killing it out there, but I worry it’s not the safest of sports.”

“It’s not like he’s in the big leagues. He will be fine.” I told her for the umpteenth time.

She shook her head at me and smiled down at our little boy. “Your daddy’s right one time, and now, he thinks he’s the king of the world.”

“Nu-huh, I seem to remember another time I was right about you and me, and that’s paid off big time, if I do say so myself,” I said, smiling down at my son, cooing at him.

George smiled at me and gurgled.

Reagan looked at me fondly. “All right, you got me there,” she admitted.

We cheered on Wolfie for the rest of the game, and then, once the game was done, all of the parents in the stands clapped. We waited for Wolfie to come to find us. He grinned broadly as he climbed the stairs. “Did you see that? I made a goal!”

“We did see that, buddy. It was amazing, great job!” I said, high fiving him.

“Did you ask her yet?” he asked me with excitement.

I looked over furtively at Reagan, who looked at me strangely. “Not yet, buddy,” I said behind my hands. “I was waiting for you to be here, remember?”

“Oh, right.”

“Are you ready?” I asked him.

“Yup,” he said, walking to Reagan and asking, “can I hold George, please?”

“Well, sure, just be careful. Remember how to hold his head,” Reagan said as she pulled George out of the baby Bjorn and gently laid George in his big brother’s arms. Wolfie held George as instructed and then stepped to the side. By the time Reagan turned back around to face me, I was down on one knee.

“All right, Miles, I don’t know what else I have to do to get you to say yes, but whatever it is, I’ll do it—just name it. Make me and Wolf-Man here the happiest guys in the world and marry me?”

A wide grin overtook her mouth and tears slipped from her eyes.

“What do you say, Reagan?”

“I say, don’t you know by now that you’re stuck with me?” she asked playfully.

I jumped up from my crouch, pulled her into my arms, spinning her around a couple of times and laughing into her

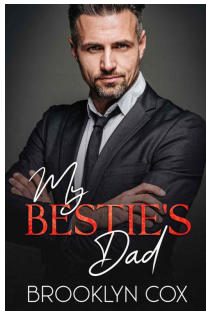
hair. "I love you so much."

"I know," she said, and I had to laugh because it had taken so long to make her really understand that I did indeed love her and that I wasn't going anywhere. "I love you, too. Forever?"

I touched my forehead to hers. "Forever," I promised.

The End

Thank you so much for your interest in my books. If you enjoyed this story and wondered what happened with Reagan's dad and her best friend, Amy, you need to check out my other hot forbidden romance, *My Bestie's Dad*. Get it now by clicking [HERE](#).



My bestie's dad just took my v-card. Oops.

My roommate thought a hot girls summer in Malibu would mend my broken heart. She didn't know how right she was.

My confidence got a boost when her sexy dad rescued me in the waves. We had an instant connection.

I can't stop thinking about how the ocean water beads on his sculpted abs.

Now we are living under the same roof and our attraction is impossible to ignore.

My friend would be scarred for life if she knew what I was doing in every room of her house with her Dad while she was at work.

People don't expect us to be together and neither did I.

My feelings for him are more than just physical but I don't know if he loves me the same way. I'm willing to risk everything to find out.

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Here's a sneak peak of Chapter One

Amelia

“Ames, I'm telling you that we would have the time of our lives. You would love my dad's beach house—it overlooks the water, and it's huge, so you wouldn't have to worry about privacy.”

I sighed as I transferred the rest of my clothes from my small dresser to my suitcase. Reagan was attempting for the hundredth time to convince me to spend the summer with her and her dad at his beach house in Malibu. I really appreciated her efforts, but I was so done with pity.

A few weeks ago, I'd walked in on my boyfriend having sex with the girl that lived three dorms down from me and Reagan. Obviously, I'd never expected to catch my boyfriend of three years in the act, but what was worse was the way Michael had reacted to my stunned expression. The words had been playing

on loop in my head for several weeks straight: “I don’t know why you’re so surprised, Amy—it’s not like you were putting out.”

The whole incident was humiliating enough, but Michael’s very vocal reminder to me, and apparently anyone who would listen that I was still a virgin, just added more salt to the wound. It wasn’t like I’d set out to stay a virgin into my early twenties, and it wasn’t like I hadn’t opportunities to do it. It just never felt quite right. Maybe it was the way I’d heard other girls talk about it, like it was just something to get over with. I’d been warned more than once that I probably wouldn’t like it at first, and with the way Michael pawed at me, I believed that. Every time we came close to going all the way, something stopped me. It wasn’t like I was expecting any big romance or rose petals or something like that. I just thought that I probably shouldn’t feel like I wanted to throw up right before I had sex with someone.

When I’d shared my feelings with Reagan, she’d laughed out loud, then clapped a hand over her mouth. “I’m sorry, girl, but if you were worried about upchucking right before you did the deed, then Michael clearly was not the one to be giving your V-card to.”

As if that wasn’t humiliating enough, it turned out the girl Michael was with, Scarlet, saw fit to tell everyone on campus all the gory details—including the apparently “hilarious” look of horror on my face and what a prude I must have been. My misery was the source of her current joy. Her love for gossip drove students I’d never even met to leave me notes on the

board of my dorm room telling me in various crude ways how they could help me “loosen up.” It was like some bizarre reversal of the Scarlet A stitched to my chest with my virgin status being spread around on social media like a wildfire and some men finding it to be a personal challenge.

As distressing as that was, for the most part, others on campus didn't seem to share in her delight. Instead, they looked at me with pity, and I'd even caught people whispering behind their hands, “That is the girl that...,” or, “I heard she's a virgin.”

Honestly, in this day and age, I would have thought we were all evolved enough to not care. Apparently, I was deadass wrong.

I only had one semester left before I graduated college—something I reminded myself of at least twenty times a day now, and I hated how much the end of my college days were spent feeling like I was right back in high school. High school had been miserable. I'd been the girl who would do other students' homework to avoid conflict, and I had been well on that track in college, too, until I met Reagan. Reagan had my back from day one, and she'd given me the courage to put myself out there. In no time, I had a boyfriend, a circle of friends, and a new lease on life. But as great as Reagan had been, the last few weeks had shown me that it was going to take real work from myself to keep from reverting back to my doormat status. That was part of the reason I kept refusing her offer to stay with her for the summer. As appealing as a summer in a beach house lolling about the sand sounded, I

didn't want to feel like I was mooching off my best friend after getting dumped. Unfortunately, that meant that I would be spending the summer in my old bedroom in my parents' house when I wasn't taking shifts at the burger shack for extra cash—so much for not feeling like a high schooler again.

“Reagan, you know I appreciate the offer, but I need to figure this out on my own,” I told her as I zipped up my suitcase.

Reagan rolled her eyes and sighed dramatically. “Uhh, that whole ‘I am an island’ bull. Our society has over-romanticized going it alone. There’s nothing wrong with leaning on your friends in times of need.”

“I know, I just think I need to do this on my own,” I told her. She opened her mouth to argue more, but the text alert chirping on my phone interrupted her. “That’s food,” I said, slinging the strap of my purse over my shoulder. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Begrudgingly, she allowed my excuse to work, but not with another massive eyeroll. “You can dodge me now, but this conversation is not over,” she warned.

I smiled at her. “Yes, mother,” I called over my shoulder, ducking just in time to miss the pillow she threw at me.

“And don’t forget extra soy sauce,” she called after me as I shut the door behind me. God bless her, that girl had been holding my hand every step of the way since Michael’s betrayal. I really didn’t deserve her as a friend. She always knew just what to say, and as I walked across the courtyard,

my steps felt a little bit lighter knowing she was rooting for me.

Maybe I would come back to school in a couple of months as a whole new woman. Maybe I would reinvent myself and no longer be the woman who people looked at with pity or laughed at. As if I conjured it, I heard laughter behind my back...all too familiar laughter. Before I could stop myself, I looked back, and there she was. Scarlet. She had her arms wrapped around the very familiar neck of a tall, lanky man who was my ex-boyfriend, and she was grinning like the Cheshire cat as she locked eyes with me. When our eyes met, her grin widened, and she held my gaze as she started kissing the side of Michael's neck. Next to them, I saw one of Scarlet's friends turn around and laugh maniacally when she realized what was going on.

I ripped my gaze away and rushed towards my destination, the Chinese restaurant across the street. My face burned as I hoofed it across the street, and it occurred to me how much I'd spent my life trying to pretend everything was ok, which was particularly difficult considering I had a horrible poker face. I was so damn tired of soldiering on. I smiled politely at the cashier when I picked up my order, acting like I hadn't just been humiliated yet again.

The cashier's name was Lucy. She was a friendly girl who I'd partnered with on a few projects in various classes. She took one look at me and said, dismayed, "Oh no, what happened?"

Oh God, please not now...shit, too late. My face crumpled. I scrambled to recover, but to my horror, the tears were already streaming down my face like I sprung a damn leak.

“Oh no, oh, Amy,” Lucy said sympathetically as she came from behind the register and hooked an arm through mine, leading me somewhere more private. Whether this was to save me from further embarrassment or to keep from ruining the appetites of the dine-in patrons, I wasn’t sure. All I knew was that I was now in the kitchen of Chen’s Cafe, bawling my eyes out while my former lab partner patted me soothingly on the back and encouraged me to let it all out. I did just that. I spilled everything I just saw and everything that had been going on for the last few weeks and how I was probably going to be a virgin forever and why the hell did I waste three years on a man who couldn’t even remember my birthday but could remember all the word to Blink 182’s “All the Small Things.”

By the time all of it was out, Lucy was holding me and Mrs. Chen, the cafe’s owner, along with one of the waitresses were circling around me. The waitress, whose name tag read Alyssa shook her head in disgust. “Men are shit, you remember that,” she said, pointing at me.

“Not all men,” Lucy said.

“Yes all men,” Alyssa insisted, scooting out of the kitchen with a pitcher of water.

Lucy sighed. “Well, I can’t say I agree with her, but as far as your ex-boyfriend is concerned—,”

“Fuck that guy,” Mrs. Chen interjected.

“Well, yeah that,” Lucy said with a small smile. For the first time in a long time, I laughed, a true genuine laugh at the sound of sweet Mrs. Chen saying that about Michael. It was only three simple words, but something about her conviction in them shoved some of the weight off my chest.

“There you go, that’s better,” Lucy encouraged. “Look, I know things feel dark now, but you’re going to have a great summer, I just know it—I’m great at reading auras. You have some amazing things ahead of you, you really do.”

“Thank you, Lucy, Mrs. Chen.” I nodded towards the older woman.

Mrs. Chen nodded and tapped Lucy on the shoulder. “Two extra egg rolls in her bag, on the house.” I thanked her, and she disappeared toward the back.

“I’m sorry for taking you away from your job,” I sniffed. “No. No, don’t be sorry. I’m just glad you could get it out. Here,” she said, pulling a notepad out of her apron pocket and tearing off a sheet and handing it, along with a pen, over to me. “Write down your birthday and the minute you were born, and I’ll do your chart for you— free of charge. I bet it’ll back up the reading I’m getting from your aura. You just wait and see. Your life is about to change, Amy.”

I couldn’t say I really believed her, but I wrote down the information she asked for anyway because she’d been so sweet to me. After thanking her profusely, I finally gathered up my order and left. I walked around the long way to get back to the dorm room, not feeling hungry anymore despite the appetizing

smells wafting up from the takeout bag in my hand. I was sick of feeling embarrassed, of feeling cornered and alone. I was mad at the fact that I was holding back tears once again over my dirtbag ex-boyfriend, and I was just so over all the bullshit. When I stepped into the dorm room I shared with Reagan, she took one look at me and asked, “What’s wrong?”

Before I could talk myself out of it, I told Reagan, “I think I want to come with you for the summer.”

“What? That’s awesome!” She jumped up from her bed. “Oh my God, we’re going to have so much fun...” She continued on, excitedly rambling the whole time, and as we dug into our food, we came up with plans for all the things we would do on the beach, just a couple of single, carefree, young women enjoying the sun.

“Ooh, I need to call my dad and tell him we’re going to have even more fun this summer since you’re going to be there,” she said, reaching for her phone.

“Are you sure he’s going to be ok with me crashing the party? I mean, I don’t want to interrupt any quality time you were planning on having,” I worried.

Reagan waved off my concern. “No worries, he has a home office at the beach house, so he still spends a good deal of time working during the day.” She looked up at me with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes, “Which leaves us with plenty of time to find some trouble of our own.”

I smiled but silently vowed to myself that while I would spend the summer having fun with my best friend, I would

also take the opportunity to work on myself and try new things
—no more little miss doormat. No more poor Amy.

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