

GRUMP DADDY

BLAIR BROWN

Grump Daddy

An Enemies to Lovers Romance

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Also By Blair Brown

Chapter One

JACK

I'm nervous enough. I can't believe the bus is late. I'm sitting here, looking at my watch, my right leg jumping involuntarily. This is all I need. This is a big meeting I have got to get to. At the moment, I have only got about twenty minutes to get there. *Where is that damned bus?*

I would've caught the earlier bus if not for that stupid pigeon attack on my way out the door. My brand new suede and leather jacket was completely ruined and I went back inside and spent another twenty minutes going through my closet looking for another coat. Surprisingly, I don't have a lot of nice coats. At least not as many that were as nice as that one.

I have got a head thing about being late. It's one of those things about me. I have always lived by the rule that if you're on time, you're fifteen minutes late. It would just figure that I have an important business conference to attend today and the universe is finding every possible way to slow me down. I

look down at my phone for the time and it buzzes. What do you know? Clark's calling. *Of course, he is.*

"Jack, where the hell are you?" he barks. "The conference is going to begin in, like, literally 20 minutes, and we still need to go over our stuff. Jeez, I told you to be on time, man."

"It's the universe's fault, Clark," I say wearily. "I was shat on by a pigeon this morning and by the time I finally got out to the bus stop, it turns out that I was on time, but it wasn't. What can I do?"

"You can try by not sounding so nonchalant about it," he growls. "Look, I don't actually care how you do it, but I need you here ASAP. Run here if you have to. If you don't get here before this conference begins, we are dead meat." And with that said, he hung up before I could say anything more.

I don't blame Clark for being pissed. He means well, even if he's confused about who really is the boss at times. He didn't always use to be this way. Before he became CEO, he was a pretty mellow guy. After, though...well, I guess the stress of the whole thing has just gotten to him.

Still, this is my company he's losing his head over. I was the one who came up with the idea for the app. I started the first bits of coding for it and organized the first beta tests. I can't tell you how many nights I stayed up late, hunched over my laptop at the kitchen table. I have got chronic back pain and carpal tunnel from those long nights and now, all those small beginnings have finally turned into a startup with a bright future and high valuation. I mean, we aren't quite there yet. A

lot of other companies have their eyes on us. This time, though, it feels like the rent is finally due after all these years and we're about to get paid.

And yet...here I'm stuck at the bus stop instead of at a meeting where one of those big companies is waiting for my presentation. I pull out my phone again and decide to get an Uber. I can't afford it, but what other choice do I have?

Minutes later, the Uber pulls up and I slide in the back. The car smelled heavily of some incense-y car potpourri and the driver was all smiles when I got in. "Hi, there!" she said. "Having a good morning?"

I can't express how not in the mood I was for this. "Can you just drive? I'm running late."

"Ooh," she says. "Somebody's grumpy."

She's driving entirely too slow, or at least it feels that way (funny how it always feels that way when you're in a hurry), but, to her credit, she manages to get me there in less than ten minutes. Relieved, I make sure to put in a big tip in the app as hazard pay for my 'grumpiness.' I jump out of the car and bolt up the stairs of the building, whizzing past security and straight up the stairs. When I get to the second floor, I race down the hallways to Clark's office.

I open the sleek glass door and see Clark pacing back and forth while looking at his phone.

"Sweet baby Jesus, you made it," he says. I almost expect him to fall to his knees in gratitude. He walks up to me, then

takes a sharp step back. I was a sweaty mess. “Oh, my God, did you actually run all the way here?”

I’m gasping for breath, but I still manage to say, “Can we please get on with this?”

“Right.” He turns around and brings me the folder with all the talking points for the presentation. As soon as the folder hits my hand, my work mode switches on.

The conference starts and I’m ready. After everything that’s gone down this morning, this will make it all worth it.

The thing is, this meeting is with our potential new investor who, if they actually sign up with us, we’ll all end up making millions of dollars. Being the president and founder, my status would go from single dad juggling work and parenting and barely staying afloat to millionaire status and being able to have whatever I wanted.

That includes time and energy for Martin. Being a single dad, I do whatever I can to make sure Martin never wants for anything. It hasn’t been easy since Camilla left. I do my best to make sure he doesn’t miss the presence of a motherly figure, but it isn’t easy. I try my very hardest to give Martin the best and not let him feel the void of a motherly figure. I try not to think too hard about those first days after Camilla left. It was like she took a piece of me with her and I was left with this gaping hole in my heart. When things were the darkest, I turned to my son instead of turning inward. It isn’t his fault his mom left and he shouldn’t pay for my heartbreak. He deserves to have a good childhood.

Now I can see that my relationship with Camilla was a mistake. Her carefree and wanderlust personality had attracted me at first. She was a party girl and I was all for the excitement that brought. We had fun drinking and staying out at all hours. Every night with her felt like tomorrow was never going to come. The party just didn't end.

That is until Camilla got pregnant. And then I realized it was time to grow up.

It's crazy. You'd think that pregnancy would have slowed her down. It didn't. And that's about when the fights started. She stopped drinking, thank goodness, but everything else just kept going. Staying out at all hours, dancing until the sun came up. At first, I went with her, thinking I could reign her in. After a while, though, she started going out without me. Nothing I said mattered to her and the farther along she got in her pregnancy, the more I started to worry for our son.

Luckily, Martin was born healthy despite his mother's partying ways. Somehow, I thought that all it would take was for her to see him. To just hold him and look him in the eyes and everything would calm down finally. It didn't. It wasn't much longer than that she left me for another man.

So, now it's just me and my boy.

Bringing up a child is one of the most expensive undertakings possible, trust me. Between diapers and formula, then clothes and shoes, then daycare and school uniforms and immunizations... It's a wonder I have been able to keep any money in my account. I want to provide my son with the best

education, the best food, and the best of everything, but all of that costs money. We've been able to get by all right. I wouldn't call us dirt poor or anything, but nice things just aren't on the grocery list.

When you know your child deserves better, it drives you. It drove me to create this app. For him, I stayed up late every night working on this thing and finding investors, all in the hopes that someday I'll make it big and provide him with a life that most people dream about.

He's who I'm thinking of when the doors to the conference room open and our potential investors pour in. Five of them, each dressed in expensive suits and ties. I scan each of them, one by one, silently assessing them. And then I see her. It's Sarah.

I blink. I can't believe she's really standing in front of me right now. *What the hell is going on?*

She doesn't see me at first. She's walking in, talking to one of the other investors. But seconds after, her eyes drift to me, then she does a double take. The smile on her face falters a little and her eyes widen. But it's only for a second. She turns away and goes to her assigned seat at the table.

I have got an assigned seat too, but I can't move. I'm frozen like a statue as I feel the world start to fall away around me.

"Sit down, Jack," Clark hisses as he grabs my sleeve and pulls me into my chair.

“Sorry, nerves,” I say out loud. I laugh, trying to make it seem like it’s no big deal. There’s a smattering of good-natured laughter around the table, but I can already feel my face flushing.

Get it together, Jack.

Clark greets everyone formally with a “Thank you for joining us” before going into his part of the presentation. As he talks, his voice turns into a droning noise in my head. I’m too busy looking over at the woman in a green suit with shiny black hair neatly pulled back in a bun.

Sarah. She turns her head, following Clark as he moves around the room. There’s that mole. Just under her jawline but not quite at the center of her neck. Yup. That’s her all right. That mole that she was so self-conscious of, that I used to kiss gently, my tongue running down the line of her graceful neck over that mole, down to her smooth shoulders...

Oh, shit, stop it.

What am I doing? I avert my eyes quickly as her head turns my way. She didn’t catch me staring...I don’t think. I hope she didn’t catch me staring.

Sarah and I dated around six years ago and... I’m not going to lie; I really had fun with her. But we just weren’t compatible. We fought over so many misunderstandings and miscommunications. Hurt feelings started festering between us and eventually, she left; she ghosted me, in fact.

It's crazy. One morning, her texts just stopped coming. I'd call her and she wouldn't answer. I'd text just to be left with read and unanswered messages. It was like she'd vanished into thin air. I was upset with her for obvious reasons, but eventually, I got over it. At least, I thought I was over it. Seeing her again, sitting in front of me during one of the most important moments of my life... I'm pissed. The resentment I felt all those years ago is welling up inside of me again and all I want to know is why. Why did she just disappear the way she did? Was I that unworthy of her time?

Clark suddenly slaps me on the shoulder and says through gritted teeth, "It's your turn, Jack."

I'm pulled out of my memories and back into the present. "Right," I say, standing up and clearing my throat. "Sorry about that." That's the second time I have apologized. Dammit. *Focus. This is for Martin.*

I regain my composure and begin my presentation, averting my gaze from the red zone area where Sarah sits and trying my level best to make every word sound as convincing as possible. After I finish, I read everyone's faces. I'm seeing satisfied faces and even a few that looked impressed. *So far, so good.*

After the meeting concludes, we empty the room and Clark pats me on my back. He raises his eyebrows at me in a silent *Good Job* kind of look. We shake our colleagues' hands one by one as they leave the room, bound for the elevators.

It's all good...until Sarah walks up to me.

She conjures a tight grin as her hand extends out to me. Her delicate fingers with silver rings and a thin silver bracelet around her wrist. Manicured nails with French tips, nothing fancy or garish. That's not her style.

"Your product is pretty interesting," she says, her voice as smoky as tinted glass.

I clear my throat and say, "Thanks. We've worked hard on it." I'm holding onto her hand as I take in her presence. She's looking at me with those oceanic eyes. Blue and deep with mystery. Her rosy complexion and red lips seem to lift the color in her eyes just a little. She's hypnotic to look at. She's *always* been hypnotic to look at.

She holds my hand without recoiling from me, but I'm holding her hand a little harder than I mean to. Maybe it's because I'm still pissed or maybe because I just don't want to let her go. Maybe a little of both.

The old fire's rekindling and I despise the idea of it.

I glance at our conjoined hands and then at her flushed face. *She's blushing!* That's unexpected. Clearly, it's unexpected for her, too, because she suddenly pulls her hand out of my grip and says, "I'll have my assistant contact you." Then, without saying goodbye, she turns away, making a beeline toward the elevators.

I watch her go. Her walk is as powerful as I remember it to be. The way her hips swing with every sure step in those expensive red heels. *She's made for this*, I think to myself. Confidence exudes from her.

I can feel Clark's eyes on me, but I can't be bothered to explain right now. My first thought is that if this deal is signed, I'm going to end up seeing her again and probably quite frequently. I'm not sure what to feel about that.

"Hey," said Clark nudging me. "You all right?"

"Yeah, I say." Now, out of the Sarah vortex, my stomach starts to rumble. I haven't had time for breakfast in all my hurrying out the door this morning. "Let's grab something to eat."

We eat at the cafeteria in the building and carry on with the rest of our day. All the while, Sarah and my memories of her are running through my mind. I can't seem to shake her.

She's still on my mind the next day. All morning and all the way to work. I keep getting these flashbacks from the past. Memories are dangerous that way. I'm starting to remember how I used to feel when things were good.

This is sad the way my brain is clinging to her. Four years ago, I became a single dad when Camilla left and two years before that, was the business with Sarah. It's been a long time since I have let myself date again. Is this loneliness bringing these emotions up?

I'm sitting at my desk when all this comes up inside of me, financial reports on my computer screen. Me staring off into space. Clark had asked me to look at this an hour ago. Why is he bothering me with this kind of thing anyway? Don't we pay other people to worry about this? I'm going to have to talk to

Clark about that, but not right now. He's got his mind on an upcoming meeting.

I look through the window of my office, across the hall and I see him pacing back and forth in his office, waiting for our potential business partners to arrive. From what I understand, they called because they weren't clear on the details surrounding funding. I should really get on these financial reports.

It's hard to focus, though. Especially knowing Sarah is going to be there too.

I get the reports reviewed just in time for them to arrive and before long, we're all seated again in the conference room. This time, we don't waste any time. There's talk back and forth about money and finances and...

And I'm barely paying attention. Sarah is wearing a black dress that clings to her body. It's long enough to be respectable, but I can see her thighs as she crosses her legs. She's wearing her hair down today. Long and black and shining in the light from the daylight coming in through the windows. Jesus, she's beautiful.

She's standing up now and I can see the full view of her dress and how it's complimenting her curves. Sarah's always been shapely. Round hips and full, firm breasts that seemed to sit up on their own. She's smiling. Those full red lips begging to be kissed.

"I think we have a deal, gentlemen," she says. And suddenly, Clark is nudging me and bringing me back into the

present. It takes a second for me to process...but from the look on Clark's face, I think we're actually done it."

"Eight hundred and fifty million dollars," says Clark, slapping his hands together. "I can't tell you what a pleasure this has been."

We'd done it. Eight hundred and fifty million dollars is how much they agreed to invest for a 35 percent stake in the company. That's what had been decided while I was undressing Sarah in my mind. I'm mad at it, of course. Quite the opposite. This was exactly the outcome we'd been trying for. I just wish I'd been present for the talks. It's all good, though. I still own 55 percent of the company, so it's not like I won't be able to make all the important decisions.

But also, I'm a fucking millionaire. *A millionaire.*

As the realization is coming over me, I pull Clark in for a hug with one arm wrapped around his neck roughly. Merrily. Okay, that's highly unprofessional, but no one cares. A deal that was going to end up making us billions had just been struck.

Sarah's smiling at me and my heart flutters. I look away from her quickly.

The company's CEO, Mr. Smith, says in a deep, crackly voice, "We should celebrate this deal. How about dinner?"

"Yes, of course, sir," says Clark. "And you know what? The dinner's on me." He gets a round of applause for that.

Mr. Smith nods and says, “That’ll do us just fine. We already spent enough money.”

Bright laughter from everyone. Mr. Smith adjusts his expensive suit jacket and says, “I can’t wait to get started on this thing on Monday. We’ll be sure our people are well briefed on all that needs to be done.”

I just lost him. I glance at Clark, but I keep smiling. I guess this is what I get for not paying attention at the most important meeting of my career.

After everyone’s gone, I turn to Clark, who’s all smiles.

“See,” he said. “I told you we had nothing to worry about.”

I snorted a laugh at him, knowing it was really the other way around on who was worried. “Listen, I spaced out for a minute. They’re coming back here on Monday?”

Clark nodded. “Yeah. They would only agree to the terms if they could have a team overseeing the project.”

I feel a pit of dread in my stomach. *Oh, no.* I already know the answer before I ask. “Who’s the project manager?”

He shook his head. “You must have been really out of it,” he said. “They’re having Sarah, um...” He paused, trying to remember her last name. Clark has always been terrible with names.

It doesn’t matter, though. I know who he’s talking about.

All right. So, it’s as I feared. The ghost of my past has walked right back into my life and is now sitting at the same

table as me. This was going to be a mess.

She'll be at dinner tonight. I guess I ought to make the best of it.

She's eating soup and so am I. We keep glancing at each other from across the table, but, so far, neither of us has spoken directly to the other.

I'm not sure what to say. How do I start a conversation with a woman I used to have a meaningful relationship with?

The air around us is already thick. I'm trying not to notice her cleavage or the way the amber light of the restaurant is making her skin appear to glow.

Damn, she's as stunning as ever.

I twirl my spoon in the bowl of soup, having lost my appetite, when suddenly her voice rings in my ears. I look up and realize she's speaking to me.

"Pa-pardon?" I stutter, clearly embarrassed that I'm daydreaming amidst our celebratory dinner.

She starts again, "Are you feeling well? You look a little pale."

"I'm fine," I say. "I guess I'm just not very hungry. I had a big lunch." It's a lie, but I'm not about to let her think she's getting to me.

She goes silent and now it's awkward. I suppose it's my turn to continue the conversation. I quickly say, "So, how long have you been working with this company?"

“For about three years or so. What about you?”

“Around three years, too,” I reply.

I glance around us and notice that no one is paying us any attention. Everyone is deep in conversation with one another. I guess this is as good of a time as any to rip the Band-Aid and test the waters.

I clear my throat and start again. “So, how have things been?” I say casually.

She blinks, frozen with her spoon hanging over her soup. Her expression is hard to read, but that’s nothing new. She’s always been hard to read. Her eyebrows are wrinkled at the center and the corners of her mouth quiver downward.

She averts her gaze. “Excuse me, I need to use the restroom.”

Okay, so she doesn’t want to talk? Not surprising. She stopped talking to me long ago. She gets up from the table and my temper flares. Always walking away from me. Never wanting to hash things out. Not this time.

I follow her, walking directly behind her until I get hold of her hand. We’re just passing the door, so I lead her in that direction, pulling her out of the restaurant.

“Who do you think you are?” She shrieks at me as she jerks her arm away. “What the hell, Jack?” Her glare pierces through me.

“Oh, finally, she’s speaking to me again,” I say sarcastically. “I feel so honored.”

The angry look on her face shifts into something else. A knowing smirk appears and she crosses her arms, manicured hands sitting pretty on her arms. “Are you serious right now? It’s been six years.”

“Yeah. Six years and no word from you,” I say. “You disappear into the night without so much as a ‘goodbye’, then you show up here like nothing happen.”

She scoffs and says, “Okay, Jack, you want to do this now? Fine. Let’s get it over with.”

I’m astounded by her nonchalant attitude. It’s like she just left the dishes in the sink and I’m throwing a tantrum over it. “What’s the story?” I say irritably.

“Story?” Her eyebrows bunch. “What story, Jack?”

“Why did you leave? Or better yet, why did you just decide to erase me from your life? I mean, one day, we’re together, and the next, you are no longer speaking to me.”

“That’s what you think? You think I erased you?”

“It’s sure what it seems like.” She’s turning away from me, rolling her eyes like a petulant teenager. “You disappeared on me, Sarah. You left without any word at all. You didn’t answer my calls or my texts—”

“You know, you’ve got a lot of nerve, Jack,” she barks angrily. Ha. That was rich. She’s mad at me. What’s she got to be angry about? She was the one who left.

“It was a lifetime ago. How dare you jump all over me with this?” Her blue eyes are sparking, though and it’s stirring

something familiar and savage inside of me.

“I didn’t know what happened to you!” I shout over her. “You know, I went to your house, even and you didn’t open the door.”

“Maybe I wasn’t home.”

“You were home,” I snarl. “You were home all right. You just didn’t answer the door—”

“You were not the only one in that relationship, Jack!” Tears are hanging in her eyes as her face contorts in rage. “Are you so self-centered to think that I broke up with you for no reason? That you did nothing wrong? The way I see it, you were the one who left me first.”

I’m thrown off by that. *I was the one that left her? What?*

She reads the confusion on my face and laughs hollowly. “Of course, you have no idea what I’m talking about. You’re just so...clueless. Like you walk through this world like you’re the only one in it. But you’re not, Jack. Other people in this world have feelings just like you and it hurts just as much when you step all over them.”

She sounds resigned, almost apologetic even. It’s like she’s been through the wringer over and over again. I sigh, accepting what she’s saying.

“Sarah,” I say, “What happened? What did I do that was so terrible?” She rolls her eyes and turns away, but I’m not letting her blow this off. “Just tell me where it all went wrong. I

deserve to know the reason for our breakup. Dammit, it was *our* breakup, but I didn't get any say in it. What did I do?"

I let the question hang in the air between us. She just shakes her head, looking away from me as her face flushes again.

"Jack," she says with a long sigh. "This is an old conversation. One that I'm not willing to have anymore. I have licked my wounds and walked away from this long ago. I'm not reopening them again for you."

"Don't, Sarah. Don't shut me out. You owe me—"

"I don't owe you anything." Her voice has taken on a cold tone and her eyes are like ice. Ice with tears hanging in them. "As they say, 'ignorance is bliss,' so stick to that. It suits you," she says icily.

I don't know what to say. She blames me. She actually blames me! And I don't even know why? I mean, I wasn't perfect in our relationship, but who is?

The door to the restaurant opens and Clark comes stumbling out. "Hey, Jack, there you are, my dude," he slurs. He looks like a mess. His tie is undone and one side of his shirt is hanging out of his pants. I don't know what's happened in there, but the party has been elevated in our absence.

"Hey," I look at Sarah, and we simultaneously put distance between us. "I just needed some air."

"Well, get your air and get back in here. The party's just starting. Smith just ordered a couple of bottles of champagne

and we're thinking about heading to this club around the corner. You're down, right?"

"No," I say, glancing over at Sarah again. She's not looking at me. Her arms are crossed tightly across her chest. She's done talking to me. "I think I'm done for the night."

Clark looks from me to her and back again. I can see something clicking around in his drunken state. "Hey," he says. "Are you two all right?"

"We're fine," I answer, pulling out my phone. "And you've had enough for the night. I'm calling you an Uber."

"No," he said, waving me off and I huff.

"Clark—"

"All right, all right," he says. He can hear the annoyance in my voice. "I get the picture. But don't waste your money. My place is just around the corner." He gives a sloppy gesture in the general direction of his house. Then he walks up to me and puts an arm across my shoulder and leans into me, the heavy scent of alcohol on his breath. "You know what I'm going to do, buddy? I'm gonna buy my beautiful wife some roses, and then I'm gonna make sweet love to her."

I see a slight smile on Sarah's face, but only for a second. She's turning her head a little farther away, so I can't see. I guess this is a little comical.

"Clark," I say, "that's not appropriate."

"Here," Clark shoves his car keys into my hand. "Take my car. I'm not going to need it tonight." He turns to Sarah,

peering at her through his drunken haze. “In fact, I don’t see your car around. You know, my buddy Jack is a great designated driver. You should let him take you home.”

“Oh, no, I say. I can’t—”

“You will. Or you’re fired.” Clark chuckles at his own joke, then staggers across the street into the florist’s shop.

We both watch him stumble across the street for a minute, then, in a serendipitous moment, we both laugh.

“At least he didn’t see us fighting,” she says, biting her lip thoughtfully.

“At least.” I flip Clark’s keys around in my hand. “You didn’t drive here, did you?”

“I’m fine,” she says. Not as cold, but still a little chilly. “I can catch an Uber.”

“Let me drop you off. I mean, it’s getting late and the car service is expensive. Out of everything, I’m not going to have you saying I left you on your own in the streets, too,” I say all this matter-of-factly.

She glances at me and starts to say something. Then turns away wearily, obviously giving up on it. “Sure, thanks.”

Moments later, the evening air pours into the car as I accelerate on the empty highway. I glance over at Sarah, and I’m entranced by the sight of her. Her black hair’s undone and is blowing in the wind, blending with the sky as if she’s part of it. Her skin’s pale, her lips almost crimson. She’s beautiful and it takes so much of me to focus on the road.

Yes, I'm still frustrated with our conversation; but it's hard to maintain that feeling when I'm with her like this. There's nothing but the wind between us and the starry sky before us. At this moment, we're in sync, in rhythm. It's just like it always was.

She catches me staring, and I quickly turn away, clenching my jaw. I look like a creep to her, I'm sure of it. She doesn't say anything, though. I dare another glance at her, only to see the corners of her full lips curl upwards.

We're driving past the overlook near her place and the beach just beyond it. The smell of the salt air is heavy here and even at night, the dark waters of the ocean are magnificent. And it occurs to me I don't really want it to end just yet.

"Let's park for a second," I suggest.

Her thoughtful gaze remains on the evening sky as dusk sparks the most spectacular rays of orange and blue.

"Sure," she finally says faintly.

I park the car at the overlook, facing it toward the beach and the sea, and we sit in silence, our gazes devouring the view. The only sound I can hear is the waves crashing on the shore, with the faint sound of the occasional car speeding by on the highway.

"It's such a nice night. So enchanting." Her beauty has only ripened in our time apart.

"Yes," I say, looking at her as she looks out at the stars.
"Beautiful."

She smiles and looks over at me knowingly. “You’ve been staring at me all night.”

I feel my face flush and I look away. “Sorry,” I chuckle, “I guess it’s kind of creepy, huh?”

She shrugs. “I wouldn’t go that far,” she says. “I have been watching you, too.”

That takes me by surprise a little. I mean, I caught her looking back at me a couple of times but...

“I’m better at it than you,” she says with a smirk and I laugh.

“You know, everything doesn’t have to be a competition.”

She rolls her eyes and even that sends warm sparks up my spine. “I have been watching you since that first meeting. When you were trying so hard to pay attention to the meeting and failing miserably.”

Now I feel a little embarrassed. “I was that obvious.”

“I’m literally shocked your partner didn’t notice,” she says with a little giggle. “You were practically drooling. I was about to ask someone if you need help or something.”

We’re both laughing now and I put my hand on my forehead. “Okay, okay,” I say. “I guess I was just...caught off guard, that’s all. I mean, I haven’t seen you in so long and....”

I stop myself. Did I want to get this deep into things? It wasn’t all that long ago that I was angry at her for leaving, and

now...now I was somewhere else in my feelings. Now I just wanted to tell her what it was really like being without her.

“Jack,” she whispers in my silence. I look over at her and she’s looking down at her hands. Her profile was like a carved statue in this light. Complete perfection. No blemishes or cracks. She was a work of art.

She swallowed, her mouth opening delicately as if she were choosing her next words. “Do you ever think of me?”

“Yes, always,” I answer honestly and without hesitation. “Do you ever think of me?”

“I do. You know, once upon a time, we were friends, not just lovers. I wonder if that’s where we went wrong. Maybe we never should have crossed that line.”

Then why did we? I want to ask her, but I don’t think I want to know the answer. Instead, I just reply, “Can’t really unring that bell, can we?”

She shakes her head slowly. We fall into silence again and I think that maybe, just maybe, this is how it’s supposed to be. Maybe we were never meant to be lovers at all. Maybe that’s where it all fell apart. Doomed from the beginning.

She looks over at me and her eyes are dark in this light. Her lips are pouty and moist and all I want right now is to kiss her one more time. Us two, doomed in our attraction. It seemed only fitting.

“Jack,” she said, her voice soft and inviting. “Kiss me.”

It was all the invitation I needed. I reach for her delicate chin, running my thumb along her jawline. Her breath hitches and I inhale, taking in the familiar floral scent of her perfume – Lillies. The smell haunted me for years after she left, making me turn my head to find her every time I'd smell it on the street or in a store. Now I was diving into it as I pulled her lips to mine.

It's like she never left my arms. I feel myself molding into her as if she never left me. We've always been together this way. Her tongue finds mine and intertwines itself with mine. I'm tasting her sweet lips and she's gently nipping mine. It's the same passion, the same fire between us...

Her hand presses to my chest and moves up and around my neck, her fingers twisting themselves up into my hair. My hand moves from her knee to her thigh. She's moving toward me, letting my hand find the hem of her skirt and slip just beyond it. A small whimper rushes from her lips and the soft sound of her moans spur me on.

"I want you so bad," I murmur and I feel her smile against my lips.

"What are you waiting for?" She pushes me away and climbs into the back seat. Her pretty blue eyes twinkle in the darkness of the car, daring me.

I move faster than I'd ever moved in my life and the next thing I know, we're kissing again, my hands in her hair as she starts to undo my belt.

“Shit, this is my Clark’s car,” I laugh. “I can’t believe we’re doing this.”

She giggles. “Reminds me of the time we took off in your mom’s car. Do you remember?”

“Yes,” I snicker as another memory of her swarms my mind. We had driven it up to the beach, built a bonfire, and camped out all night, making love and watching the stars above.

My pants are undone and now she’s hiked up her skirt and pulling her panties down. I watch as she playfully kicks them off her high heel, then kisses me, her hands pushing me down to the back seat. She straddles me, then moves her hips against my manhood, guiding me inside of her. My toes curl in my shoes as I enter. She’s so tight and wet that I can’t hold back the moan that escapes me. I’m in heaven. Pure heaven.

“Oh, shit,” I say in a shuddering moan. I grab hold of her hips as she moves. I can feel her heat through her clothes and I want more of her. I reach under her skirt and grab hold of her ass, squeezing as she rocks her hips. She leans down to me, kissing me again as I move my hips to match hers.

“Oh, Jack...” she whispers between kisses. She moans into my mouth, her hands grabbing handfuls of my hair.

She sits up and unbuttons her blouse, letting it fall off her shoulders. I reach up and take her exposed breasts in my hands, my fingers rubbing against her hardening nipples. I sit upwards and take one of her nipples in my mouth, licking and sucking as the nub hardens in my mouth.

“Yes,” she moans, “Oh...yes...harder...”

I grab hold of her hips and thrust my hips hard against her, thrusting deeper inside of her. She’s gasping, her moans reaching a high and fevered pitch.

“Oh, god, Jack.” She quakes—her body shaking.

A spiraling sensation grabs hold of us and I feel my body start to respond as well. I bite down on my lip, trying to hold onto my own orgasm as her legs start to shake and her chest starts to heave. It slips away from me just I feel her tense up and shiver on top of me.

“I’m coming,” she says. “Oh, Jack...oh...Ooooh.”

“Fuck,” I swear and my body explodes with hers. She goes limp against me and I’m holding her, my hands sliding up her bare back as she kisses my neck.

God, I have missed this woman so much.

Sometime later, I woke up. My body shivers as I open my eyes and look around in the darkness. Sarah’s lying in my arms, topless, nuzzled up against me in the backseat.

The reality of what happened is sinking in. I’m in the backseat of Clark’s car with my half-naked ex-girlfriend. We’d given in to each other like hormonal teenagers. Not a thought to anything but our own carnal desires. I suppose I shouldn’t be too surprised. Our chemistry has always been undeniable.

I sit up a little, trying not to wake Sarah and I notice the clock on the center console in the front seat. The time glares at me in electric blue: “2:17 am”. *Shit*. We’ve been out here all

damn night. Oh, my gosh, Martin! How am I going to explain this to his babysitter? God, I'm an idiot. I glance toward Sarah, still asleep, cuddled up next to me. My heart pumps anew. It's okay. I got this. I reach into my pocket for my phone, then I shoot a quick text to Sylvia, the babysitter.

So sorry, I got caught up with an old friend. Be home shortly. I'll pay you extra for your time.

I hear Sarah gasp herself awake. She sits up wild-eyed, her hair all over her head. "Oh, wow. What time is it?"

She doesn't wait for me to answer. She sees the time just like I did a second ago and she sits straight up in a panicked state. "Oh, no." She grabs her shirt and slings it over her shoulders, covering her bare chest. "No, no, no."

"I know," I say. "It's so late."

She looks at me, then shakes her head. "This isn't good, Jack. What were we thinking? We're supposed to be professionals. Not this." She waves her hand vaguely. "Whatever this is."

She's right. Now after the fact, I realize what a mistake this was. I don't say anything as she's buttoning up her blouse.

"Take me home, Jack," she says and I'm stunned by her sudden coldness.

"Sarah, I get that this shouldn't happen, but maybe we should—"

"We should just forget this ever happened, okay? It's a one-time thing, so let's just never mention this again. It didn't

mean anything. It was just a moment of weakness.”

Her dismissiveness hits me in the gut. I’m not sure if she’s admonishing herself or warning me away, but I don’t like it. That old red pit of anger wells up inside me again.

“The feeling’s mutual. Trust me,” I say before I can stop myself.

She stops and looks at me, her blue eyes trying to read me. “Yeah?” She asks, eyebrows furrowed.

“Yeah. Don’t worry about it. This is just between you and me,” I say with as much sincerity as I can muster.

“Okay.” She blows out a long breath. “Good.”

“Good,” I repeat.

She pauses awkwardly, then says, “There’s no hard feelings or anything, right? I mean...we’re good, aren’t we?”

I manage a smile and say, “Well, *I* was good. I had your toes curling and everything, didn’t I?”

Sarah’s eyes widen, then she hits me on my arm playfully. We both laugh and for a moment, I’m reminded of our days together in the past. She was right before about us being friends first. That was the part of our relationship that I think I miss the most. If things had gone well, maybe she would have made a perfect wife.

I don’t know what went wrong...but if I were given a second chance, I’d fix this.

Fix us.

Regret and sadness well up inside of me. I push them down.

“Let’s get out of here already,” I say and she smiles.

“Good idea.”

I start the engine and press the accelerator.

Chapter Two

SARA

I t's about a month or so later and Jack is still on my mind. I'm getting ready for the day the way I usually do. All the while, I'm thinking of Jack and the way it felt to be with him again after all these years. The way we laughed, the way he kissed me, the way his hands felt on my body...

I can't start doing this again.

Jack. The name I have hated hearing for such a long time. Just his name hurt my soul after our breakup and yet it was the same name that used to bring me the most joy and happiness. I remember how just seeing his name on my phone would light up my face.

We'd been through so much together.

And now, here I'm again, but to square one with my feelings for him. I must have been out of my mind to sleep with him again.

How could I let myself get so caught up so easily? And it all started with the way he was looking at me. I could see he was trying to avoid me. Trying to push away those old feelings the same way I was. It was our memories that tied us together, still after all these years.

I guess when it all comes down to it, I was craving those feelings again last night. Maybe that's why it happened. That longing for familiarity...

"Doesn't mean anything," I say to myself as I shake my head to rid myself of these thoughts. And it doesn't. I think about it as I slide on my running shoes and run to the park close to my home, getting in the groove of my exercise routine.

The morning jog. There's the usual light hustle and bustle of the area that consumes the air around me; neighbors I don't want to face early in the morning, kids on their way to school, and people out with their dogs... I only notice their presence on a surface level. They're the ambient music to my exercise routine.

The feeling of nausea settles in my stomach after my third lap, which is unusual since I typically have much more stamina than that. All the junk food I have been eating these days must be catching up with me.

Stopping at a bench, I catch my breath, panting lightly. Mrs. Morris, a friendly woman in the neighboring apartment, waves to me as she continues her power walk in her pink workout

clothes. I wave back politely, making sure not to look too available lest she think it's an invite to a conversation.

I laugh as I watch her aggressively ignore Mr. Henry, another neighbor of mine, struggling to keep up with her as he tries his best to talk to her. Mr. Henry is infamous for not being able to take a hint; even a wedding ring isn't enough to deter him. He's like a man on a mission, although his task is failing - like always.

Saturdays are a blessing. No matter how much I love my work, the weekends are a little piece of heaven I cherish. The alone time, the serenity of not socializing or talking to anyone from work, and the absolute bliss of just overeating to my heart's content without having to watch myself constantly to maintain my reputation as a graceful and professional worker.

As I arrive back home, I encounter my archenemy, Kelly, the pomeranian. Slowly walking in front of her apartment, I maintain eye contact with her while noticing her petite and furry form. She may look innocent, but in reality, she is Satan's apprentice. If you break eye contact even once, she takes it as an opportunity to attack you from behind.

Kelly barks at me, a habit she's never failed to do, even once in the last four years. I growl back for good measure. Human or animal, I'm not about to let someone else get the last word.

When I get back to my apartment, I stuff my face with cereal as I browse the internet to find something good to watch. I'm about halfway through an article about an Egyptian

tomb that was just found when my screen suddenly shows the caller ID text.

“Jennie Calling.”

A microsecond after clicking ‘accept,’ a screeching howl blasts through the phone, most probably rupturing my eardrums.

“SARAH, GUESS WHAT.” In usual Jennie fashion, she gives no regard to being considerate of people’s ears or their peace as she lets her excitement take over.

“What?” I massage my ear, putting the phone on speaker mode and keeping it away from me on the table.

“You remember Stacy?”

“Who?”

“Stacy Turner, dummy. Our class valedictorian,” Jennie tuts.

Stacy Turner, the bright poster child, like straight out of a movie. Beautiful, intelligent, and lovely. She’d run around with the elite popular crowd mostly. But she’d been my friend as well.

“Crazy Stacy,” I chuckle. “I remember.”

That’s no exaggeration. Stacy really was a little certifiable. During the day, she was a normal person who behaved like she’d been raised by normal humans. But as soon as the sun set, she turned into a whole different person. Especially if there was alcohol involved. All she’d need was two drinks and

she was ready to fight anyone who even looked at her the wrong way.

“Yeah, well, guess what.” Jennie sounds as if she’s on the verge of jumping up and down from unrestrained excitement.

“What? What is it?”

“No, you have to guess!”

I groan, smacking my face. Why do I even bother arguing with her?

“I don’t know,” I say, “She’s working as a stripper clown.” I threw my most outrageous idea at her, knowing how annoying that was to her.

“What? Oh, my god, Sarah.”

“Hey, you’re the one making me guess.”

She tsks and says finally, “No! She’s pregnant, Sarah. Can you believe it?”

“Pregnant? With a baby?” My voice raised in shock. Stacy didn’t even like pets. I couldn’t believe she’d actually gotten pregnant. I mean, seriously, Stacy absolutely disliked the idea of kids. Once when we all were out at a mall and we witnessed a mother having a little trouble with her toddler, she looked at the scene with her lip turned up in disgust and said, “The world would be a better place if you could shoot the little bastards out of cannon.”

And now she’s pregnant? *What?*

“Didn’t she used to say that kids were a parasite that only ruined your body and your career?” I frown, scratching my head at this complete one-eighty turn by Stacy. It’s only been three years since I last spoke with her. What the hell happened to change her mind in that time?

“No,” Jennie says in a mock matter-of-fact tone, “I believe she used the term ‘blood-sucking monsters. But that’s not the most shocking part.” Jennie continues, the excitement returning to her tone. “Guess who the dad is.”

“Would you just tell me already?” I hated playing these annoying guessing games Jennie insisted on. But on brand, Jennie waits a beat before saying, “No, take a guess.”

I sigh. Again, why do I even bother with this creature?

“The dad is her own father.” I hurl at her. She scoffs in disgust.

“Oh, my God, Sarah. Gross. What is wrong with you?”

I chuckle at her disgusted tone. “Fine, then, who is it?” I ask.

Who’s the brave soldier who was able to cut through Stacy’s numerous defenses? Seeing as she was a considerable commitment-phobe in college, anyone who got this close to her must have some good qualities...or be a serious masochist.

“David,” said Jennie.

My mouth drops open. I look around the room for a moment, expecting the furniture to confirm and validate my shock.

“Nooo,” I say. “Are you serious?? David Marshall? Her sworn enemy David Marshall?”

“One in the same.”

“No. No way. There’s no way in hell that David is the father.”

“Yes!” she says like an excited gossip hound. “Believe me, I’m just as surprised as you are right now. It turns out there is a thin line between love and hate,” Jennie giggles, prompting me to chuckle as well.

“More like hate and lust,” I add.

Jennie agrees with a humming sort of chuckle.

“So, did you talk to Stacy? How did this happen?” I inquire more about her.

“Well, I ran into her yesterday, but we only talked for a second. From what she told me later on the phone, though. The pregnancy is an accident, but they decided to keep it.”

“Hmph, ‘they’ did, huh?” I say and Jennie chuckles.

“That’s what she says.”

I’m silent for a moment so my brain can process all of this information. Stacy’s behavior in getting herself into such a significant mess is so unlike the person I’d once known. Or, I don’t know. Maybe it is. Maybe this was the event she needed to make some serious changes. I guess time does change people.

“Well, I hope they do whatever is best for them,” I reply, genuinely hoping for the best for David and Stacy. I mean, all things considered, Stacy had been a good friend once upon a time.

“Yeah, me, too. But you know what? This got me thinking about what I would do if I were in Stacy’s position,” Jennie ponders while I hear something falling on the other end of the line, followed by a string of curses.

A laugh escapes me at that. “God save the child that has a mother like you.”

“Hey! I’d be a great mother,” Jennie scoffs, causing me to laugh harder.

“So, what would you do if you were in Stacy’s position?” I ask, my curiosity conjuring up images of Jennie as a mom but coming up empty-handed. She’d be fun, at least. I’ll give her that.

“Well, you know, I used to think that if I ever got pregnant, like, not on purpose, I’d get an abortion. Obviously.”

“Obviously,” I repeat.

“But, I mean, the more I think about it, the more I think maybe I might keep it.”

“What made you decide that?” I question, running my fingers over the rough textures of the dining table. I hear Jennie pause briefly as she formulates her thoughts.

“I don’t know, honestly. I just started thinking that maybe I might be all right with a kid. It’s not the very worse thing that

could happen, right?”

“I guess,” I say noncommittally.

“What about you? Ever think about being a mom?”

“Me?” I laugh and lean back in the chair I’m sitting in. “No, I don’t want to be a mom. I decided that a long time ago. I’m not the kind of girl who wants to stay at home and chase after a kid. Not that I have anything against them. I just want a career first. That’s all.”

“But what if you did somehow end up in this kind of a predicament? What would you do then?” Jennie’s poking at me. She liked to pin me down with questions like this.

I think about it, imagining myself in Stacy’s position. No matter how hard I try, I can’t wrap my mind around it. I never gave children that much thought. I was always focused on my career.

“I don’t know,” I reply truthfully.

Jennie just sighs at my less-than-satisfactory response, no doubt shaking her head in real life. “I’ll bet you keep it,” she said.

“You think I wouldn’t abort it? Or maybe put it up for adoption?”

“No, because either way you’d have to deal with it and that’s not exactly one of your strong suits.”

I feel my face flush a little. Jennie was always good at calling me out on my bullshit. We talk for a little longer,

gossiping some more and reminiscing about the old times before cutting it off after two whole hours. Conversations with Jennie always seemed to last forever that way.

The weekend came and went by too fast and before I knew it, it was Monday. Monday brings the work rush back in full force, encapsulating everything around me. It's busy and that's good. I'm overloaded with task after task. So much so that I don't even have time for lunch.

I'm thankful for it. The busier I am, the less chance I have to think about my time with Jack and how our complicated and resentful past all but dissolved as I molded into his arms. I wasn't even drunk.

Stop it, Sarah. We need to erase him. I have done it once before. I'd needed to for my emotional health.

I finish my day accordingly and, stomach growling, I head out, looking for somewhere to eat. Surprisingly, as I walk out of my office building, no food option made my appetite rise. Even though I'm hungry, I don't want to eat anything. Nothing I have at home sounds good, and take-out sounds even worse.

Usually, my favorite go-to is the infamous chow mein down the street, but today, as I pass by that same chow mein stall, I nearly gag at the smell. I hurry past it, hand over my mouth to escape the aroma. Looks like eating out isn't a thing today. I can throw something together at home.

The next two weeks pass by in a blur and I notice that I'm getting sicker and sicker. The nausea is almost constantly present and my appetite is mostly nonexistent. I spend my

work days working, trying not to think about my stomach, drinking tea just to have some sustenance since I can't seem to keep anything down. And when I do try to eat, I get a strange metallic taste in my mouth.

I know I should visit a doctor at this point. I mean, feeling this bad for over a day or two is enough to raise alarms in anybody. But...I have a pretty deep distrust of hospitals and doctors, in general, so I just file it away and get through the day. Every day I say the same thing to myself. *If it gets any worse, I'll go to the doctor. I'll probably feel better by tomorrow...*

I'm this way because I was chronically ill as a child and had to spend most of my time in hospitals surrounded by doctors and nurses poking and prodding me like a science experiment. I don't like doctors and usually, I'll do just about anything to avoid them altogether.

"So I have only vomited two times today," I say to Jennie into the phone. She calls about every day around my lunch hour and every day lately, she's been asking about how I was feeling.

"Two times, huh?" Jennie says with a hint of sarcasm. "That's progress, I guess."

"I mean, it is, though. It's better than it was last week."

Jennie gives me a sort of half-mumbled affirmative. I sigh. "I don't know why this is happening. You know, I can't even stand the smell of some things because of this nausea," I complain like a petulant child. Even though I know the

solution to my problems—going in for a checkup—I still put off the inevitable.

PTSD is real and I hate going to the doctor.

“So here’s a thought,” Jennie says. “This might sound a little crazy, but...you know, your symptoms sound a lot like what Stacy went through...” Jennie pauses for a moment as if waiting for me to fill in the blanks. I don’t get what Stacy has to do with any of this. When I don’t respond, she sighs as if to say *you’re just going to make me say it, huh?*

“You know. Because Stacy’s pregnant?”

I freeze in place. I’m sitting at my desk, ginger tea steaming in my mug a few inches away from me, the world moving on just outside my office door...

The word is dancing around in my brain like a demented ping pong. *Pregnant.*

I take in a deep breath and everything seems to blend back into place around me. “Nope,” I say, shooting that idea down immediately, “Don’t even put that thought out into the universe. It’s not possible.”

“I mean,” said Jennie, “I’m not saying *your* pregnant, per se. I just think that maybe you ought to be considering all the possibilities, you know? You shouldn’t leave any page unturned.”

“Okay, but this page isn’t even in my book. It’s nowhere in any chapter or verse or anything. In fact, my book doesn’t even have pages,” I babble nervously.

“Okay, Sarah, you are not making sense right now,” Jennie says cautiously.

“I’m freaking out, Jennie,” I admit. “I...I can’t be pregnant. You have to understand that.

“Okay, okay. Let’s just rule that out right away, then,” she says. “When was the last time you had your period?”

Dread settles in my body as I think back to my previous period. “Hold on a second.” I take the phone from my ear and open my period tracking app. I wait endless milliseconds while it loads up its little flower splash screen before it gets to the calendar. When it finally does, my stomach falls into my shoes.

I was supposed to get my period around ten days ago. I feel my entire body go cold as the realization hits me. This was something I might’ve noticed before. I might’ve actually noticed it if I hadn’t been throwing myself into my work.

“I was supposed to get mine around two weeks ago,” I tell her. My voice came out as no more than a whisper.

Jennie takes a big breath, then says, “Okay. Well, first of all, don’t panic.”

“Don’t panic? You’re joking, right?”

“Well, all right. This is kind of a curveball, sure—”

“How can I be pregnant? I just can’t believe this.”

“Well,” she said, “I mean...have you been having sex with anyone lately.”

“No! Of course not, I...” Immediately Jack comes to mind. It was almost a month ago and he’d been the only one since... well, since I don’t know how long. God, I can’t believe that stupid romp in the back seat of his friend’s car has cost me this much!

“Okay, when do you get off work?”

I look at the clock on my computer. “Um, in a few hours. Why?”

“I’m coming over tonight with a pregnancy test.”

“Jennie—”

“It’ll be fine, okay? No matter what. But we need to know for sure before we go any further with this, right?” Jennie said reassuringly.

“I can get my own test—”

“I know that. But on the off chance that you’re actually pregnant...well, you probably shouldn’t be alone. Okay?”

I mull over her words silently, biting my thumb out of habit.

“Okay?” Jennie repeats a little louder.

“Yes, okay, fine.” I hang up and lean back in my office chair. This can’t be happening. It’s just a bug. The stomach flu or some weird virus. And as for my period, I’ve been stressed out lately. Stress can delay a period. That’s all this is...right?

I sleepwalk through the rest of my day, the cloud of a possible pregnancy hanging over me. *What if I am pregnant? What do I do? What about my job? I can’t take time off for*

maternity leave. I'll have to find a sitter and I'll have to take the baby to doctor's appointments and nursery school and elementary school and...and...

And Jack. What the hell am I going to do about Jack?

Jennie's already waiting for me in her car when I get home. She follows me in, a plastic drug store bag in her hand and her brow creased with worry. Once inside, she lays out three different test kits on the coffee table and says, "I wasn't sure which one was more accurate, so...I just got one of everyone they had."

I look at them, fear seizing me for a moment. I feel Jennie's warm hand on my shoulder. "It'll be okay, Sarah," she says, "no matter what it says."

I nod at her, then I pick up all three boxes and I take them with me to the bathroom.

All three tests involved me peeing on a stick, but each had a different readout. One had lines, another had colors, and the third had a 'pregnant' or 'not pregnant' window. I followed the directions for each, then set all three on the bathroom sink... and waited.

Outside of the bathroom, Jennie was waiting by the door. "Well?" she asked.

"Gotta wait fifteen minutes," I tell her. "Let me make you some tea. I've got a ton of it."

We go into the kitchen and I make the two of us some ginger tea. The nausea's still going strong and, in some ways,

it's a little worse now that I could add nervousness on top of this situation.

“Jennie,” I say as we sat at my kitchen table, the gingery smell of tea wafting between us. “If this test is positive...I really don't know what I'm going to do.”

Jennie rests a hand on top of mine. “Let's just get over this hurdle before we start buying baby clothes.”

“I mean it. If I'm pregnant, I'll have to tell Jack.” This is the first time I'm even saying his name out loud. I told Jennie about what happened and even then, it was ‘my ex’ rather than his name.

“What if he doesn't want this?” I say, “Or worse, what if he does?”

“You know, there are other choices you could make,” she said. “You know you don't have to keep it if that's what it comes to.”

When she'd asked me before if I would keep it or not, I didn't know the answer. Now, sitting here with ginger tea warming my hands, I found myself cringing a little at the idea of giving the baby away or having an abortion.

“We don't know for sure yet, though,” said Jennie, glancing at the clock on her phone. “And we won't know for at least ten more minutes. So let's just drink our tea and wait.”

So...we wait.

The fifteen minutes drag on until, finally, it's time. Three-quarters of my tea is gone and what's left is cold in my cup.

I'm frozen in my seat.

"Okay," says Jennie. "Time to see the results."

"I don't think I can do it."

"Come on." Jennie holds out her hand to me and stands up. I take her hand and she pulls me up from my seat.

We walk to the bathroom and I freeze just outside the half-open door. "You see what the results are." I look to Jennie. I can't seem to get my feet to move any further. "Please."

Jennie smiles at me and pats my hand gently. "Okay." She walks all the way into the bathroom and looks down at the three test sticks on the sink. She stands there for an eternity, her complexion going paler by the second.

"Jennie?" I say when she doesn't move. "H-hey. Jennie, what is it?"

Jennie doesn't move except to bite her lip in distress.

"Jennie, goddamn it, say something, please. You're scaring me."

Jennie takes a breath. It's quick and succinct as if she just needed a second to breathe. She looks over at me with big, brown eyes the size of saucers.

"It is positive," she says. "*All* of them are positive."

The breath I'm holding whooshes from my lungs, and all my emotions release in as if a dam has been broken.

I step back once, twice, and a third time. I continue wobbling backward as if separating myself from the

consequences of my actions, of my foolishness.

Until I back myself against the hallway wall.

Stupid. That is what I am. Extremely stupid. How did I fall into something that was so avoidable, something so idiotic? How did I make this mistake despite being proud of my critical thinking skills and intellectual decision-making? This is not intellectual in any way. How can this be happening to me?

And with Jack, of all people?

“Sarah?” Jennie’s coming out of the bathroom and walking towards me. “Sarah, honey. Come on.” She takes me by the shoulders and holds me up. I feel like my knees are buckling from beneath me.

“This is not the end of the world. Remember what I told you. No matter what, it’s going to be okay.”

She engulfs me in her arms, giving me a warm hug. I can’t feel anything, but the arms around me provide some comfort. I’m staring at the bottom of the bathroom through the door, my mind spinning out with the possibilities....

What am I supposed to do now? How do I manage this? What about Jack? Do I tell him? *Should* I even tell him? I don’t even know what I’m going to do about all this really. Should I even involve him in this situation?

A thousand different questions run through my head, and I can’t answer a single one. I take a deep breath and try to calm

myself down. One step at a time—I have to take this one step at a time. That’s all I can manage right now.

Jennie walks me to the living room and we sit down on the couch. For a long time, she doesn’t say anything and neither do I. We’re both still reeling from the shock.

When she finally does break the silence, it’s only to say, “You know, you’ll need to go to the doctor. We can’t just go by the tests.”

“I don’t see why not,” I reply. “Three out of three. What are even the odds?”

She nods slowly. “Good point. You should still go anyway. I mean...you can’t not go to the doctor here, Sarah. You know this isn’t up for debate...right?”

I look over at her and there’s nothing but seriousness in her eyes. “All right,” I say. “Besides, I could be one of the small percentages of women that got three false positives.”

“Anything’s possible,” she said, feeding into my need to hope that this wasn’t real.

Probably false hope, but I’m willing to go along.

If only for my mental health. Sometimes delusions were the only safety blanket you can afford.

I nod slowly, agreeing to see a doctor first thing tomorrow.

Morning brings another level of dread I don’t want to face. I couldn’t sleep. The thoughts and possibilities kept spinning around in my mind late into the night. I lay in my bed looking

up at the ceiling for hours until I eventually passed out from exhaustion.

I wake up with Jennie wrapped around me like a koala, making me struggle for my life to get out of her grip. I finally manage to untangle myself without waking her, which is impressive. Jennie can sleep through anything.

In the bathroom, I look at myself in the mirror. Dark, heavy bags under my eyes, tired-looking face, exhaustion clear in my posture, I'm a mess, inside and out. Mess or not, I get showered and dressed. Today's the day I see a doctor and pray this is all some crazy story I can tell over drinks by the weekend.

Jennie's up by the time I'm getting out of the shower. I hear her on the phone with the doctor's office through the door. Despite the circumstances, I'm smiling a little. I'm happy that she's here to handle the mundane part of this whole thing. I take a final look in the mirror as I get ready, then settle into the reality that we are going to see a doctor and that's all there was to it.

And Jennie's here now that we're in the waiting room. She's making jokes about the paperwork and that's settling my nerves. I'm grateful for her being here.

The entire visit takes about an hour and a half. I fill out paperwork. The nurses weigh me and take my temperature. And after I tell them what I'm there for, they ask me all the super personal questions about my reproductive system. *When*

was your last period? Did you use a condom? Do you think you might also have STDs? and so on and on.

The part with the doctor was the hardest part. I sit on the table holding Jennie's hand as he explains to me that if the tests were right, then, more than likely, I was pregnant. *Modern tests are about as accurate as the ones we use in the office...* I drowned most of that out. He still wants to do a blood test, though, just to see how far along I am. I go through a pelvic exam just to make sure everything is where it's supposed to be. I come out of that with a clean bill of health. No infections. No abnormalities. At least there's that.

When we leave, it's with the knowledge that I *am* pregnant.

I'm pregnant. For really real.

We're sitting in the car now and Jennie is looking over at me carefully, her hand on the ignition. "You okay over there?"

I nod. My throat is dry and even if it wasn't, I don't have any words.

Jennie drops me off at the house and tells me that she'll be back with some dinner for me tonight. I shouldn't have to worry about cooking, I guess.

One of the first things I do once I get home is call in to work. I tell my boss that I'm not feeling well and I'm going to take a couple of days. My nausea must have been noticeable because he doesn't give me a fight about it, even though we're swamped at the job. With all this free time, my overthinking habit exceeds its maximum capacity.

I think about Jack and all the complications that come with being forever associated with him. How do I bring this up to him?

My mind suddenly shifts to Stacy, and at that exact moment, I know exactly what she must feel. I chuckle at the irony of the situation. Just a few weeks back, I was gossiping about her ending up pregnant and now look at me.

I think about calling her, wanting to talk to someone who recently went through a similar situation but then I talk myself out of it. Stacy probably has her own problems right now and...well, at the moment, I'm still in a slight bit of deniable about it.

The doctor said I was pregnant, but couldn't that blood test come back showing I wasn't?

Modern tests are about as accurate as the ones we use in the office...

Sure. The hope is pretty slim.

The morning comes and I wake up from another nearly sleepless night. My test results are supposed to be back today. I sit by my bed, looking at the time and biting my bottom lip nervously. They're due to be open any minute, now.

Everything seems loud to me all of a sudden. I can hear my refrigerator buzzing all the way in the kitchen. I can hear the click of the air conditioning come on. It also seems a little too fucking bright in here all of a sudden.

I take some deep breaths as the clock ticks on. I need to calm down. If I call there like a raving maniac, they're liable to call the cops on me for harassing them. *I need to calm down...*

I breathe until my hands stop shaking, then I pick up my phone from the nightstand and dial.

The phone rings and rings. Three...four...five... *Jesus, pick up the fucking phone...*

“Medical General, how can I help you?”

The woman's voice sounds pleasant. Maybe even a little relaxed. *It must be nice.* I clear my throat and say, “Hi, this is Sarah Williams. I was there yesterday for a test...”

The sound of typing. Then, “Oh, right. Let me pull it up for you.”

I wait as she pulls up the result, biting my nails. *Say I'm not pregnant. Just say that and everything will be fine. Say it was all just a weird mistake. I'm one of the small percent. I am... right?*

“Okay,” she says finally. “So, Ms. Williams, it looks like you're about six weeks along.”

I pause. I don't really understand what she's saying. “Along...what? I don't understand.”

“Oh, well, you're pregnancy test, dear.” She says, putting the final nail in the coffin containing my false hope. “You're about six weeks pregnant.”

Six years ago...

I'm waiting for Jack. He was supposed to pick me up after class. We had a date planned – dinner and a movie – but that was supposed to happen about three hours ago.

I pace around my apartment living room. I've called him about ten times already. Maybe more actually. I'm actually starting to get worried.

He might've lost his phone again. He's so absentminded. Maybe that's it. I hope that's it. I don't want to think the worst. I've never had to call the police for something like this. How would I even file a missing person's report?

Calm down. I need to calm down. It's probably nothing like that.

My roommate left for the evening to go to a party. She'd invited me, like she always does and I almost accepted. She's got one of those effervescent personalities that can be contagious.

I should've gone with her. I'm sure I would be having a great time.

Instead, I chose to stay here, and wait for Jack.

This isn't the first time my boyfriend decided to bail on me. It seems like he's always forgetting about me. I'm beginning to think that I'm just not a priority for him.

And to think, we started out so good. The nights we'd stay up talking until the wee hours of the morning. We have so much in common, especially our childhoods. We both had it

kind of rough growing up. That always seemed to bond us together. It was enough to ignore the little things...things like this. I just kept making excuses for him. I just kept saying to myself that it was all a product of his rough upbringing.

At this moment, though, I just want a normal boyfriend. One who pays attention to me, takes me out, and buys me presents on my birthday. Hell, I'd settle for a boyfriend who can at least *remember* my birthday.

Maybe he's too carefree. I always say he's a free spirit. Maybe that's the whole problem.

But what's sad is that I still love him, warts and all. Even now some three hours after he was supposed to show up for our date. I still love him. I doubt I would be pacing this room if I didn't love him. God, I shouldn't have to worry about him so much. I should be just living my own life.

In fact...I should go to that party.

So why don't I go to the party?

Shoot. Forget it. Forget him. I'm going.

With that thought in mind, I walk to the bathroom, quickly put on some lipstick, and ruffle my hair a little. Then I grab my purse and my jacket and I'm gone.

The party's thriving at the abandoned building just off Pearl Avenue. Neon lights stream across the old walls. The music vibrates the floors and shakes the windows. I walk in and I can feel the energy pulsing off the dance floor and right into me. It feels really good.

I spot my roommate, Jennie. She's laughing and talking to her crush. They're drinking beers and they look like they're having the best time. I'm not going to go over and say hi just yet. Jennie's been trying to get next to that guy since Freshman year. I don't want to block that.

Stacy is in the corner with David and they look like they're really getting into it. I don't know what David has said, but Stacy looks like she's practically yelling over the music. That's no surprise. I've never seen two people who hated everything about one another *except* for the arguments.

I laugh to myself and pour myself a beer from the keg. The music has me swaying, and I have to admit, I'm glad I allowed myself a little fun rather than stay at home wearing out the carpet because of Jack.

And just as I think his name, I see him.

He's holding a beer and talking to his friends, laughing and palling around with them like he hasn't got a care in the world. My heart jolts in my chest. I'm not sure to feel angry or disappointed or both.

This is it. This is the last straw.

I can't think of a single thing that he could ever say to me to make this right. How can I let him treat me like this? I can feel my eyes start to burn with tears.

I throw my beer away and storm back to my apartment.

I'm done.

Chapter Three

JACK

I'm waiting to cross Fifth Avenue and the cars rush by me like seconds on a stopwatch. It's times like these that I feel like I should have someone to hold to protect me while I maneuver across a busy street, but all I care about is the one thing I can't protect.

My idiotic heart.

All week, my phone has been rudely jammed up by call after call and I'm aware that some deals are going to need to be made today. The thought rejuvenates me.

I haven't yet grown tired of hustling. Ironically, making deals gives me insight into how well-built my intuition is and, at the same time, how far-sighted I can be.

Horns honk, jarring me. I jog across the street a little faster. I wonder why they're in such a hurry. Maybe they're late for work. Maybe they're on the way to the hospital. Maybe someone is frantic because this moment is all life gave them control over.

Boy, am I in a mood today.

The clouds seem to be covering the city today. I wonder what messages the heavens are trying to tell us. I'm about halfway down the street when a light mist falls over the city. I pull my jacket up futilely as I jog the rest of the way to the office. As I approach, the guard notices me and rushes toward

me with an umbrella. I thank him but wave it away. A little drizzle never harmed anyone.

I make my way to the elevators. The building is never as crowded on weekends, and the ambiance is calm and composed. I notice a few women eyeing me along the way. They're all pretty attractive. I give them a thrill and smile back, familiar with the attention I often receive from women. Sadly, none of them entice me. They rarely do these days.

I'm in the elevator alone with nothing but the faint sound of some easy listening playing through the speakers. For the umpteenth time since that surreal evening, Sarah invades my thoughts.

She isn't just any woman.

My mood dims again as I ponder.

The most beautiful things in my life have also been the most tragic, and I never want her to be one of those tragedies. I made mistakes with her, and I don't want to make them again. For once, I want to see if I can live life as fully as I want to - like I'm supposed to.

As I walk into my office, the executive who'll be leading the meeting follows me.

"Sir, the meeting with Tricon has been finalized. Their executives will be here at one o'clock."

"Good. We have time to prepare," I say.

He hands me the files, and I skim through them. Pretty pieces of paper with lots of fancy graphs and charts attempting

to convince Tricon to partner with us. I nod, and he exits the room.

We've been working our asses off for the past two months to finalize this contract, and here it is, finally. Sure, anyone could have worked on the project, but I insisted that it had to be me if only to make sure they knew my face. Them knowing who I am is just as important as all these pretty pieces of paper.

The contract with Tricon Company is extremely important to me. It represents a significant opportunity for the business to grow and expand. This funding will allow us to reach new markets, increase our revenue, and improve our overall success. I invested a lot of time and effort into negotiating the terms of the contract and ensuring that it was going to be mutually beneficial for both parties. I'm confident our partnership will be a game-changer for my startup and be an opportunity to make us richer than our wildest dreams. For the first time since I started this whole deal, I'm confident in what lies ahead.

That's the thing, though. I exceed in everything I do except the one thing in which I should have succeeded.

Sarah.

I try not to think about her all day but to no avail. I can't seem to get her out of my mind. That evening with her renewed the memories I had been trying so hard to push down for the past several years. Now, I find myself thinking about her more often than not. The memories of our time together

flood my mind, and I can't help but feel a sense of longing and sadness.

I miss her laugh, smile, and the way she looks at me. I miss the touch of her skin when she held my hand and the warmth of her sweet embrace. I miss the way she would listen to me, understand me, and the way she would make me feel so special.

We had a special bond. Or at least I thought we did until it all disappeared.

The truth of the matter is that forming connections with women has never come naturally to me. Somehow, though, I managed to have that with her. Someone I could hold close, feeling that even if the world ended, there would be nothing to be afraid of. No regrets because even in death, I'd feel blessed to be with her.

It's funny how I started out my life with a father who couldn't show affection if you paid him and a mother who found warmth in the bottle of a vodka bottle instead of her husband's arms and somehow, I managed to find the one person who made me believe that we could never be them. For a while, I really believed in love.

And then, somehow, she slipped through my fingers. I start to think that maybe it doesn't have to be that way, though. Maybe I could get another chance with her. If that last evening was any indication, I might actually have a shot. I know that if I ever do get that lucky, I'll be more careful not to be like my

father. This time, I'm going to be the man she needed me to be. Loving, kind, and present.

Can I make it happen? I'm going crazy thinking about the idea.

Whenever I notice a couple holding hands on the street, I can't help but remember the way Sarah held my hand and the way it felt so perfect in hers. When I pass by a coffee shop and smell freshly brewed coffee, it reminds me of how she would make me coffee in the morning and always add a dash of cinnamon on top. When I hear a song we both loved, it brings back memories of us dancing together on the boardwalk, singing happily along to the lyrics.

I miss her presence in those mundane moments like doing the laundry, cooking dinner, or watching a movie. Everything I do, everywhere I go, and everything I see reminds me of her and makes me miss her even more.

Before I get lost deeper in thought, I call one of the team leads over to ask about the meeting details. The young lead enters the office to give me a summary of the day.

“The meeting with Tricon will take place in their corporate headquarters located in the heart of the city. The address is 531 Business Park Drive, Suite 101.”

I know the building. It's a modern, high-rise work of art with a sleek glass exterior and a spacious lobby.

As I recall, the conference rooms in the building are all equipped with state-of-the-art technology, including a large

screen for presentations, fiber internet, and video conferencing capabilities. It also has comfortable seating, ample natural light, and an incredible view of the city. If I'm going to wow my clients, though, I'm going to have to arrive early to ensure all of my materials are in order and to have time to set up any equipment or presentations that I will be using. I also plan to bring extra copies of any important documents or contracts in case they are needed. I arranged for my team and I to have a private room for lunch and breaks to make sure we would discuss any important details and strategies before the meeting.

It's all set. I just have to show up and show out. No problem.

I tap my phone nervously.

I should call Sarah. I think about it off and on now. It's been a while since that night. Maybe if I called her and talked about it...

It'll ruin our professional relationship if I do that. I imagine telling her how I truly feel, expressing my love for her, and hearing her say that she feels the same way...but then I think about the possibility of her rejecting me, of her not wanting to take that risk, and my heart sinks.

I scroll through my contacts, hovering over her name. No... it's not worth the risk. Our companies are tied together in a partnership. I can't risk making her feel uncomfortable. Well, more uncomfortable than I did the night we'd spontaneously made love in the back of Clark's car.

She made it very clear our rendezvous was a mistake and to never bring it up again. If I'm supposed to be the better man I keep proclaiming to be, I'm going to have to respect that.

As I walk out of my building and onto the busy street, my nervousness is palpable. My palms are sweaty, and my heart is racing as I make my way toward the Tricon building. I can't shake off my apprehension, but I attempt to remind myself that I have done my best to prepare for this meeting.

The rain has stopped, and streets are bustling with activity again. People are hurrying to and fro, going about their day. Cars and buses rush by, honking their horns and adding to the hustle and bustle of the city. The sound of the chatter of people fills the air.

It's a beautiful day now, and the sun is shining bright.

I take in my surroundings as I walk. The streets are lined with tall skyscrapers and modern buildings, each one impressive in its own right. The architecture is stunning, with clean lines and a modern aesthetic.

As I approach the Tricon building, I can't help but feel a bit awestruck by its impressive glass exterior. The building seems to tower above me, reflecting the sunlight and the energetic city around it. The entrance is grand, with a spacious lobby, the walls adorned with modern art, and the floor is made of marble. The receptionist greets me with a smile and directs me toward the elevators.

The elevator ride to the fifteenth floor is quick and efficient. I feel like I'm on some futuristic spaceship with how fast it

seems to travel up the floors. As the doors swish open, I step out into a spacious hallway lined with large windows offering a panoramic view of the city. The conference room is at the end of the hall with a sign that reads “Conference Room 101.”

As I walk towards the conference room, my phone suddenly begins to vibrate in my pocket. I pull it out, and to my surprise, it’s Sarah calling. My heart skips a beat and I answer without even thinking about it.

“Hey, Sarah,” I say, trying to sound as casual as possible.

“Jack,” she says, her voice sounding a bit hesitant. “I know you are probably busy, but I just want to call and see how you are.”

I can’t believe it. I stop walking, looking down the hall toward the conference room. Here I’m about to enter one of the most important meetings of my life, and she’s calling me out of the blue. I don’t know if this is good or bad luck, but I’ll take it either way.

“I’m good, just about to head into a meeting,” I reply, attempting to keep my voice steady.

“Oh. Okay, um, I understand,” she says. Her voice sounds a little shaky like she’s nervous about something.

“Listen, Jack,” she continues, “I know this is kind of sudden, but I’m wondering if you have a little time today to meet up. I have something important to tell you.”

It’s like I willed this outcome into being. The one thing I wanted was just serving itself up to me on a platter. I want to

drop everything and run to meet her right now.

“I would love to, Sarah,” I say, “Um...I’ve kind of got a full day, though. Maybe we can have dinner sometime tomorrow night?” I’ll have to see if Sylvia can watch Martin. It *is* a weeknight.

“Actually, I was hoping maybe we could meet sooner,” she says and I can hear the urgency in her voice. “It’s kind of important.”

Important. What was so important that it couldn’t wait a night?

“Sure,” I reply. “Um, how about tonight, then? I’ve got a few things I need to get straightened out first, but I can meet you, say, about seven?”

“That’ll work. I will text you my address.”

As I approach the conference room, I can’t shake the feeling of nervousness and excitement. My head is a little out of the game now, thinking about meeting Sarah again. I can’t wait. I feel a little like a schoolgirl.

I get as far as the door to the conference room and I freeze, a feeling of unease eating at me. She said it was important. Important enough that it has to happen today. My excitement is turning into something else and it’s starting to consume my mind.

I’m not going to be able to focus on the meeting, not with this hanging over my head. I have to know what she has to say.

I turn around and make my way back to the elevator without giving the meeting a second thought.

As I step out of the building, I pull out my phone and call Sarah. “Hey, so, I’m just going to come over right now, if that’s all right,” I say. This decision might have dreaded consequences—the meeting with Tricon Company might never happen again, but I can’t let it go. If there’s a chance with Sarah, any chance at all. I need to take it.

I send a quick text to Clark, telling him I have an emergency and to try to postpone the meeting. Hopefully, he’ll understand. He’s going to have to understand.

The next thing I do is get an Uber. As I wait those few minutes watching for the late model sedan to pull up, my heart is in my chest. I’ve gotta be out of my mind to walk away from this meeting. Out of my damn mind...

The Uber pulls up and we’re on our way. We inch our way through the city, the driver expertly navigating the crowded streets and honking at other drivers to make room for us. I watch the city pass by outside the window, the tall buildings and bright lights of the city a blur as we move. The hustle and bustle of the people is a constant background noise, the sound of chatter and laughter filling the air. Cars honk and buses rumble by. It all starts to slow down and it occurs to me that we’re going too slow.

I tell the driver to pull over and opt to walk instead. I make sure to pay him a big tip for his trouble. Once out of the car, I

dash down the sidewalk the rest of the way. Sarah's house is just a few blocks away at this point.

The city has been my home for many years. I love the many parks, which provide a tranquil escape from the hustle and bustle of the city. The lush green grass, the tall trees, and the lakes offer picturesque scenery, the perfect spot for a picnic, a walk, or just relaxing.

I rush through one on my way to Sarah's.

Another 200 yards and I'm running up her apartment stairs, standing at her door, ringing the bell, and waiting. As each second passes, it feels like an eternity is expanding across the universe like an evil curse.

She opens her door finally. She looks beautiful, of course. Blue sparkling eyes, rosy cheeks, and a glow from within. Her dark hair is framed around her oval face.

But there's something wrong. Her full lips are thin and the rims around her almond-shaped eyes are red. Has she been crying?

I swallow down my apprehension and enter her apartment. Her living room is cozy and bright from natural light. She directs me to the sunflower yellow couch and gestures for me to sit.

Without question, I sit down. She doesn't choose to sit beside me but rather stands in front of me. My heart feels like I'd just run a marathon; it's pumping so hard. She's wringing her hands a little and standing a little unsteady. Whatever I

thought this was about, I can see I was wrong. Something was very, very wrong.

“Well,” she says, her voice wavers a little. “I guess I better just get down to it.”

“What’s going on?” I ask. I’m now a little alarmed. “Are you in trouble or hurt—?”

“I’m pregnant,” she says quietly.

An electric charge runs through my body, giving me goosebumps all over. I’m stunned and silent.

She’s pregnant?

I need a moment. There’s a second where I think maybe I heard her wrong. But she’s looking at me, her eyes full of trepidation. She’d spoken the words and now they’re out there, just hanging between us like a cloud.

I’ve been silent so long that I can see she’s getting even antsier by the second. “Are you going to say something?” she asks.

I don’t for a second. I feel like if I start talking, then it’ll be real. I stand up and start to pace, my hand in my hair. Finally, the words start to come. “Are...are you sure?” I ask.

“Yeah. I’m pretty sure.”

“I see.” I feel weak all of a sudden, so I sit back down on the couch. This time she sits next to me and puts her elegant hand in mine.

I'm going to be a father. Again. With Sarah as the mother. Unless she decides not to keep it.

"Say something, Jack," she says softly.

"I, uh... Sorry, I guess I'm in shock." I run a hand through my hair.

"Imagine being the one carrying the baby." She gives me a small smile.

"Listen," I squeeze her hand. "Whatever you decide, I'll support you. But if you do decide to keep the baby, I'll be here for you in whatever way you need me to be."

Her gaze softens, and her cheeks pinken. "For a guy in shock, you sound pretty ready to be a dad."

I shrug slightly. "Well, uh, the thing is, I already am one."

I feel her hand stiffen as her little smile drops. "You...you have a kid already?"

I nod and she narrows her blue eyes at me.

"Why are you just now telling me this?"

I scoff. "When would I have had the time? We went from fighting to fucking the last time we saw each other."

She opened her mouth to dispute that, then stopped herself. I could see she was regrouping a little. "You are not married, are you?"

"No," I reassure her. "His mom decided not to be in the picture. It's a really long and boring story and not really the point right now, is it?"

She doesn't say anything for a moment. She's looking down at her hands for a moment, thinking. Then she asks, "Tell me about him."

I raise my eyebrows slightly. "Well...his name is Martin. He's four years old and...he has my eyes and his mom's blonde hair. He's a pretty amazing kid." I can't help but smile from ear to ear.

"He sounds wonderful."

"He is. You know, when I found out my ex was pregnant, I wasn't exactly ready to be a dad any more than you're probably ready to be a mom. But once he was here..." I'm thinking of the first time I held Martin in my arms. He was so tiny I thought I was going to break him.

"Once he was here," I went on, "I realized that I would do anything in this world for him. Having him in my life just kind of changed everything, you know? I realized I had to buckle down and be responsible because if I wasn't..." *I'd be just like my parents.* I didn't say it aloud. It was like invoking their name would bring all the misfortune of my childhood back to me.

"The bottom line is that who I decide to be is going to color who he'll become and I didn't want to mess that up...and I don't want to mess this up either. Sarah, I swear to you, if you keep this baby, then I'm going to be the best father in the world to them."

Sarah's eyes fill with a mix of emotions I can't quite pinpoint, but a smile curves her gorgeous lips showing

happiness and excitement shining through.

“Okay.” She sniffs back a tear.

I look into her watery eyes and return the smile on her face. “Okay as in you’re going to keep the baby or...”

“I’m going to need a lot of help,” she said. “You’ve got a four-year head start on me.”

“You’ve got it.”

We hug each other tightly, and I can’t stop smiling. I’m excited to start this new chapter in our lives as parents. I know there will be challenges ahead, but I’m ready to face them with Sarah. Surely, she’ll be a present and nurturing mother. She always had so much love to give.

I lean in and touch her stomach gently. “Hey, there, little guy,” I say to her taut belly. “Get ready to be a part of the best family in the world.”

I already feel a strong connection to the little life growing inside of Sarah and I know I’ll do everything in my power to be the best father I can be. I feel incredibly lucky and grateful to be able to start a family with Sarah. And admittedly, I don’t know what that means for us in terms of a relationship...but I can hope, right?

From there, we started talking about what was next. Prenatal visits, baby showers, all the things that come before the baby gets here. We don’t cover anything about co-parenting or what that would be like, but that’s okay. This is only the first day of the rest of our lives.

I can see the excitement in Sarah's eyes. It feels like this is the beginning of something truly special, and I can't wait to see what the future holds for us. She really seems happy about all this...at least, I hope she is.

As far as forgiveness for me and where I fit into all this in terms of a relationship...well, one thing at a time.

Six years ago...

All I want to do is forget.

My mom ends the call crying after telling me that dad has passed. Sudden heart attack. He just dropped dead one day after church. No one saw it coming. He probably wasn't even in any pain.

I don't know what to say. I never had a good relationship with him. He was a cold and emotionless man. A nonexistent father who was there every day when I got home from school. I'm pretty sure he hated the sight of me.

Growing up, we were poor, and I was just another expense draining money from his pocket. He never said a kind word to me and when he did decide to give me any attention at all, it came in the form of a backhanded slap across the face. And he hit me almost all the time, not just when I was in trouble. Shoot, he hit me whenever I walked too close to him.

And my mom...she never did much to make it stop. I mean, sometimes, she'd jump in if he went too far. Once, I spilled paint in the garage and paid for it with several fists to the face. That time, she broke it up, screaming, "You're going to kill

him!” But if he wasn’t actively pummeling me into unconsciousness, it was perfectly fine with her that my dad slapped me around from time to time.

I never asked to be born and I never asked to be his son.

Right now, I’m listening to my mother sob and my eyes are dry as the desert. I’m not sure how to feel about his death. I don’t know what to feel.

I know I hate him, but he’s not here anymore to hate. I feel empty about it...like an unanswered phone message that’s been deleted. I feel like there’s nothing there where there used to be something...something I never got to do anything about.

And I need to forget.

So I decide to drink.

“Jack,” my friend Harris calls from across the hallway. “We’re headed to the party. You coming?”

I think of Sarah. She’s probably at the party, too.

Either way, I just want to listen to loud music and forget my life, my childhood, and any tense moment I ever had with my father.

My father, who’s now gone forever.

Chapter Four

SARA

I always called my mother ‘My Moonlight.’ The innate ability she possessed that turned every harsh, blunt, and edged thing into a soft, graceful, and safe haven always reminded me of how the moonlight, no matter where it fell, brought out a kind of beauty in each object exposed to it.

For her, everything appeared to be straightforward. Taking care of me, acting as a cook, a chauffeur, a babysitter, and a bodyguard all at the same time, all without breaking a sweat. Because she made everything seem so easy, I never imagined that being a parent would be a challenging job until I saw how hard she made it look.

But now, as I realize that I, too, might become a mother soon, everything seems so intimidating. Lying in front of me are a thousand different things I need to think about, a thousand different roles I need to play, and a thousand different questions I need to answer.

How am I going to deal with the added responsibilities that come along with having a child? If I become a mother, will I even have what it takes to be a good parent? What if I screw up royally and my child grows up to resent me?

And there is my career to think about.

I’ve worked alongside many women who were also mothers, and they’d made it seem effortless. How did they do that?

Well, they probably have another parent to share the responsibilities.

God, would Jack be there for me as well? Can I trust him? Despite all his honeyed words when I told him I was pregnant, his track record is spotty at best.

All this running through my head and I can't even get the dishes together. The uncertainties just keep racing through my head like an electric current through a wire. When the clutter in my mind is so insurmountable, I can't concentrate on the task of cleaning my apartment.

Jennie's been calling me daily, chatting me up with the smallest of talk. It's all just a ruse to make sure I'm okay. However, Jennie's constant attempts at cheering me up and coming up with solutions to the current situation are doing very little to soothe the worry that has put a dent in my brain.

A little silver lining, if you can even call it that, is Jack's compliant behavior throughout the whole scenario. I've been avoiding thinking about the fact that fate has entwined Jack and me in a much closer way now. No doubt, I will be seeing him a lot more often now, and not only that, he'll be a permanent part of my life for the next eighteen-plus years. This thought is so daunting I've been acting as if it doesn't even exist. I can deal with this issue later.

"Later" is always a comforting thought.

On the other hand, the fact that Jack already has a child gives me some degree of relief. The realization that he's taken on the responsibility of single parent for the last four years

removes some of the weight from my shoulders...but not all of it. I don't know what kind of father he is, really...even if he says he is. I want to believe his story about straightening up when his son was born.

At least his resume is shiny, I think, with a smile.

Ironically, the thing causing me the most misery is also the thing that used to bring me the most joy – junk food. My stomach can't handle certain foods. The taste or smell of pizza, burgers, chow mein, or anything slightly greasy causes me unbearable nausea. While other mothers get to have pickles and ice cream, I'm stuck eating rice cakes and veggies.

I have no choice but to eat healthy foods.

With all this on my mind, I just give up on cleaning altogether, instead choosing to watch television from my couch. Browsing through the channels, I put on some mindless reality TV show I don't care about, hoping the brainless content will numb my mind and ease my overthinking a little.

Of course, right when I'm beginning to get invested in the show, a commercial break comes on. And what's the very first commercial I saw when I turned on the TV?

A diaper commercial.

Is the universe playing a sick prank on me? Is this even real? I find it interesting that the moment I start to forget about my problems, a cruel reminder is shoved into my face in the form of a naked baby running around a house.

Gah, I'm going to be a horrible mother. What if I don't have that maternal instinct? What if none of it ever clicks in?

I groan, turning the TV off. It's no use. I need to sort out the thunderstorm of thoughts brewing in my head. Otherwise, my head just might explode. I think about calling Jennie but then decide against it. Jennie, as good of a friend as she is, just wouldn't understand the feelings I'm experiencing right now. I need to talk to someone who has been through this already. There's only one person I know who's on the same track as I am.

Crazy Stacy.

I go through my contact list and stop on her name, my thumb hovering over it momentarily. I'd put off calling her before because I didn't want to burden her, but now...

Now I just need to hear from someone who's going through it, too. I press the call button but then immediately hit cancel. What am I thinking? How can I just call her after almost three years of no contact and randomly ask her to meet up? She was the popular one at college. She probably doesn't even remember me.

Maybe I should message her and see what she's up to these days instead. Just to measure where she's at...

I sink my face into my palm in annoyance. Forget it; this isn't going to work. What would I even talk about? What am I hoping for by meeting Stacy? I don't even know the questions to ask, so how can I expect her to answer them?

My phone vibrates, alerting a text message. It's Jack.

“Hey, so the appointment is tomorrow morning. I'll be there to pick you up about a half hour beforehand.”

I let out a sigh once more. The sincerity and compassion with which Jack approaches our dilemma makes my heart feel warm and fuzzy.

Once more, the phone begins to vibrate, which indicates he sent another text message.

“Also, if you need me to bring you anything, let me know.”

Exhaling my conflicted feelings forcefully, I quickly type out a response, agreeing to meet up tomorrow and denying his latter offer with thanks. Although it's inevitable that I see Jack again now that I'm carrying his child, I still need some amount of isolation from him

I sit up, spontaneously deciding to go to a grocery store to restock my pantry even though I don't need to. What I need is to get out of the house. Otherwise, my brain will combust.

I arrive at the grocery store about an hour later and it's filled with people. I'm looking around at the crowded parking lot with disdain. The last thing I need is to be around so many people. It's such a pain to go to a public place and find, well, the public. I take a deep breath, however, grab a cart, and make my way in through the sliding doors.

Browsing through the various aisles, I look for anything that doesn't make me nauseous and that doesn't look like it would leave a weird metallic taste in my mouth. So far, nothing

jumps out at me other than a bag of rice cake chips and a box of crackers.

Looking around, I'm on a mental sort of autopilot. I just cruise through the aisle, ignoring my surroundings for the most part and while I'm trying to be cognizant of my surroundings, I'm actively tuning everything out but my task at hand. So, it's no wonder I crashed into a shopping cart when I turn around a corner. The shock from the metal connecting on metal sends waves of pain up my arms like fireworks.

"Jesus Christ, are you okay?" a woman calls out.

I've let go of the cart and am now rubbing my arms and shoulders. "No, not really," I mutter, not in the mood to become my old people-pleasing self today.

"Well, you should've been watching where you are going then." The stern tone reminds me of a mom lecturing her child.

I turn around towards the voice, ready for a fight...only to come face to face with a familiar woman.

"Stacy?" I question tentatively, stepping forward slowly.

She looks different, a modified version of my old classmate. She's a little heavier, which shows in the shape of her face. Her hair's a little longer as well. But her face is the same. Still the same old Stacy. At the sound of her own voice, her face softens from the scowl it was in and her eyes widen in recognition.

"Sarah?" Stacy replies back in the same surprised tone. She looks me up and down, not once but twice. She seems taken

aback by my presence.

What are the odds of this happening? How ironic is it that I talked myself out of hitting up Stacy, only to end up meeting her in a grocery store by accident? My life doesn't seem real to me at times.

She laughs suddenly, abandoning the cart to approach me with open arms. It's then that I notice her bulging belly. The round bump makes it hard for her to hug me properly.

Nonetheless, I return her hug sincerely, rubbing her back as a gesture of love. Although we haven't kept in touch, she'd been a friend back then. I should have known that this would be the way it would work out.

"How are you?" she says, pulling back and looking at me from head to toe once more with the biggest smile on her face. "God, it's been so long since I have seen you; it's unbelievable."

I feel so silly now, being so hesitant to meet someone whom I'd been so close to once.

"I'm good. I'm good," I reply. "What about you? What are you up to? There are so many things we need to talk about." I glance down at her belly and she smiles, rubbing it proudly.

"Yeah, I'll say. Do you have a little time? I was just thinking about going to lunch after this."

"Sure. That sounds like a great idea."

We both go to the checkout and pay for our items, then walk out together smiling as if time hadn't ever passed between us.

“I know a place around the corner,” says Stacy. “It’s a little vegan café. You want to meet me there?”

I agree and before long, we’re sitting in a small but quaint cafe nearby. The cafe has a 50s theme, the walls lined with vinyl records and pictures from artists such as Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, and The Supremes. I appreciated the vintage-yet-fresh ambiance the place provided.

Stacy is *heavily* pregnant, and although I try not to show it, seeing her struggling to walk unlocks a new type of fear and uncertainty inside me. I shake myself to rid my brain of such thoughts. Now is not the time to show panic.

We order, with me asking for a decaf coffee and Stacy some fresh juice. How strange to see her in a café and *not* drink coffee. She was practically a drug addict for coffee when we were in school.

“So, tell me, what’s up with you?” I ask, placing my head on my palms.

Stacy lets out a big, hearty sigh as if silently telling me that it’s a long story. I smile back—I understand her completely.

“Well, no point hiding it now,” she smiles at the table satirically. “I know you can’t really tell, but I’m pregnant.” She throws her hands up in an excited manner, inciting a laugh out of me suddenly.

“No way,” I gasp, going along with her joke.

“I know, I know,” she laughs.

“So, when did this happen? How did this happen?” I ask sincerely. I genuinely want to hear her version of the story.

“Uh, where do I start?” she chuckles, not quite looking at me. “Do you remember David? The annoying know-it-all from our class?”

“How could I forget? You two fought like cats and dogs.”

“Well, after college, we ended up doing more than just fighting,” she says smartly.

The disbelief on my face is genuine. It just doesn't make sense with the two these two used to go at each other.

“You and David?” I say. “How does that even happen? I thought you hated each other.”

She shrugged. “You know what they say. It's a thin line between love and hate. I guess we just...always had a thing for one another.”

“Wow,” I say, sipping my coffee. “It's just so hard to believe.”

“Yep. I mean, it started as just sex, you know? Just the two of us, having fun, getting out our frustrations on each other.” I giggled at that statement and she giggled too. She went on, “But eventually...I don't know. Things just turned serious between us. Next thing I know, I'm pregnant, and...David's the daddy.”

“What about David? How does he feel about all this?” I ask tentatively.

“He sort of proposed,” she replies sheepishly.

“What?” My mouth drops open. I haven’t heard this news yet.

“Yeah. I mean, it was inevitable, you know? Oh, we had a lot of challenges, sure. What couple doesn’t? But at the end of the day, I couldn’t picture my life without him...and he couldn’t be without me.”

I lean back in my seat, processing this information. Stacy looks happy, though. Very happy. That’s all that matters at the moment.

“So, how did you manage? Being pregnant all of a sudden must have been quite a challenge,” I muse, eagerly waiting for her answer. Stacy is my ray of hope right now. My mind’s all muddled, and I need help comprehending what I should do next. Maybe her story will be the final clarification I need.

“I’m not going to lie,” she says, “it’s not easy. Finding out my life is about to veer in a direction I’d never imagined... It was kind of hard to take, you know? I spent a lot of time debating my options before deciding to keep the baby.” She’s sipping her juice, a little bit of a faraway look on her face.

“You...actually thought about not having it?”

She nodded. “A baby is a big life decision. I mean, it changes absolutely everything. I wasn’t sure if I was ready to take on that responsibility.”

In between the hassle and hustle of the rush of the past few days, I haven’t properly thought through my options. My brain

is shutting the doors on all other choices, especially after Jack handled the news so well.

I realize I'm unconsciously holding a hand over my stomach, prompting me to let go of it in a hurry. I did intend to tell Stacy about my situation, just not now. I can't bear a conversation like that at the moment.

"Obviously, I chose to keep the baby," she goes on. "I honestly have no idea why, but my heart just convinced me to wait for a little before making a decision. Maybe it was fear. Maybe it was my gut feeling, but I just knew that time would give me the decision I needed. And it did. I looked at baby pictures of myself, you know? And seeing how my mom and dad were holding my little hand and doing all sorts of things.... I just ended up having this little clarity inside of me—that I want that too. I wanted to be a mom." She smiles, reminiscing.

I tilt my head at her. Stacy sounds so mature now. This refined quality in her tone shows how much she'd matured since college.

"You're not scared?" I ask her. "I mean...what if you mess things up?"

"Of course I'm scared," she says with a chuckle. "I'm terrified of screwing up. I mean, raising a child is a huge undertaking. But I don't know. Whenever I think about my baby, see his ultrasound pictures, and see him floating around in his small little world, all my worries just fly away. I just

know that we'll be okay." She smiles, the peace and serenity in her eyes as she talked, touching something deep inside me.

I take a moment to process everything she said, my brain going completely silent for a single second. I guess I never really thought about it like that. I've been so busy worrying that I never actually focused on the baby and what it might be like for him.

Miraculously, my nerves are calmed down for the first time in days. I figure, if she can do this, so can I. I sigh, for the first time in a long while, in relief.

"Wow," I say with a smile. "I'll bet you're going to make a great mom, Stacy."

"I certainly hope so," she chuckles. "And what about you? We've been talking about me all this time. What's going on with you?"

We talk for another hour or so, conversing about everything and nothing at the same time. I still don't tell her anything about my predicament. I'm still processing that, but we still catch up just the same. It feels good to reminisce about the good, old college days with Stacy. I didn't realize how much I missed talking to her and her easygoing personality.

We part ways after a while, promising to keep in touch more often. I drive back home with a smile on my face and a sense of relief in my mind.

Monday rolls around as quickly as the sand slips through the proverbial hourglass. The doctor's visit I have scheduled

for today is something I dread a lot. Jennie initially offered to go with me, but Jack insisted on accompanying me this time. I agreed, although a little hesitantly.

The doorbell rang, the door opening to reveal Jack. He's early. Although he's dressed very casually, he still looks gorgeous. His dark hair is swept across his forehead, his cocoa-brown eyes twinkling as he looks at me.

"Ready to go?" he says excitedly. I smile unconsciously. He's eager to find out about the baby.

"Yeah," I say, letting him in. "I just need to get my purse." He follows behind me as I walk into the kitchen to get my purse on one of the chairs.

"Did you eat anything?" Jack opens my refrigerator, perusing the sparse items inside.

"Excuse you, Mr. Nosy." I nudge him out of the way and shut the door.

"You didn't eat anything, did you?" he slowly questions, a small exasperated sigh leaving his lips.

"Oh, my gosh. I'm fine. Stop pestering me." I fold my arms in front of me, daring him to argue.

"Just as stubborn as ever," he chuckles with a shake of his head. "Do you need anything to make you feel better?"

You, I think, but clasp my lips shut.

It feels as if six years haven't passed, as if we were still those two young people, stupidly blind and atrociously dumb

in love.

“A toasted bagel wouldn’t kill me,” I offer.

“Coming right up.” He turns to the bag of bagels on the counter and he gets to work slicing them.

This feels like old times. It’s nice.

I used to have a nasty habit of skipping meals, and he would make sure I ate something throughout the day. The *déjà vu* I feel is so strong I have to sit down.

“You know you don’t have to do that,” I say while watching him bustle around my kitchen. He still has a runner’s body, lean with broad shoulders. His ass, filling his jeans out just right, is still just as appealing.

Jack gives me an “oh, please” roll of his eyes and swipes the cream cheese from the fridge.

The toaster pops out the sesame bagel, and he hot-potatoes it onto a plate. “What about some fresh fruit on top? You have strawberries?”

“Bananas,” I say, making myself useful by plucking one from the counter and handing it over.

“Potassium. Good.” He spreads a healthy dose of cream cheese on the warm bagel, then slices up the banana to go on top.

“You know, you haven’t changed, Jack. You always were a nurturer.”

“I have had practice with Martin.” He smiles. “I’d love for you to meet him. The kid’s so smart.”

“Wonder where he gets that from.”

“No clue,” Jack jokes. He cuts the bagel into smaller bites. “Here. Open wide.” He puts the bite to my mouth teasingly, beckoning me to open my mouth like a child.

“Not funny,” I say but laugh. “Give me that. I’m an adult.” I grab the piece of bagel from him and pop it into my mouth.

He stands too close as I chew and swallow. His gaze is on my lips.

I sigh. The bagel actually tastes superb.

He nods, seeming satisfied. “I think I’ll join you. I missed breakfast this morning.” He slides another bagel into the toaster.

“Help yourself,” I banter and give him a cute smile. “You always did.”

“I think you mean, ‘Thank you for feeding me, Jack. You are always thinking of me, Jack. You are my hero, Jack’.” His voice sing-songs, making me laugh again.

“Right, of course, that’s what I meant.”

We eat together, talking about things here and there, preserving a bit of normalcy in the chaos our lives have become. I cherish the peace and quiet, even if it is momentary. My brain became accustomed to constant overthinking in the

past few days, so Jack's presence is really helpful in making me focus on the present and nothing else.

After the bagels, he gets up and hustles me out of the kitchen. "Come on, we're running late now." He gestures for me to go out first, with a hand on my lower back. Outside, we make our way to the car, where he, as usual, opens my door. Maybe it's the hormonal imbalance going on in my body right now, but being reminded of all the things he used to do, all the things he does without even noticing, is making me a bit emotional.

I exhale all these thoughts, focusing on the coming doctor's appointment, something that will be very frequent in the coming months. As much as I dread the doctor, I also feel a bit of relief. Relief at the company, relief because I'm not alone in this situation.

Jack's with me.

Yeah, we're going to be okay. Hopefully.

###

Six years ago...

Jack's banging at my door. I can't let him in. If I do, we'll just end up making up and making out. I can't be around Jack without wanting to kiss him.

So I don't answer the door.

I can't.

I have been crying nonstop since last night after seeing him at the party. I can't believe he forgot all about me again. It's just so disrespectful! I just don't understand how he can treat me like this...

I have cried way too much over this man. His carefree attitude and irresponsible behavior don't just hurt his grades in school. He's hurting me too. Repeatedly.

Every time he says he's sorry, I forgive him. And every time, he'd promise not to do it again. He'd promised to include me in his plans more. How many times did he say he only wanted to make me happy? *I love you, Sarah. Your happiness is all I want...*

And just like he does every single time, he forgot all about me. It's like his default setting or something. How expected I have ever expected him to change?

I just can't let him keep breaking my heart over and over again.

I'm done.

Chapter Five

JACK

The next morning, I wake from my slumber and head straight for the bathroom. I wash my face with cold water and brush my teeth.

Another day, another dollar, my dad used to always say. But I'm not like my pops. I'm nurturing, just as Sarah said. I was in bliss spending time with her yesterday. We bantered as if a second hadn't passed between us.

As I walk by Martin's room, I peek in. "Rise and shine, Martin. It's time for school." Martin's taller-than-average four-year-old frame rustles and he gives me a thumb's up sign.

Satisfied with that response, I head to the kitchen to make breakfast.

As he starts getting ready, I have my breakfast with scrambled eggs and a cup of coffee while reading the newspaper. Martin comes out of his room in his usual mismatched outfit and sits at the table in front of the plate I've

made for him. He eats, now old enough to feed himself. I remember when I had to spoonfeed him.

When he's done, Martin pushes his plate away from him. "Let's go, dad. I'm done with my breakfast," he informs me.

Both of us get up and head for the front door to my apartment. I lock the door and we take the elevator down to the ground floor. As we reach the ground floor, we walk to Martin's preschool so I can drop him off and head to work.

On the way, Clark calls me.

"Jack, we have another meeting with the clients today. Do me a favor, and please don't flake out again," he lectures.

"Yeah, I will be there as soon as I drop Martin off at school," I tell him.

"Alright, I'm waiting for you," he says and ends the call.

We reach Martin's school, and I drop him off at the gate.

"Bye, Dad," says Martin as he hugs me, then turns and rushes off into the school.

With Martin sorted, I jog back to my apartment as quickly as I can and head back upstairs to change into my office clothes and leave for work. This time, no bus rides. Thinking about the last disaster and how I can't afford to be late this time, I get an Uber instead.

After about fifteen minutes of zooming past traffic, I reach my office in record time. On my way to the conference room, I meet up with Clark, who's just wandering the halls aimlessly.

“Good, you are here,” he says breathlessly. “And with about five minutes to spare.”

“Told you I’d be here.”

“Color me impressed. Now impress the clients.”

We head for the elevator and on the ride up, Clark briefs me on the talking points.

“Last time, we convinced the clients to the deal,” he says, giving me a review of what I already know. “Today we finalize that deal, got it?”

“That’s the idea,” I reply.

Five minutes later, our clients file in and start taking their seats. As soon as I see Sarah, my heart jolts as she takes her seat opposite my direction. As our eyes meet, I wonder how she’s feeling. I hope the nausea subsided and she was able to eat breakfast.

“Okay, everyone,” Clark starts, “last time we discussed the plan for the deal, so today we’re finalizing and discussing the terms and conditions of the plan, as Jack will now explain.”

“Morning, everyone,” I begin, sitting up in my seat. “As you know, this is a great day. We’re very excited to solidify our business relationship and, with any luck, make enough money to keep us all rolling in dough for decades to come.” I get a little laugh from that. At the same time, I feel something nudge my leg under the desk. Something soft makes its way up and down my shin. I glance over at Sarah, who’s looking back at me with a sly smile on her face.

I clear my throat, trying to ignore the soft feeling of her foot on my leg. “I, um, I will now present the terms of our agreement for the deal.”

I pass copies of the agenda and other documents surrounding the deal to Sarah, who takes one and passes it along. As she’s looking down at her paper, she starts chewing on the edge of her pen. Her pearly white teeth against the dark of the pen and the red of her lipstick are catching my eye as she twists the pen between her long fingers. God, what is she doing to me?

As the meeting continues, Sarah discusses the terms with her boss, pointing out some conditions in the document that the clients didn’t agree to. Seeing her in her element is impressive. I’m in admiration at how clearly and concisely she’s speaking. She really knows her stuff.

“Condition number two and condition number eight are not feasible to our side of the deal,” she says. “We request a change in the terms and conditions pointed out if we are to agree to it.”

Clark reviews the said conditions for a moment, then shakes his head.

“Condition number two can be slightly changed, and condition number eight can be bargained as both conditions may affect our ROI,” Clark informs them.

As the meeting goes on, it looks like we’re entering an impasse. The stress levels in the room are heady, but I try to remain calm.

It'll all be worth it in the end, I think. It'll all be worth it.

All in all, we ended up with a few more problems than we had started, and the clients requested another meeting to sort it all out.

“We’re going to have to reconvene at a later date so we can discuss the terms amongst ourselves,” Sarah announces.

Clark and I look at our calendars. “How’s the day after tomorrow?” Clark offers.

“We’ll take it,” one of the clients answers.

“Okay, we’ll expect you on Wednesday same time. Thank you for your time.” Clark says as everyone gets up and heads for the exit.

I take out my phone and text Sarah.

Will I see you today?

Meet me in the bathroom, she replies.

As the clients leave the office premises, Clark confronts me.

“What was that? I thought we had this figured out,” he hisses angrily at me. “Now they have time to come back with more changes.”

“I did the best I could, Clark,” I reply. “I can’t tie them down with rope.” I really want to end this conversation. I’m thinking about Sarah in the bathroom.

Clark sighs in exasperation. “Okay, I’ll run through the terms with the management and see if we can compromise on

the conditions a bit. In the meantime, work on your debate game, huh? We need this thing done and over with.”

“I know,” I say and Clark nods. After he leaves, I hurry out of the room and straight to the unisex bathroom down the hall.

As soon as I get on the other side of the door, I see her there, leaning against the sink and looking at me lustily with those sapphire eyes of hers. I lock the door and the sound echoes against the tile walls.

“Finally,” she smiles and curls one elegant finger at me, gesturing for me to come closer.

Just as if she’d cast a spell on me, I comply, walking over to her and putting my arms around her waist. I kiss her hard and she whimpers a little against my lips. I pick her up and set her on the bathroom counter, my hands reaching up her blue pencil skirt.

She’s kissing my neck as I loop my fingers into her panties and pull them off. I can feel her unbuckling my belt and unzipping my pants. She wants me, and there’s no way I’m questioning it. I spread her legs and pull her hips to me. I feel her breath in my ear and it’s making me crazy.

“Fuck me, Jack.”

I’m inside her before she can finish the sentence. She moans in my ear as I enter her tight forest. She has one hand in my hair and her other wrapped across my back, her nails digging into my shoulder. I thrust myself inside of her, my hands

gripping her ass cheeks. She feels like heaven, better than anything I've ever felt. *Has it always been this good?*

She starts to move her hips with mine as she leans back, throwing her head back and her gasping moans echo all around us. I reach under her blouse, my hand finding her bra and snaking under it so I can feel her warm, soft breast in my hand, the hard nipple rubbing against my palm.

“Oh, Jack,” she gasps, squeezing herself around my manhood. I moan and lean into her, feeling myself getting closer. I lift her leg up and wrap it around me. The slight change lets me thrust deeper and she grabs hold of me, her moans increasing in pitch.

“Don't stop,” she says breathlessly. “Please...don't stop...”

I hold her to me and bury my face into her neck, inhaling her sweet floral perfume. Her body starts to shiver against me and I know she's close. I'm getting close too.

“Oh, Sarah,” I moan. It's all I have time to say as I feel her shaking against me. The sound and feel of her excitement send me over the edge and I explode inside of her. Loud, animalistic grunts escape me as my orgasm takes control of me, making me thrust hard against her. She goes limp in my arms and when the waves stop, she wraps her legs around me and holds onto me.

A liquidy calm comes over my entire body as I kiss her neck. The taste of her skin is like ambrosia. I could live inside of her with her taste on my lips.

“That...was really good,” she whispers in my ear. As she giggles, I pull away and I’m looking down at her flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes. I lean in and kiss her one last time before she pushes me away and slides off the counter, pulling down her skirt.

As we zip and button up, I say, “You’ll call me if you need anything, right?”

“I will,” she says with a wink.

“Yeah, I mean...if you need anything else.”

She tilts her head a little at me, then says, “Okay. See you later?”

“See you later.”

I head back to my office and get back to work, my body still tingling from the afterglow. It’s hard to keep my mind on my work, given that I can still smell her on my clothes. But it’s worth it. If I could feel like this every day, I would.

I worked in bliss all day. I even did a little overtime. Before long, I was looking at the clock with the feeling that I’d forgotten something...

Martin. *Shit*. I forgot to pick him up.

Quick as a flash, I left my office and rushed out of the building like it was on fire. All the while, ordering another Uber on my phone. *Jesus, how can I forget him?!*

When I reach the school, I spot Martin almost immediately. He’s sitting on the bench in front of the school, his little feet

swinging back and forth. A feeling of guilt hits me hard. There's a teacher out there with him with a crease of concern on her forehead. I turn to the driver, "On second."

I open the door and Martin's face lights up. "Daddy!"

He turns to the teacher and says, "Bye Ms. Landcheck," before jumping off the bench and running towards me gleefully, his blonde hair flapping in the sunlight.

"Hi, Daddy. You'll never believe what happened at school today!" Martin shouts as he gets into the car with me.

"Tell me all about it, son," I say.

We ride all the way back home and Martin is telling me about one of his classmates who brought a pet hamster in for show-and-tell.

"He was small," he was saying, "and fuzzy like a carpet. Can we get a hamster?"

I chuckle. I'm so glad he's not angry. I still feel guilty, though. "No," I say. "Not yet, anyway. Maybe when you're a little older."

He seems a little dejected, but it's not bad. He shrugs a little and says, "Okay."

Once we're dropped off at the apartment, I look up at the late afternoon sky and I think that maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea for a treat. At the very least, it would help this cloud of guilt that was hanging over my head.

“Hey, would you like ice cream?” I ask him and his face lights up like Christmas.

“Yeah, but can I get a chocolate ice cream?”

“Sure thing, kiddo,” I say.

We walk to the ice cream parlor, hand in hand, enjoying the warm breeze and fresh air. The ice cream shop is only a block away and that suits us just fine. When we get there, I order a double scoop of chocolate for him and a scoop of butter pecan for me. We walk back, ice cream cones in hand, eating them gleefully as the sky starts to ascend into its twilight colors.

Once we’re back home, we crash on the couch and watch cartoons until we drift off to sleep.

When I sleep, I dream of Sarah. I see us together in a ranch house with a neatly manicured lawn. Sarah’s in a porch swing with the baby in her arms and Martin’s playing with his trucks out front. I’m sitting with Sarah and there’s the smell of lilacs in the air.

My eyes open on their own accord as the cold breeze blows from the open window. It’s just past six o’clock. We’ve only been sleeping for about an hour, but that’s longer than I was planning. I get up and close the window. When I turn around, I see Martin fast asleep on the couch

I wake him. “Hey buddy, come on. Time to get up from our nap.”

Martins stretches his little body and yawns. “Okay, Dad.”

“Why don’t you practice your reading while I cook dinner for us?”

I turn off the television and follow Martin to our kitchen. He sits at the table with a book, and I gather the ingredients to make tonight’s dinner; meatloaf. Martin likes it with extra ketchup on top.

Dinner’s in the oven and Martin’s at the table practicing his reading. I sit next to him and help (Martin keeps pushing me away with a “Dad, I got it!”) as much as possible. The oven timer eventually goes off. As I go to get the meatloaf out of the oven, my phone vibrates. I put the meatloaf on the stove and pull out the phone. It’s Clark.

“Damn,” I mutter. “What now?”

I reluctantly answer.

“Jack,” he says. I already don’t like the tone of his voice. “Hey, sorry to bother you so late, but the investors are getting cold feet. We need that big brain of yours to sweet talk them into staying onboard.”

“I’ll take care of it,” I tell him and end the call.

“Who was it, daddy?” Martin asks.

“Just one of daddy’s friends. Ready to eat?”

Martin nods and I start making his plate. I set the plate out in front of him and my phone rings again. I look at it, and, of course, it’s Clark again. I sigh heavily and answer.

“I almost forgot,” he says. “We rescheduled for tomorrow. Make sure you wear your best tie. And be there on time.”

“Right,” I say. How long is he going to make me pay for being late the one time?

We eat the meatloaf (Martin devours every bite) and I give him his evening bath. Martin always loves playing with his toys, laughing as he splashes them with water. Watching him splash around, happy as a clam takes away some of my stress. What would I do without him?

After the bath comes bedtime and a bedtime story. I sit on his bed and read to him as he drifts off, his head against my arm. He’s asleep before I finish the book. I tuck him in and kiss his forehead.

“Sleep tight. Love you, buddy.”

Time for the nightly routine. I wash the dishes and lay out mine and Martin’s clothes for the next morning. After finishing the chores, I sit on the couch and fire up my laptop for work. Six critical bugs were detected in our app in the last 2 days. All of them needed my personal attention.

“Oh, this is going to take a while,” I mutter.

I start working on the issues. I only get about halfway through fixing the bugs, I start to feel the day creep up on me. I need to get some sleep. I rub my eyes and work for another four hours before finally finishing up and going to bed.

In the morning, I start it all over again. I wake up with my alarm, I get up and dressed and get Martin together. I make

breakfast for us both, then we leave, him for school and me for work.

“Hey, right on time,” says Clark as I walk into the meeting room at work. “Early, even. You look like shit, though.”

“Thanks,” I say. “I was up all night trying to fix a couple of bugs that popped up in the app.” I glance around the meeting room. “Looks like I’m really early.”

“About twenty minutes or so. Say, why don’t you go freshen up before they get here? I’m serious. You look like hell.”

I give him a smart look and say, “Fine. I’ll get some coffee, too, while I’m at it. You want some?”

He raises the cup of coffee he already has and I nod. “Be right back.”

I snap my fingers at him in acknowledgment and I leave, going to the bathroom first. As soon as I get a look at myself in the mirror, I cringe a little. I’ve got dark bags under my bloodshot eyes and my hair was sticking up in spots. I shaved this morning, but my skin looks a little sallow and sickly like I just got out of the hospital or something.

I splash some water on my face, then use a little of the water to lay down the cowlick in my hair. It’s not perfect, but at least I don’t look like a homeless guy in a suit now.

I head to the cafeteria and grab a cup of coffee and as I turn around to sit at a table, I’m surprised to find Sarah already sitting there working on the laptop. Her black hair is pulled up

in a loose bun. A few strands frame her beautiful face and her blue eyes shine in the sunlight from the windows behind her.

“Sarah? What are you doing here?” I inquire with a smile.

“Hey,” she says pleasantly. “I beat my bosses here, apparently. I live a little closer than the rest of them do.” She gives me a once-over. “Are you okay? You look like you’ve been up all night.”

“That’s probably because I was,” I sat down next to her. “Work stuff kept me up. That on top of making sure Martin’s together...it was a long day yesterday.”

Her smile broadens a little. “Aren’t you Superman? I’m impressed.”

Her supportive words settle warmly in my heart, and I suddenly don’t feel as tired.

“Thank you,” I say, taking a sip from my coffee cup.

“You’re welcome.” She opens her mouth to say something else but her phone rings. She answers the call and I can’t help looking at the dip in her blouse, showing off her cleavage. A repeat performance of yesterday’s romp goes through my mind.

“Hello,” she answers. Someone says something on the other end and she looks down at the time on her laptop. “Yes, of course. I’m already here, in fact...I’ll see you then.”

She ends the call and closes her laptop, and stands up. “Time to punch in. Ready?”

“Always,” I say with a smirk.

She gives me a playful side-eye and says, “Come on, then.”

We head for the conference room and meet Clark at the door. “The clients have arrived,” I tell Clark.

“Good. I’m going to meet them downstairs,” Clark says.

As he leaves, we walk in and sit down. I sit next to her, but not too close. I can already feel her body heat and I need to focus this time.

A few moments later, Clark walks in with the rest of the clients. As everyone finds their seats, I get my laptop open and ready. Once everyone is seated, Clark starts the meeting.

“Okay, everyone, last time we agreed to make changes to the terms, and I hope you will accept the modified version that Jack will now present,” Clark announces.

I connect the laptop to the projector screen and open up the page with the terms of the deal. I narrate the terms to the investors, pointing out the main changes made in terms of the deal. After reading out the terms, the potential partners chat amongst themselves while Clark and I await their decision. After a while, they announce their decision.

“We accept,” one of them says.

“Great! We’ll start the paperwork,” Clark informs them.

With a done deal, Clark takes a moment to chat with everyone about the company we’ll all be a part of. As he’s

shaking hands and such, I notice Sarah's standing in the corner...and she looks really pale.

"Hey," I say to her, "You okay?"

She shrugs. "I'm holding it together."

"Nausea?"

She nods her head. "I'm also really tired. I don't know, but I've just been rundown lately. A side effect of pregnancy, I guess."

"Sorry," I say, "Hey, these guys aren't giving you any trouble about all this, are they? I know some executives can be hardasses."

She shrugs again. "They're as understanding as they can be. I only have so many sick days. At least until my maternity leave, right?"

I slip my hand into hers and squeeze it. She smiles up at me. "After this deal goes through, we'll both be able to take as much time off as we want."

She snickers. "You sound so confident."

"Probably because I am," I say. "Stick with me and we'll be on easy street in no time."

She's smiling and a little of the color comes back to her cheeks. This must be what they mean by pregnant women glowing.

"You know what I think," I say, "I think that tonight would be a very good night for me to make you dinner."

“Oh, Jack,” she chuckles. “Food is the last thing I’m thinking about right now.”

“You’re eating for two, love,” I say. “I won’t have you skipping meals. Come over. Let me pamper you a little. It’ll also give you a chance to meet Martin.”

Her smile got a little brighter and her face flushed. “I don’t know. What if he doesn’t like me?”

“What’s not to like? Say yes. You won’t regret it.”

She takes a second, but she’s looking into my eyes and I can see she’s being persuaded. “All right,” she says. “I’d love to meet Martin.”

Pretty soon after that, Clark and the clients wrap up their questions and the clients leave with Sarah in tow. As soon as they’re gone, Clark walks up to me with a satisfied look on his face.

“Jack, in case you didn’t hear, you’ve made us all very rich!” We laugh together about it for a minute. After he leaves, I linger in the room, feeling a little good about myself. After all the sleepless nights and bearing Clark’s constant pestering, the tedious work of balancing work life with being a single father is finally paying off.

For dinner, I’m preparing a roasted chicken with asparagus and some butter noodles on the side for Martin. While Martin does his homework at the table, I cook and hum to myself. A glorious day behind me and a glorious evening ahead of me.

“Daddy?” Martin asks me. “Are you happy?”

“As a matter of fact, I am,” I say. “Why do you ask?”

“You’re humming,” he says with a giggle.

“Am I?” I say. “Huh. I guess it’s because we’re having a guest over tonight.”

He nods and his mass of blonde hair falls into his eyes. “Daddy’s friend.”

“That’s right. Daddy’s friend. And I need you to be extra nice to her, okay? You think you can do that, buddy?”

Martin nods and I smile to myself. It was going to be a perfect night.

By the time dinner is about ready, Martin has finished his homework and Sarah is due to show up any second. I tell Martin to go wash his hands and get ready for dinner. Just as he leaves, the doorbell rings.

I open the door to Sarah and I smile. She looks really good tonight. She’s wearing a loose knit top and a long bohemian-style skirt. It looks like it might be formless on anyone else, but on her, it only enhances her curvy shape. She smiles at me and her eyes twinkle like stars.

“Come in,” I say and guide her into the living room. Martin comes walking out at the same time. He stops and looks up at Sarah with large eyes.

“Hey, buddy,” I say. “This is Daddy’s friend, Sarah. Sarah, meet Martin.”

He walks up to her and puts out his hand. “Hello there.”

Sarah kneels down to his level and shakes his hand. “Hello there. Nice to meet you.”

“It’s very nice to meet you, too,” he responds.

We head to the kitchen and as Martin and Sarah sit down, I bring the food to the table. Sarah is watching me with playful eyes.

“Oooh, this looks wonderful,” she says. “I didn’t know you were such a good cook.”

“You don’t know the half of it, sister,” I retort. I take my seat between them and say, “Let’s dig in.”

I fix Martin a plate and Sarah fixes her own. Once I’ve got my plate together, Sarah has already taken a bite of the chicken. “What do you think?” I ask her.

She nods, chewing. After a moment, she says, “It could use a little finesse, but it’s very good.”

“Daddy?” Martin pipes up. “Is Sarah your girlfriend?”

Both Sarah and I share an amused glance. I raise an eyebrow to get her reaction and she nods.

“Yes, I guess you can say that,” I tell him finally.

“Yes, your dad and I go way back,” Sarah tells Martin.

“What’s that mean?” he asks.

“It means we’ve known each other a long time,” I respond. “Since before you were born.”

“Oooh,” he responds. The sound rises and falls like he’s on a rollercoaster.

After dinner, I go about the task of putting Martin to bed. I pick him up and put him over my shoulder. He clings to me, yawning in my ear as I hold him.

“You don’t mind waiting in here for a few minutes?” I ask Sarah and she shakes her head. I turn around so Martin is facing Sarah. “Say good night to Sarah, bud.”

“Okay, Daddy. Goodnight, Sarah,” he says, waving a little chubby hand.

I take him to bed and as I’m tucking him in, he asks, “Daddy?”

“Yes, buddy.”

“Can Sarah come over all the time?”

I feel my face get a little warm. “Sure. If you want her to.”

“Okay,” he says with a lazy smile. “You’re happy when she’s here and I like it when you’re happy.”

I kiss him on the forehead at that and say, “Good night, kiddo.”

I come back to the living room and Sarah is sitting on the couch, smiling up at me. “Do you want something to drink?” I ask her. “I’ve got some non-alcoholic wine in the fridge.”

“That would be lovely, thank you.”

I get the wine and pour two glasses. I bring them out to her and we sit and sip for a moment. “So, it seems,” I say, “that you’ve managed to get the seal of approval from Martin. Congratulations.”

She giggles. "I'll drink to that," she replies. "This was a lovely night, you know."

"I'm glad you enjoyed yourself."

She bites her lip and says, "So, I'm your girlfriend now, huh?"

I'm thinking of Martin's question and I sigh. "Well, I mean...we are friends now...right?" She nods and blushes a little. I add. "Maybe a little more than that. We can take it slow, though."

"Well," she says, "I was wondering..." She pauses, her fingers rubbing the cool surface of her glass. "You know how we had sex at your work."

I smile. "I can't really stop thinking about it."

She laughs. "Well, since we're trying to define our relationship and all...and I'm not seeing anyone, and if you are not seeing anyone... maybe we can start there?"

I raise an eyebrow. "Start with...having sex more often."

"If you're okay with that," she says quickly. "I mean, it doesn't have to be anything serious, it's just...these pregnancy hormones have me climbing the walls some days and...well, if we're heading in that direction anyway—"

"I really like this idea," I say, not mincing words.

"You do?" she asks.

He nods. "In fact, what do you say to a little nightcap? Just the two of us?"

She smiles and sets her drink down on the table. “What did you have in mind?”

“Lean back on the couch.”

Her face flushes. “Wait, you want to do something right now? What about Martin?”

“He’s sound asleep and, besides, what I want to do won’t take long.”

She raised her eyebrow at me now. “What do you want to do?”

“Just trust me,” I laugh. “Come on, lie back.”

She lies back and I lift one of her legs up onto the couch. I reach up her skirt, running my hands along her thighs until I get to her underwear.

“Jack...”

“Shhh,” I say as I pull down her panties. “All I want you to do is lie back and relax...and be as quiet as you can.”

She’s smiling at me as I slide her panties all the way off and toss them to the floor. I move between her legs, my hands finding her warm and wet center. I slip my fingers inside of her and she shudders with a small gasp. She bites her lip as I slip another finger in and start moving them in and out, my thumb finding her sensitive and slippery marble.

Her legs are already starting to shake as I finger her. She lets her head fall back as she breathes out in soft whispers.

“You like that?” I say huskily.

“Oh, yes,” she says. She reaches to me and grabs me by the back of the head, kissing me deeply as my fingers work under her skirt.

Her excitement drips all over my fingers and I know I can bring her all the way just with this...but I desperately want to taste her. She moans a little against my mouth and her teeth graze my lips.

“Jack,” she whispers. “Oh, Jack.”

I smile at her, then I lower myself down until my head is under her skirt. I take hold of her thighs and bury my face between her legs, letting my tongue explore and taste her sweetness. I feel her grabbing at my head as a low moan escapes her.

“Oh...God...” she whispers. “Oh...fuck...Oh...”

Her legs are starting to shake and I speed up my tongue motions. She sucks in air between her teeth and her body starts to vibrate. Despite her best efforts, she’s doing a lousy job keeping quiet as her orgasm takes hold of her.

With a shuddering gasp, she comes. I hold her thighs as they shake against the sides of my face.

“Oh, Jack...God...”

I sat up and kissed her gently. “Thank was for you.”

We lay on the couch together for a little while before she finally got up and put on her panties. “I should get home,” she says. “Walk me to my car?”

I do. She was parked right outside, so it was a short walk. Right before she gets into the car, she and I kiss each other as we savor this moment.

“See you soon,” I say to her as she starts her car.

I watch her leave. And I feel good about this entire thing. I guess it really is all going to work out.

Finally.

Six years ago...

We're graduating tomorrow and Sarah's successfully avoided me for the past month.

I call all her friends to see if they've heard from her and all they tell me is that I screwed up and to leave her alone.

What did I do now? I'm so confused. My heart hurt like hell. I love this girl. I love her so much. And now she's decided to end it. No explanation. No call. No nothing. I fall onto my bed and press my palms to my eyes, and I cry. There's nothing more I can do. I have lost the best thing that's ever happened to me. I'm shattered.

Chapter Six

SARA

So, it seemed that Jack and I were on the road to getting back together. It was both thrilling and frightening all at once. Even though I was seeing so many changes in him from six years ago, I knew how true it was that old habits died hard. I found myself mentally waiting for the other shoe to fall. To add to all of it, this go around, I was pregnant with his baby. It all seemed to be moving so fast.

I think about that a lot. This baby growing inside of me. To think it was just a month ago that I was single and focused on my career. Now...Now, everything just feels so uncertain. I'll be a parent in less than nine months. Someone's mother. There will be a tiny person in this world who relies on me for safety and security for the next eighteen years. I'll be expected to feed it, clothe it, and keep it alive. I could barely remember to feed myself some days.

In retrospect, my attraction to Jack seemed to be the least of my troubles...but it was still trouble. I'd fallen back into his arms so easily. Being with him just seemed effortless. Like I don't even have to think too hard about it. It just...is. It's always been that way, though. I've always had a hard time saying no to him. His energy engulfs me, and the way he looks at me gives me butterflies. It always has. I wonder what will become of us.

After the breakup six years ago, I tried to clear him from my mind. Now, here I was, pregnant by him with an undefined

relationship. If my mother were alive, she'd shame me for being an unwed and with child. But my mother's opinion of me had always been negative.

I think that's why I fell for Jack so easily. He loves everything about me. I can do no wrong. And it's not like I haven't thought of Jack all this time. I often wondered how he was holding up in life. But I had moved on, dating here and there. And so had he, apparently. Martin's four. I wonder about Martin's mother. Had Jack loved her as much as he said he loved me?

I'm thinking of all this as I sit on my couch. It's the day after we've had dinner and my mind is dizzy with the unending complications that is our relationship. So many things could have gone right the first time around. If only...

If only he'd been the man he's at least trying to be now.

He's taking responsibility for this child. That should be enough for now. I'm overthinking it all again.

At least he's making an effort. He's being so much more attentive. So sweet.

I need to stop worrying so much. To distract myself, I pick up my phone to scroll through it. My Instagram feed is filled with heartwarming stories of happy couples.

Will Jack and I ever be a happy couple? I wonder. It's too stupid of me to even think of that.

"What a fucking mess," I say aloud and my stomach grumbles, reminding me to eat. Time to feed the baby, I think.

My priorities need to change.

I make my way to the kitchen and prep all the ingredients needed for the pasta. My phone rings and I see it's Jack.

"Hey," I say, "what's up?"

"Hey, Martin's at a sleepover, and I'm wondering if I can come over. I know it's short notice."

"It's fine. I was just about to make some pasta."

"That'd be nice. I'm starving too." He pauses. Something's on his mind. "You know, I was thinking that maybe we could talk over some things."

"Yeah," I say, "I was thinking the same thing."

After I hang up with him, I go back to cooking pasta, now for two. No, mushrooms. He's allergic. Maybe some alfredo sauce, instead? God, look at me compromising. Just like the old days.

I finish cooking and put the pasta in the oven to keep it warm. I'm not sure what's taking Jack so long. My stomach grumbles again. Waiting for Jack. How much of my life have I wasted doing just that?

When we were together, he worked long hours after school, then he'd go out drinking with his co-workers. He used to call it "networking."

His job and his friendships always spilled over into his personal life. I took a backseat to the "Jack Show." It was always about him and how he needed to work hard to make

money. He could play just as hard as he could work, just never with me.

I'm a different person now, I think to myself. I have grown and matured. He's different, too. He's a parent. The way he is with Martin warms my heart.

I have to believe he'll be present in our baby's life as well. The clock on my oven says I have been waiting over an hour. This is ridiculous. I go to the stove and pull out the pasta, making myself a plate. No reason I have to go hungry because he's late. I'm starting to feel a little faint anyway.

As I fill my plate, the doorbell rings. Jack's here. I go to the door and he's all smiles, barely acknowledging how late he is. I feel faint and my legs begin to shake. A cold rush runs up my body, and I start to sweat. My stomach lurches.

"Sarah, are you okay?" Jack says.

My body crumples to the ground as blackness overtakes me.

I wake up in a cold hospital room. Jennie is sitting beside me in a chair, looking worried.

"She's awake!" My friend grabs my hand.

On the other side of me, Jack grabs my other hand.

"What happened?" I glance around. I'm hooked up to an IV.

"You fainted," Jack says, his eyebrows furrowing. His dark hair looks like it's been raked over.

"The doc says you were dehydrated," Jennie adds, "You know you have to be careful. That's how you go into early

labor.”

I don't know what to say. I thought I was doing okay. “I have been trying my best. It's just hard to eat and then keep food down. I will do better.” I try to sit up, but Jack presses me back on the pillow.

“Just rest, okay,” he says. “The doctor says if you can't keep food and water down, you may need to be admitted. For you and our baby's sake.”

Jennie strokes my arm. “Jack and I are thinking it might be a good idea if you take a leave of absence and maybe move in with him for a bit.”

“Just until you are feeling better,” Jack says. “No pressure after that.”

Move in with him? My mind races. This is all happening too fast. I press a protective hand to my belly. I have to think of the baby.

I'm silent for a moment. Then, “Okay, just until I get better.”

The next two weeks roll by. The hospital keeps me overnight and, as promised, Jenn and Jack start moving my things into Jack's apartment. I take time off, which, honestly, wasn't an entirely terrible idea. I'm starting to feel better.

Under Jack's watchful eye, I have no choice but to remember to eat and stay hydrated. He cooks every night when he gets home and makes sure there's food for me in the fridge while he's at work. I can't be mad at it. Maybe the hospital

visit scared him. I don't know. But either way, he really cares about my well-being. For that, I'm thankful. Jack's being reliable. He's coming home after work. He's not going out drinking. It really is like he's a different guy altogether.

This evening Martin is at another sleepover and I decide to make pasta again. Jack's home from work, but his nose is still in his laptop.

"Hey, you," I nudge him on the shoulder. "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy."

"Oh, haha. I see what you did there." He grabs my waist and sits me on his lap.

I can't help but laugh. "I made us some pasta. You hungry?"

"Starving."

"Extra mushrooms just for you," I tease.

"That's nice, dear," he jokes. "Let me just update my will."

"Yes, go ahead." I laugh. "Your heir is in my womb, Jack. I will automatically be a part of your will," I said grandly. "It's a perfect plan ... kill you and then run with all your money." I give a comically evil laugh.

"Oh, you bad girl," he says. He gives me a little spank on my backside. "Daddy's gonna have to spank you later."

I kiss him and his hands start to roam immediately. I push him away, sliding off his lap. "Come on," I say. "I'm hungry. Let's eat. Go wash up and don't take too long. You don't want me passing out again."

“Never again.” He stands up and kisses my forehead.

I walk to the kitchen to finish the pasta while Jack washes up. He returns, wearing the same flannel pajamas he’s been wearing all week.

“Do you not have any other pair of pajamas?” I ask.

He looks down at himself. “What’s wrong with these? I like these. They’re comfortable and roomy in the crotch. You know how rare that is for a pair of PJs?”

I just chuckle and bring him his bowl of pasta. “They’re just like you. Roomy in the crotch.” I kiss him on the top of his head and sit down to eat with him.

“Mm, delicious,” he says just after eating a forkful.

“Thank you. I mean, it’s better with mushrooms but... It passes.”

“Well, let me be the first to thank you for not killing me tonight,” he grins.

“My pleasure,” I say with a chuckle.

“How was your day?” he asks. The old Jack rarely asked how my day was, nor did he take the time to talk about the little things in life.

“It was a good day,” I answered. “Boring, but I think uneventful is a good thing, considering. How was yours?”

“Busy. I’m exhausted,” he says.

“Luckily, you have a comfy bed in a warm apartment,” I smile and bite into another string of pasta.

“Luckily, indeed.” He smirks a little as he looks over at me suggestively.

“If you want, I can do a little cleaning up during the day. I’ve been trying to keep things tidy, you know,” I say. I hate not being productive in some way. “Or maybe I can pick Martin up—”

“No, you’re supposed to be resting. That’s all I need from you.” He winks at me. “Resting and eating and taking care of yourself.”

I nod, twirling the pasta on my plate around my fork. “You know, I’m going to have to go back to work soon,” I say, “I can’t live here forever. I don’t want to be a burden.”

“You’re anything but a burden, and there’s no rush.” Jack tilts his head. “You want to add stress to your life after that little scare. I don’t think that’s good for the baby.”

“Thanks, Dr. Jack,” I joke. “We’ll see how it goes.” I finish my last bit of pasta and hold a hand over my belly.

The last thing I want is to have to rely on a man who wasn’t committed to me, not to mention a man with a history of selfishness. Being tied to *that man* could never happen. I won’t let it.

After dinner, we sit on the couch and watch television. I’m nuzzled into his chest, his arms securely around my shoulders. I like this. This feels good and natural. Suddenly, I feel the fires of my old self start to stir...

I sit up and smile at him. He chuckles a little. “What?”

“You’ve been so good to me,” I say. “It’s a real turn-on.”

He raises an eyebrow and says, “You have no idea.”

I reach down, moving my hand easily past the elastic of his pajama bottoms.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

“What do you think I’m doing?”

He’s already hard for me. The feel of his cock in my hands is enticing. I bite my lip as I start moving my hand up and down.

He sucks in a breath. “Oh...baby,” he moans.

I pull it all the way out and admire how long and thick it is as I move my hand slowly up and down on it. He’s breathing heavily, little low moans rumbling out of him.

I slide down between his legs and take him in my mouth. I swallow him down my throat and when I hear him curse, I smile inside. He’s put his hands on the back of my head as I’m bobbing up and down on him.

“Oh, Sarah,” he whispers as his hips start to move with me. He’s thrusting himself into my mouth and I’m taking it all in, letting the head of his cock go down my through again and again.

He shivers a little and I pull up, giving him one last long suck before letting him go. I stand up and start taking off my shirt. He’s looking up at me with drowsy lust in his eyes. Watching as I let my shirt drop to the floor, then pull my pants

and panties down my legs to join my shirt. I bite my lip and move to wrap my legs around him.

His mouth sucks in my nipple, sending shooting tingles along my spine. He's inside me and it fills like he's filling me with every inch of himself. I hold his head to me as he sucks my breast, his hands gripping my hips as he matches their rocking rhythm.

He's hitting the right spots inside me and every time he thrusts into me, my body sings. "Harder," I moan. "Oh, give it to me, Jack..."

I speed up my movements, squeezing him as he thrusts into me. I feel my body start to shiver, the warm sensation of my climax just around the corner.

"You are so fucking sexy," he says, massaging my breasts with one and while gripping my hip with the other, his tongue flicking my nipples.

My body finally explodes with a sweet, sweet orgasm. I shake against him, my moans hitting the ceiling of the apartment. As I lean into him, my head against his, I see him smile up at me.

"Not done with you yet," he says. He picks me up, still hard inside of me, and carries me to the bedroom.

There, he lays me down on the bed and lifts one leg up until it's resting on his shoulder. He thrusts deep into me. I moan so rough and loud I don't even recognize my own voice. Another

crescendo builds inside of me. I gasp at the sensations, ruffling my fingers through his dark hair.

Our bodies clap together—our skin moist with perspiration.

I cry out as I arch my back, my insides shuddering. My mind is in the ether.

“Oh, yes...oh, fuck, yes...”

“Give it to me,” I say as he thrusts hard into me. “Oh, yes. Oh, Jack. Oh, yeesss.” I scream over and over until I see stars. He lets out a loud moan and I feel him explode inside of me.

“Oh god, Sarah.” He says breathily.

“I know.” I breathe, and my body is more relaxed than ever before.

“I love you so much.”

“I love you too, Jack.”

Jack sleeps comfortably on the bed next to me with the fan blowing on both of us. I toss and turn, unable to sleep. I’m exhausted and annoyed that I’m the one who has to carry this baby, while he’s off in La La Land.

I sigh and punch my pillow. My pregnancy hormones are broiling, and I’m getting angry.

The blowing of the fan isn’t helping, and the sound is annoyingly obnoxious.

Why would Jack care if I’m uncomfortable? This is his house and his room. We’re only together for the baby.

Screw it, I think and take myself to the living room to binge-watch my latest Netflix series. But my mind isn't letting me even sit in peace. I'm too antsy.

And then the overthinking cycle starts again. I start to think that the only reason I'm sharing a bed with him because my doctor is worried about the pregnancy. Jack is only with me as my baby's father.

Then, what am I even doing? Why am I worried about making a place in his life and having him adjust his lifestyle for me? Why? There were many unanswered questions about why I felt this way. But I have no answers.

This house, this place, and this routine are all new to me. I'm out of my comfort zone here. I crave my own bed in my own apartment.

I look at my phone, desperately needing to talk to someone other than Jack. I need to rant.

Should I text Jennie? It's late, but I'm desperate.

Hey...are you up? I text her.

After a while, she replies; *I am now. What's up?*

I think I'm losing my shit, I reply.

Within a minute, my phone started ringing, and it was Jennie.

"What's wrong?" she asks as soon as I pick up the phone.

"I don't know. I think...I think I might be going crazy here," I say to her. "I mean, things are going so good with Jack

and everything. We're getting along and he's really taking good care of me."

"So, what's the problem? It sounds like he's doing what he's supposed to be doing."

"I don't know. I just...I can't believe that this is real, I guess. Is he really here for me? Would he be here if I wasn't pregnant? What happens after the baby is born?"

"Sarah, calm down, okay? It's not like you don't know Jack. He's not a stranger to you. You used to be in love with him."

"Yeah, I know, and all that's making it worse," I say.

"Why?"

"I don't know. I'm just... I mean, we know all about each other's pasts and—"

"Sarah... Is he being a neglectful asshole again?" she asks.

"No. Surprisingly, he's actually the opposite now."

"Is he working long hours and forgetting you exist?"

I sighed. "No, but—"

"Then what are we talking about here?" she says. "Has it occurred to you that he might actually be changed for the better? I mean, for real, this time? Is it really such a reach to believe that the experience of being a parent has actually settled him down?"

I laugh a little. "I really am insane, aren't I? I mean, just now, he's in the bedroom with the fan on and he's sound

asleep. Meanwhile, I'm climbing the walls. Why isn't he climbing the walls with me? ”

“Do you hear yourself? You can't seriously be expecting him to lose sleep just because you can't sleep. That's psychotic.”

She's right. It *is* completely insane.

“Look, this isn't about whether or not he cares if you're asleep tonight,” she says. “This is about you thinking this is the first step to him going back to the way he used to be, isn't it? You're afraid that it's this today and him forgetting about you tomorrow. Am I right?”

“Maybe,” I say. “I mean, is it so bad that I'm this gun-shy about him?”

She sighs and says, “Sarah, all I know is that you have two choices if you want to keep your sanity right now. Either accept that he's changed and stay with him or don't accept it and go back to your own apartment.”

“It's not that simple.”

“And yet,” she says. “It actually is. Now, go and sleep in the guest room until you decide what you really want to do.”

After hanging up, I traipse to the guest room, still feeling miserable and completely out of control of my life. I feel lighter after venting to Jennie, but leaving behind the past is not as easy as she makes it sound.

What she says makes sense, though. I'm making myself crazy over what *could* happen. Not what's happening. If I keep

doing this to myself, I was going to come to a point where I have to choose... and I wasn't ready to do that just yet.

I get into the spare bed and pull the comforter over my body and try to relax. Finally, I fall into slumber.

I wake up early the following day, make the bed, and head to the kitchen to make some tea.

My emotional breakdown last night doesn't seem as bad in the light of day. I have to give myself a break. This is an entirely new place for me, and it's been six years since Jack and I were together under one roof. I was really overreacting.

I shower, feeling myself perking up even more, and change into fresh clothes.

I went to Jack, but he was still sleeping. I was hungry, so I decided to make some pancakes for breakfast. I was in the process when I saw Jack walking out of the room entirely dressed in his professional attire. He looked so attractive, all cleaned up with his black hair slicked back. He looked like he was ready to go out and conquer the world. I couldn't help but have a thought to be annoyed by all the work he did. Damn! I sound like one clingy girlfriend who doesn't let his boyfriend go to work. I immediately brushed off my thoughts.

He's ready to leave for the office. I'm annoyed when he doesn't say good morning right away, just slides past me and grabs a cup of coffee. *Deep breath.* I remember he's never been a morning person like I am. It takes him a few minutes to jumpstart his brain.

“Morning,” I offer and face him.

“Good morning.” He kisses my cheek. “Hey, you disappeared last night. I went to check on you and saw you were sleeping in the guest room. Everything okay?”

“I’m fine. I was just feeling antsy and tried a different bed. I’m surprised you noticed. You seemed to be sleeping comfortably.”

“I get it,” he says. “It’s an adjustment.” He sips his coffee. “I was going to go in a little early since Kyle’s mom is taking Martin to school.”

“Pancakes aren’t ready. So if you leave early, you are on your own.” I wink at him, waving the spatula in the air.

“I can wait,” he says, grazing his fingers along my cheek. “Are you sure you are feeling okay?”

“Fine,” I say pleasantly, stuffing all my feelings down.

I hand him a plate of pancakes to distance him from me.

“Mmm, yum,” Jack says after taking a bite.

“What’s ‘yum’ about it? It’s the box pancake mix, Jack,” I say brightly. “Is this your new way of flirting?”

“No, no. These pancakes are infused with your love,” he chuckles back.

“Stop it, Jack. Just go to work,” I say.

He leaves for the office and I’m alone again. My thoughts and our past are going to haunt me again. I need to get out of this house to raise my spirits. I can explore the neighborhood

and buy some essentials. I walk to the bedroom to pick some clothes for myself, but the messy room in front of my eyes is enough to rile my anger yet again.

“He hasn’t changed a bit,” I say to myself while cleaning up the mess that Jack has made simply by getting dressed.

Why is he so messy? It’s been six years, and he hasn’t grown a bit! I seethe and go to the bathroom to wash up. I’m fed up.

I really, *really* need to get out of this place.

I step out of the house and take an Uber to my apartment. Inside, I pack products for my skincare routine, hoping that getting back to the basics will help my mood.

A knock on my front door startles me. My first thought is that it was my neighbor from next door. She said if any packages came, she would bring them by. She might have seen me come in. When I open the door, I see a dark-haired man with piercing blue eyes staring back at me. I remember seeing him before. He’s one of the men who lives in the alley beside my building.

His eyes are bloodshot as he glares at me. “Can I come in?”

“No, you can’t,” I say and attempt to close the door.

He stops the door with his foot and pushes inside. I fall onto the floor and scream as loud as I can. The man wrenches my purse off of my shoulder and hits me over the head with something hard. I’m out before I know what happened.

I wake up in a hospital room. Jennie’s beside me. As the lights come into focus for me, my head is pounding...

Then panic. *Oh, no...the baby!*

“Jennie,” I say and the sound of my voice even hurts my head. I moan and Jennie half sits and half stands as I rub my head. “Is...Is my baby okay?” I ask and she smiles gently.

“Yes,” Jennie says. She takes my hand and scoots her chair closer to me. “The baby’s fine. You’re both going to be fine.”

“God...” My memory’s kind of hazy. “What...happened to me?”

“They found you in your apartment,” she says. “The police think you were mugged.”

It’s starting to come back to me. I put my head to my aching head and moan. *Stupid, stupid...* “Right,” I say. “A guy came to the door...God, I am so stupid. I know better than to just answer the door without looking.”

Jennie nods. “He clocked you pretty well, apparently,” she said. “The doctors think you have a concussion.”

Yeah. That tracks. “Is Jack here?”

She shook her head. “They called me. Do you know if you still have me as your emergency contact in your phone? I mean, thank goodness you had your phone on you instead of in your purse, but, you really ought to think about changing your emergency contact now that you and Jack are...” She pauses and scrunches her nose a little. “Sorry. I know you haven’t exactly defined your relationship.”

“It’s all right,” I say. “You’re right. He is the father of this baby. He should be here.”

She nodded. "I'll make sure and call him."

I nod. I can suddenly feel the pain all over. Down the back of my neck and in my shoulders. That guy really did hit me hard.

The doctor checks me out shortly after that. Fortunately, no concussion, and I'm free to go back home. Jennie drives me back to Jack's house. All I want is a little bit of peace and quiet.

Luckily Jack still isn't home but there are three missed calls from him on my cell phone. That melted my heart down a bit after what happened earlier today. But I can't bring myself to call him back. I'm still shaken up from the attack.

Jennie sticks around. As I sit on the couch, she makes us some tea and brings me an icepack for the lump on my head. "What were you doing back at your apartment?" she asks.

"I just went back for a few things," I say, then, on second thought, I add, "and I just had to get out of here. This apartment was beginning to feel like a cage."

She put a comforting hand on my knee. "I know it's been hard for you to deal with all this. You should have called me, though. We could have gone together or maybe I could have sent someone else over—"

"It's fine," I say. "The bottom line is that I'm fine and the baby's fine and..." Something comes over me. My breath suddenly hitches and I feel tears start to burn in my eyes. I

start to sob, hot tears fall from my eyes. Jennie sets down her cup and embraces me as I dissolve in her arms.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay,” she says. “You’re all right, honey. Everything’s okay.”

I’m glad she’s here instead of Jack. I didn’t want him to see me completely unraveled this way.

Just as I think that, I hear Jack’s keys turning in the door. I wipe my face hastily and straighten up. “Thank you for being here,” I say to her. She watches me carefully as I clear my throat and take a sip from my warm cup.

“No problem,” she says. Jack and Martin walk in and she smiles up at them politely.

“Hey,” he says, his eyes flitting between us. The tension in the room has risen significantly.

Jennie stands and clears her throat. “I probably should get going,” she says. “Call me later?” I nod in response and with that, she leaves the apartment.

“Hi, Sarah!” Martin says brightly.

I manage a smile and respond. “Hey, big guy. How was school?”

“Hey, Martin,” Jack interrupts. “Why don’t you go and play for a little bit before dinner?”

Martin looks up at his dad curiously, then says, “Okay.”

His gaze falls on me and he asks Martin to go to his room to play a bit.

“What happened?” he asks as soon as Martin’s out of the room. “Jennie left a message that you were in the hospital. I was about to go see you...but you’re here.”

“It’s nothing,” I say. I stand up and take the nearly full tea cups to the kitchen. He follows me.

“The hospital isn’t *nothing*. What’s going on?”

“Jack, I...it’s not a big deal, okay? I mean, everything’s okay. I’m okay. The baby’s okay—”

“I’ve been trying to call you all day,” he says. “Did something happen this morning—?”

“My phone was off,” I say. “I just needed some peace and quiet this morning.”

“Peace and quiet?” he squawks. “From what? Nobody’s here but you. What’s going on with you?” Jack’s glaring at me, his eyes dark and angry. He can read my weak attempt at deception all over my face.

“You know,” I say defensively, “all I ask is for a little space every now and then—”

“Space? When have you asked me for space—”

“And then here you come, crowding me in like I’m your possession—”

“*What?* What are you talking about?”

“I’m not your possession,” I say, stomping my foot. “You don’t have to keep me up on a pedestal and take care of me

like I'm some kind of...porcelain doll. I'm fine. I just needed some space, that's all."

We're glaring at each other. This conversation has gone completely off the rails, but I can't seem to stop it. The train is moving and I can't stop it...

"Sarah..." He pauses and looks away from me for a second, obviously rearranging his thoughts. "I don't know what's going on with you, but you need to talk to me. If I've done something wrong—"

"You didn't do anything wrong. Not everything is about you, you know."

His eyes widen in shock. Then he puts his hands up and says, "Fine. Freeze me out. When you're ready to talk, you know where I am."

And he leaves. He just leaves me in the kitchen. A few minutes later, he and Martin come walking out from the bedrooms. He's telling Martin to put his jacket on.

"Where are you going?"

"We're going to get some ice cream," he says. "We'll be back by dinnertime."

And he's gone. And I'm alone. Again. I sit down and put my hands to my face wearily. *What am I doing...?*

Ten years ago...

I don't know what to think of Jack. I'm still trying to figure him out, I think. He's offered to help with my mother's funeral

plans. I don't know why, but I welcome the assistance. It's kind of him.

Having to deal with this right before college is just not right. There's a part of me that wishes Mom had waited to die until I was at least in my second semester. That's terrible to say...but what can I say? I'm still a little pissed at her for leaving me.

Jack's going to college, too, even though he doesn't really have the money or any means to support himself. I told him to apply for a position at my job and he did. He's got a great personality, so I don't doubt that he'll get the job.

As for this funeral...I just don't want to have to do any of this. Thankfully, Jack's been doing most of the heavy lifting. That makes it a little better, I guess. He even helped out with the obituary, which is good, because I just didn't have it in me to write about my mother. We'd had a horrible relationship to the very bitter end. Arranging her funeral with all the many details was the last thing I wanted to do.

Thankfully, Jack can relate. He's had the same kind of trouble with his parents. We're bonded in that way. I'm glad he's around.

I'm sitting in the car in front of the funeral home. Today's the day. Jack sighs and puts his hand on my knee.

"There's no law saying you have to go in," he says and I give him a wry smile.

"Thanks," I say. "But...I really need to do this."

He nods shortly and says, "All right. Lead the way."

As we walk in, he takes my hand. It's funny how I've fallen for him. Things haven't always been perfect. A lot of my mother's abuse has threatened to mess things up between us. We were on again/off again for a while there, thanks to my trust issues.

We stop at the stairs and I look at Jack, who just smiles at me and squeezes my hand. "I'm here," he says, "I told you. You can't push me away so easily."

I smile back and kiss him gently. Then we walk into the church.

Chapter Seven

JACK

I don't know what's going on with Sarah, but she's been doing her damndest to shut me out. All I know for sure is that something happened. Maybe she had a scare with the pregnancy and that's why she went to the hospital. I don't know. But I wish she'd tell me.

We get back from the ice cream place and I find her lying in bed in the bedroom. Her legs are curled up to her chest and she's been crying. I pause at the door and there's a part of me that wants to just leave her alone to let her work out whatever it is. But I can't just leave her when she's hurting like this.

I sit down on the bed and she stops sobbing, realizing I'm in the room. I say softly, "I don't know what's going on, but I wish you would just talk to me about it. I thought we were in this together. You and me. Was I wrong? Do you...do you not want this anymore?"

She doesn't say anything, so I go on. "Because if you don't...then okay. This weekend we can move your things back to your apartment and forget any of this happened. I mean...at least we gave it a try, right?"

I hear her sob again, then the sobs turn to full-on tears. I turn around and lay on the bed with her, spooning her and taking her in my arms.

"I'm sorry, Jack," she wept. "I didn't mean to lash out at you. I...I don't know why I did it. I didn't mean it."

“Shh, shh,” I say as she turns around to me. Her eyes are red and swollen and the edges of her dark hair are stuck to her face in damp tendrils. “It’s okay, baby.”

“No, it’s not.” She snuffles, then says, “I went back to my apartment.”

I don’t say anything, but I know my shock is translated into my face. She looks away from me. “I...I needed some air or a change of scenery. I just needed to get out of this apartment for a little while. So, I thought maybe I should go back to my apartment and get a few things that I needed.”

“Why didn’t you call me?” I say. “I could have gone with you.”

She kind of half laughs, then she says, “A man came to the door. I recognized him. He was one of the homeless guys in the alley around the side of the apartment. I guess he saw me go in and decided... Anyway, I was so caught up with what I was doing that I answered the door without looking to see who it was, and...well, he mugged me. Stole my purse and hit me over the head. Luckily a neighbor must have heard the commotion and called the police because the next thing I know, I’m in the hospital.”

I’m stunned. I lean back for a moment, trying not to freak out. I don’t say anything and her eyes get wide from my silence.

“I’m so sorry,” she says. “I know I should have told you about it. I just...I don’t know. I didn’t want you to get angry.”

I take in a deep breath. “First...you’re really okay, right? You and the baby?”

“Yes. We’re both fine.”

That actually makes me feel a little better. “So, did you make a statement with the police yet?” She shook her head, so I patted her on the hand. “We’ll worry about that later. You gotta promise me that you won’t go back there again. Not alone.”

Her face changes a little. Some more of that defiance in her. “Jack, I’ve lived there for years and never had any problems —”

“It’s a sketchy neighborhood,” I say. “You know, what if something worse happened to you? I’d never forgive myself.”

She sighs, then says, “I can’t stay here forever, Jack.”

I look at her and it’s all clear. It’s been there in front of us this whole time. “Why not?” I ask her. “Let’s just make this official. Stay here with me.”

“Jack,” she sits up and pulls out of my embrace. “I can’t stay here. I mean... I’m not comfortable here. You sleep with a fan on. You leave your clothes on the floor. Your toothpaste and deodorant and hairbrush and everything are all over the bathroom.” She’s looking around the bedroom, waving at the furniture and closet. “There’s no room for my clothes in the closet. There’s no room for me here!” The words pour from her mouth like a long sentence.

I sit up and look at the back of her head. She turns to me, looking into my eyes sorely. “I’m sorry,” I say to her. “I had no idea. You...you never said anything.”

“It’s not about sorry. I...You know, it feels like you don’t care about me.”

“Sarah,” I say incredulously. “I do care about you.”

“Yeah? Do you really?”

I get it. She needs this place to be as much hers as mine. She needs to see it in my actions. “Yes,” I say to her. “I do. More than you could ever know.”

She looks at me and for the first time since this whole doubt thing started, I think she believes me. “Then what are we going to do?”

I take a deep breath and give her a half smile. “I guess I’ve got to make a trip to the home improvement store.”

She smiles despite her tearful eyes. “I’ll go with you,” she says. “I’ve seen how you decorate.”

She leans in and kisses me and for a moment, it’s all back to good. We’re making this work.

“I’m here, baby,” I tell her. “You’re not going to push me away.”

She smiles and kisses me again.

I let Sarah sleep after that and go about getting dinner together. As I cook, I start to think about everything that just happened.

My first thought is to the guy that attacked her. I didn't show it in front of her, but I am enraged. I wish I had been there to protect her, but more than that I wish I'd given that thug what for. He put his hands on her. He might've even killed her and for what? A few dollars in her person?

When she was feeling better, we were heading to the police station and pressing charges. I need to see that piece of shit in jail for what he did.

I feel all of this in my heart. God, I'm falling for her all over again. This day has made me realize what's been missing in my life for those six years we were apart. Sarah has always been the missing piece to my life. I'm not about to let this all fall apart over her insecurities. I need to make things right for her.

We have dinner and for that time, things almost felt like they were back to normal. Sarah's not talking a lot, but it's okay. She seems a little better than she was earlier. I'll take even the small steps at this point.

After dinner, we watch television for a while and before I know it, I fall asleep. My dreams are full of twisted images and anger. Sarah walking alone in the dark holding Martin's hand...shadows are following her. Waiting to pounce on her...

I walk up in a cold sweat and look around in the living room. I'm alone. I get up and look in on Sarah and Martin and find them both asleep in their respective beds. The man that attacked her is now haunting me in my dreams. I need to keep my family safe.

The next morning, I decide to call in and take care of Sarah. I make breakfast like I usually do. After Martin is set up in the kitchen, I bring Sarah her breakfast in bed. Carrying a breakfast tray, I walk into the room and say, “Wakey, wakey, love. Time to get up.”

Her eyes open blearily and she smiles at me, stretching out and yawning. Her eyes travel down to the tray full of food in my hands and she says, “What’s all this?”

“Breakfast,” I say and kiss her on the forehead. “Thought you could use a little relaxation today.”

“Thank you.” She’s smiling as I set the table down over her lap. Her eyes widen as she looks over the bacon and eggs and pancakes. “This looks really good.”

“Dig in,” I say.

She picks up a bacon strip and takes a bite. “Gosh, I am starving,” she says. “This is great. You know, after, I think I’ll head out to the police station to give my statement.”

“I’ll go with you.” She raises her eyebrows at me and I say, “I called off this morning. I thought maybe we could run some errands together. Maybe stop by the store and get some things for the apartment.”

She smiles and says, “Sounds good to me.” She eats more of the food, then as I go to get up, she says, “You know, I never did get my things from my apartment.”

I frown at her, but then I say, “Okay. I’ll stop through and get them for you.”

“Jack...”

“You’re not going alone.”

She sighs. “Okay...but you don’t know what I need exactly, so let me go with you at least. You can protect me all you want.”

I chuckle a little and say, “Yeah, okay. You know, I have every right to be overprotective here.”

“I know,” she says smartly.

“All right, well, let me go get Martin ready for school and we’ll go.”

Martin’s dropped off and we’re on our way to run errands. We decide to go to the apartment first and get it over with. As soon as we pull up, I go into sentry mode. I’m looking up and down the street for anybody that looks out of place.

“Jack?” she says, drawing my attention. I turn and smile at her, patting her reassuringly on the leg.

“Yes?”

“Let’s just go in and out. I really don’t want to be here longer than I have to.”

“Roger that,” I say. With that said, she opens the car door and I follow her to her front door.

In the light of day, the apartment building looks more run down than I remember the last time I was here. The dirty linoleum in the halls and the faded wallpaper. I don’t think anyone’s done any real maintenance here in years.

As requested, we go into her apartment and gather everything she needs quickly. I mostly stand guard as she moves around the apartment, looking at the door. Waiting for this homeless dude to try it again.

We finish in minutes and on the way out, we lock the door behind us. I'm seriously considering coming back with a moving van. I never want her to step inside this place again. We're on the way to the Uber when she freezes.

"Sarah," I call her. She doesn't reply.

I look to see where she's staring, and I see a dark-haired man in a scruffy jacket and jeans.

"It's... It's him," she stammers. "I...I can't believe it."

"He's the guy?" I ask her. "The one that mugged you."

Timidly, as if she's afraid that he'll see her, she nods slowly. That's all I need. I stalk over to the man. He's in the middle of a conversation with one of his friends so he doesn't see me coming until I've got him by the collar.

"Hey, man! What—Ow!" I punch him in the face, hard enough to take him off his feet. He tumbles to the dirt and slides a few feet, his nose bleeding.

"The fuck are you doing, man?"

I'm on him. I grab him again and start punching. Once, twice, three times until I feel somebody grabbing me.

"Stop! Jack! That's enough!"

“Hey, man,” the man yelled through his blood-filled mouth. “I don’t even know you! What the hell?”

“You know her, right?” I shout, pointing to Sarah. “You followed her to her apartment and took her purse.”

“Hey, it-it was just a purse—” “You hit her over the head, you psycho!” I’m lunging at him again, but someone’s got my arm.

“Apologize to her,” I snarl. “Do it, or I’ll come back here and kick your ass again.”

He looked wildly from Sarah to me and back again. “I-I... I’m sorry,” he says in a shaky voice. “I...I just needed some money.”

“Where’s her purse?”

He blinks dumbly at us. “I...I threw it away, man. Listen, I didn’t mean to hurt her. I just needed the cash.”

“You *did* hurt her. You hurt a pregnant woman, you animal.”

He swallows hard, then he gets to his feet and reaches into his pocket. “Here.” He’s pulling out a wallet. Sarah’s pocketbook. He hands it to her and says, “Sorry. I mean...I’m really sorry.”

I’m glaring at him and Sarah is tugging my sleeve. “Let’s go,” she says.

We’re in the back seat of the Uber and she’s been silent the whole way. I can see she’s turning the wallet over and over again.

“Thank you,” she says softly. She looks at me and I can see she’s genuinely appreciative. “I mean that.”

I take in a breath. It feels like I just started breathing now that I know she’s not upset with me for losing my head.

“You don’t have to say thank you, Sarah,” I say. “Nobody gets to disrespect you like that. Not while I’m around.”

I see a smile slowly spread across her face and she says, “My hero.”

Needless to say, we skipped going to the police station. My little outburst complicated things significantly and we both decided that since Sarah got her important things back (her credit cards and ID were untouched, but the forty dollars she had was gone), we would just let things lie. The way I saw it, I’d stamped that idiot paid in full anyway. Right on his fucking forehead.

We went and got things for the apartment that might make it a little easier for Sarah. Blankets and shower caddies, and a fan with a special dampener, so it was quieter in our room when we slept (not exactly pleased about that, but I can adjust). We even got a few knick-knacks for the living room.

Taking a car service again with all the bags, she laughs and says, “You know, now that you’re about to be a millionaire, you ought to think about getting a car.”

I scoff a laugh. “Yeah, it’d certainly be cheaper than this.”

As the sun sets, we go home and make dinner. After, the three of us sit and watch television. Midway through the

program, Sarah turns to me and says, “While you’re at work, I think I’ll start decorating the apartment...if that’s okay with you.”

I smile and kiss her on the top of her head. “Whatever you need.”

We watch television until Martin gets sleepy, then I take him to bed, reading him his favorite story. When I go into the bedroom, Sarah’s already changed into her night clothes. She’s lying on the bed reading...and she’s wearing a blue satin night dress and my heart jumps in my chest. With her baby bump and the way the gown clings to her body, I’m practically salivating.

I sit on the bed and brush a bit of her hair out of her face. She looks up at me from her book and smiles. “Hey.”

“Hey,” I say. “You look pretty good tonight.”

She smiles and rubs her growing baby bump. “I feel like a blimp.”

I laugh and I put my hand on top of hers. “You’re beautiful. You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever known.”

I pause. My heart is full right now. It always seems to be when I’m near her. “Sarah, I love you,” I say. “I’ve always loved you. Even when we were in college. Even before I knew where I was going in life. I’ve always pictured you right next to me whenever I did figure it out. I know we haven’t had it easy at all, but...I think this is right. I think this is how it’s supposed to be.”

I pull her into a kiss and for a moment, she kisses back. Then she pulls away from me, her face flushed.

“What?” I ask.

She sets the book down on the nightstand. “I...” She sighs deeply. “You’re really in love with me, huh?”

“Deeply.”

Her smile is a little sad and that makes me a little sad. Still, she reaches up and touches my face gently, and kisses me back. My hands move up the soft silk to her full breasts and she moans a little against my mouth.

“Gently,” she says, “They’re a little sore.”

I loosen my grip on her, feeling the hardening of her nipples in my hand. I reach up and pull the strap down from her shoulder. I’m kissing her neck, giving gentle kisses down until I reach her nipple. She moans and arches her back a little as I take the nub into my mouth.

I suck on her nipple and inhale her scent, the sweet smell of lilies. My hands rove her body, and she bends to my touch as I slip the other strap off her shoulder. She leans forward and lets the nightgown fall to her waist. I kiss her between her breasts, down to her abdomen.

She tenses up and I look up at her curiously. “Sorry, I...my stomach...”

“You’re beautiful,” I say. “All of you.”

She smiles, the blushing on her skin turning even pinker. I take her head into my hands and kiss her deeply again.

We make love then. I move on top of her and she lifts her legs and wraps them around my waist as I enter her. She moans and I feel the vibration against my skin as she kisses my neck.

“Oh, Jack,” she says. She digs her nails into my shoulders as I thrust into her, feeling her walls squeeze around me. I’m going slow, trying to enjoy every minute of this. She rocks her hips with mine and we’re in sync. Moving in synchronous rhythm with one another.

“Oh, yes,” she moans. I feel her teeth as she bites into my shoulder and I moan out loud, the mix of pain and pleasure taking me over. I pull her up until she’s on top of me. I’m in heaven as I look up at her beautiful body, sweat glistening on her skin.

I’m getting close just watching her and thankfully, she’s almost there, too.

“Oh, Jack,” she gasps. “I’m...I’m almost there...oh, *yes*...”

I feel her squeeze me and my orgasm explodes out of me. She throws her head back as her body shivers with mine. We’re in sync once more.

“I love you,” she says in a shaky shuddering moan. “Oh, God, I love you, Jack...”

Chapter Eight

SARA

I'm as big as a house. With my ginormous belly, I waddle through the house like Shamu. I feel so freaking gross right now. I'm almost into my third trimester and everyone is telling me that how I feel is normal. Every woman feels like a beachball around this time and I'm no different, I guess.

Jack and Jennie have decided to organize a baby shower for me, which is right on time. I've been a mess lately, what with worrying about things for the baby. It just doesn't feel ready yet, and I'm honestly beginning to wonder if we will ever be.

Every time I bring up my concerns, Jack says the same thing. "You'll get everything you need at the shower."

The last time he said that to me, I challenged him. "What do you know about baby showers? How many baby showers have you had?"

He just smirked at me and said, "One." Okay, so he had me there.

And so, the shower is happening. Jennie came by earlier with Stacy and the two of them went about getting the apartment together. Colorful streamers and balloons, a big silver banner over the door that says “It’s a Girl!” (We found out at our 20-week scan. I wasn’t about to wait without knowing. I’m already a mess). And a party plate, arranged by Stacy.

She looks great, by the way. She had her baby about a month ago and it looks like she’s got her old body back already. I’m looking at her flat tummy and her rounded hips and I’m wondering if I’m ever going to get back there again. I miss my figure.

People are starting to show up now and...well, I’m delighted. Jennie invited almost all our old friends. Well, all the ones that she was still in touch with. It’s so good to see them again and everyone seems so happy to see me. Gleefully they gather around me, rubbing my stomach and happily chattering on about my impending birth.

Jennie makes sure that everyone has a drink and some food from Stacey’s tray and that it’s going well. We’re playing party games and I’m actually enjoying myself.

We’re playing a trivia game and Stacy leans over to me and says, “It’ll get better, you know.”

I smile and rub my large belly. “It certainly doesn’t feel like it. I feel like a beached whale.”

Stacy laughs and says, “Yeah. I promise you, though. It’ll all pass. Once you have the baby, you’ll see. It’ll all be worth

it.”

I look over at Jack, who’s standing by the living room entrance, watching us all play. He has a big, silly smile on his face. Stacy looks over and sees him and says, “You’re lucky to have him, you know? That man really cares about you.”

Oh, I wish I could see that all the time. I don’t, though. I worry all the time that he only sees this giant woman lumbering through the apartment and not me. I hope he sees me...

“Okay, okay,” says Jennie after reading the last trivia question. “Let’s get down to why we’re here. Present opening time!”

Jack takes his cue and retreats to the kitchen. He returns with a rolling tray that has all the presents on it. There are so many! Jack was so right about this. We’re about to get everything we need for this baby.

After he’s done bringing the presents out, he sits next to me on the couch and takes my hand. I smile and scoot over a little. I feel the baby adjust inside of me, pressing against my vital organs.

“How are we feeling?” he asks and I laugh.

“*We* are feeling like a bloated walrus,” I say. “I’m so over this pregnancy. The baby’s crushing my insides, I have to pee all the time, and I don’t even want to talk about the heartburn.”

“Tell me about it,” says Stacy and the other women laugh around us.

Jack kisses me on the cheek and I feel warm inside.

The first gift is from Jennie. A car seat. A really nice one too. As I unwrap the package, I'm surprised by how large it is. "Jennie," I say, "This is...this is so much!"

"You need it," she says. "Take it and say thank you."

"Thank you," I laugh. The next bunch of gifts are clothes, but so nice. "Oh, my gosh, look how cute." I hold up a little pink dress with lace trim. That was given to me by Stacy. One of the gifts anyway. She pushes another wrapped gift toward me. "And some onesies," she says.

"Wow," Jack says, "I don't remember Martin being that small."

The doorbell rings and Jack says, "Don't move. I've got it."

He gets up while I open the next bunch of gifts. More onesies and some T-shirts with funny sayings on them. As I'm looking at one that says, *Daddy's Little Angel*, I look up to see who's just arrived.

I don't recognize her. She's got long red hair and big green eyes. She's tall and thin and she looks like a supermodel. She waves for a second at me and the rest of us before turning and talking to Jack.

I rub my hand over my huge bump and anger begins to boil my blood.

Whatever's being said, has ended and Jack turns and walks over to us. She's carrying a gift. "Ladies, this is my coworker, Priscilla."

Priscilla. Ugh. Her name was pretty too.

Priscilla waves brightly at everyone. “Hi,” she says. “I hope I’m not too late. I got held up at the office.”

Jack holds a hand out towards me and says, “You haven’t met my girlfriend yet. This is Sarah.”

His *girlfriend*. I don’t know why, but I don’t like how that sounds. Not in front of her. She shouldn’t have any idea that I’m going anywhere.

I shake her hand and I become acutely aware of how swollen they are next to her long and elegant fingers.

“So nice to meet you,” she says. I manage a tight smile. “Same.”

She turns to Jack. “Congratulations.” Then to me, as if I’m a second thought. “To both of you. You’re going to be a dad again!”

I do not like how friendly she is with him. Who does she think she is anyway? I’m grinding my teeth and trying to stay cool, but I feel like a volcano inside.

“Have a seat,” Jennie chimes in. “We’re just opening the presents.”

“Oh, great,” she says and puts her gift with the others. As she sits down, Jack takes his place next to me...but I’m steaming. I wish he would sit somewhere else.

The rest of the party goes as planned. All in all, I got more than enough for the baby. All that was left was a crib for the

nursery, but otherwise, we're all set. It was a good day.

Or at least it could have been if *Priscilla* hadn't shown up.

Everyone starts to leave sometime after. I watch as Priscilla thanks Jack for the invitation and kisses him on the cheek. It's all I can do not to walk over and rip all the pretty red hair out.

"Hey, Sarah," Jennie's walking up to me with a trash bag. "Jack and I have all this. Why don't you just relax for now?"

"Sure," I say. "One second." Priscilla's left and I walk up to Jack. "So, she's your coworker."

Jack is looking at me like a deer in headlights. My tone tells him that something's wrong, but it's pretty clear he doesn't know what. "Yeah," he says. "She's been at the company for a while now. I thought it'd be nice if she came. Are you okay?"

"So, she's just been there this whole time? When you and Clark have your little celebrations after work, is she there?"

His face splits into an incredulous smile. "Are you serious right now?"

"It's just that I've never met her before now. We've been together for almost a year and—"

"You're jealous," he says and my face flushes.

"No," I say angrily. "But while we're on the subject, should I be?"

"Of course not. She's just a colleague. Even if I was single, I wouldn't have gone for her. She's kind of fake."

I'm totally disarmed. Every angry thing I was about to say is gone now. "What?"

"You didn't see it," he says with a raise of his eyebrow. He looks over at Jennie and Jennie says, "He's right. Did you see the gift she got you? Very pretentious."

A smile cracks my lips. The gift was socks. Expensive Louis Vuitton socks. For a newborn. "I did see that."

Jack takes me by the shoulders. "You know, you're beautiful when you're mad."

I slap him playfully on the chest. "Ha, ha."

He hugs me and rubs my belly lovingly. "You're the only woman for me," he says. "Big belly and all."

Tears start burning in my eyes. *Ugh, I hate being this emotional.*

"Liar."

He laughs, then puts his hand under my chin and kisses me. "I am bewitched by you. No one could ever take me away from you. I'm under your spell."

I gulp. "Really, Jack?"

"Yes, really. Now, go rest up and let us clean."

"Fine. What do you want for dinner tonight?"

He shrugs. "What are you in the mood for?"

"Anything and everything all at once," I joke. "But nothing spicy because my heartburn will flare up again."

“You got it. No spicy. How about pasta, extra mushrooms?”

“Oh, yes, I like how you think.”

Chapter Nine

JACK

There's supposed to be a big storm coming. I'm thinking about that as I make the beds. I hate thunderstorms. I always have. Something about the unbridled and uncontrolled force of nature just freaks me out.

The sky started darkening a few hours ago and I'm getting increasingly nervous as time goes on. Busying myself with housework is helping a little.

"Hey."

I look up and see Jack in the doorway. Actually, he's kind of hanging off to the side. "Got a minute?"

I sigh, looking down at the half-made bed. "Sure," I say.

He comes into the room and he's got something behind his back. I frown a little. "What's going on?"

He walks up to me and presents me with a bouquet of roses. They're beautiful. I take them and their sweet smell fills the air between us.

"Oh, Jack," I say. "You shouldn't have done this."

He shrugs. "I saw them on my way home today and they made me think of you. They're nowhere near as beautiful, but you get the idea."

I chuckle and take a whiff of them, gently touching their delicate petals. "You're just too good to me." I'm starting to think about that. He has been really good to me this entire

time. He comes home on time every night – working late has become a thing of the past. He brings me gifts on a regular basis. He even rubs my feet when we're watching television on the couch.

I feel pampered and loved...and yet...

“Jack,” I hold his arm and make him sit beside me. “I...I know all that you've done for me since I moved in and...” I didn't know how to say this. I feel so awful that I don't feel the same way he obviously does.

“The flowers are too much,” he says and I feel my face flush.

“The flowers are perfect. You're not doing anything wrong. This is about me. I...I guess I still need time and—”

“Stop,” he says, putting his hand on mine. “You don't have to apologize and you don't have to worry. I'll wait for you to come around. Take as much time as you need.”

I chuckle a little. “You are so confident that I'm going to fall in love with you.”

“Yeah,” he says. “I am.”

That's when the windows start banging with the incoming storm, the winds hitting them hard. I jump and hug Jack instinctively. I bury my face in his neck taking in his comforting smell. After a second of surprise, he hugs me back, rubbing my back slowly.

“It's okay,” he says. “It's just the storm. No big deal.”

But this seems to be our relationship now. It reminds me of the time before we started dating. The time when he was just there for me because it was decent. This is the part of him that I fell for. That I kept hoping to see when he drifted so far from me in our college days.

That night, the storm raged on as we slept. Well, as Jack slept. The sound of thunder and madness outside of our window was keeping me up. By the time the morning hours came, I decided just to give up on it and start getting ready for the day.

I slip out of bed, being careful not to disturb Jack, and go to the bathroom. It's then that I notice a book by the toilet. I pick it up and I'm a little surprised by the title. *When Partners Become Parents* by Carolyn Pape Cowan and Philip A. Cowan.

More proof of Jack's commitment to me. I must be a fool not to doubt him. What is even wrong with me?

When I go back to bed, he rolls over and wraps his arms around me, kissing me on the neck. "Good morning, princess."

I smile. "Princess? What's with this 'princess' thing?"

"You are my princess," he replies. "It's your new nickname, 'princess'."

He gives me a quick kiss and gets out of bed. "What do you want for breakfast?" he asks.

"I don't care," I say. He goes to the bathroom and leaves the door open a little. I'm biting my lip, thinking about the book

on the toilet tank.

“Jack?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“So, you are reading books on parenting?”

“What’s wrong with that?” he says from the bathroom. “Thought I’d bone up on my parenting skills since we’re about to have the pitter-patter of two pairs of feet around here.”

“Wow,” I say. I don’t have anything else to say about that. It’s...unusual.

He finally comes out of the bathroom and says, “Let’s make breakfast.”

I smile. “You’re helping.”

“I am helping.”

I smile. Fine, he doesn’t want to talk anymore about it. It’s fine. I guess there’s nothing more to say, really.

As we’re making breakfast, Martin pads in from his bedroom, his hair all over his head and his eyes full of sleep. “Good morning.”

He walks right up to me and hugs my legs. I rub his back and smile warmly at him. “Good morning, sweetheart. Ready for breakfast?”

“Yes,” he says. I watch as he walks over to his place at the table. I realize how connected I feel to this little boy.

We cook, we eat together and Jack and Martin go get ready for school and work. As I wash the dishes, they come back

into the kitchen. Jack comes up behind me and kisses me on the cheek. "See you later, babe."

"See you," I say.

When I got pregnant, seeing Jack as the responsible father was the last thing I envisioned. Then I saw how he was around Martin and got to see Jack taking care of both him and me, ensuring my pregnancy went as smoothly as possible. He's been my comfort and my protector. He has really bent over backward to show me he can be there for me.

The longer this goes on, the more of a fool I feel. I should be just as much in love with him as he is with me.

An hour later, my phone rings. It's him. "Hey,"

"Hey," I say. "Did you forget something?"

"No," he says. "I just wanted to tell you that if you have any plans tonight, cancel them."

I scoffed. "Oh, no. And I was all ready to go to that rave tonight."

He laughs. I love the sound of his laugh. "Well, I guess you'll just have to go another night. Tonight, I need to see your beautiful face when I walk through the door."

"All right. Any reason?"

"No reason," he says. "It's just after another crazy day at this job, I need to see your face again. That's all."

I'm blushing. He's making me blush even though he's not in the room. "I'll be here."

“Good. See you later.”

I’m swooning after that call. I stand there in the kitchen with the phone to my chest, thinking of how he kisses me at every opportunity, how he’s done so much for me all this time...

And my heart. My heart is beating like a drum. It *always* feels like this with him. Always.

Maybe I’ve been wrong this whole time. Maybe I do love him. Maybe I’ve always loved him.

I smile to myself. Maybe love doesn’t have to be hard after all. It could be just this easy.

The evening comes and Jack comes home right on time... and without Martin.

As he walks in, I greet him at the door with a kiss. “Hey,” I say.

“Hey.”

“Where’s Martin?”

“He’s staying the night at a friend’s house.”

I tilt my head at him. “Oh?”

He takes my hands and kisses them. “Go and put on your nicest dress. I’m taking you out to dinner.”

“Okay!” Excitement for the evening to come swirls through me.

We change clothes, me in a black evening gown and him in a nice casual brown suit that looks really good on him. It

doesn't take us very long to get ready, which is good. I'm actually starving.

We head to dinner, taking an Uber to a fancy restaurant near the downtown area. When we walk in, the host takes us past the busy dining room and to a closed-off area near the back. He's booked a private table for the candlelight dinner.

"Wow," I say, looking at the white tablecloth and single rose in the center of the table. "You really went all out."

He walks around and pulls my chair out. "Anything for the love of my life."

I sit down and he joins me. The waiter pours glasses of wine for us.

"Can...we afford all this?" I ask him.

He smiles slyly. "We can now. The first returns for the app have come in as of this morning."

I gasp. "Really?"

"Really. Get used to eating like this all the time, babe."

I smile and suddenly...

I don't know. I look at him and I feel like he's the only one I want. That feeling that I had this morning is growing. He was my valiant protector, my comfort and strength. And now, it looked like he was going to be a provider for all of us. This child is going to have a future and it's all due to him.

"Jack," I say, "Can I...can I say something to you? Something important."

He frowns a little and says, “Of course.”

“Just...let me get it all out before you say anything, okay?”
My heart is beating like a drum. I’m terrified. *Why am I terrified?*

“These past bunch of months...I’ve doubted you. After everything that happened when we were in college, I...I thought that you were always going to be selfish and thoughtless. I thought that this was going to be our relationship. Baby or no baby.”

He’s not saying anything, but his eyebrows are knitted together. Is this disapproval? Skepticism. I go on. I’ve got to get this out.

“But every time I’ve doubted you,” I say, “you prove me wrong. Every time I think you’re going back to your old self, you don’t. You’ve gone above and beyond for me in ways that...that I only ever dreamed you could.”

I feel my mouth go dry and I know that after I say what’s on my mind, there’s no turning back.

But I wasn’t sitting with the same man that I knew when we were young. This man is someone different. Someone I can love with my entire heart and soul.

I really don’t have anything to fear. I never did. It’s funny how the words are still not coming, though. I take a drink from my glass.

“You don’t have to say anything,” he says. “I mean, actions speak louder, right?”

I smile at him and say, “Yeah. Actions speak louder.”

When we get home, I text Jennie.

Hey. I think I have a big problem.

Jack’s in the bathroom brushing his teeth. I’m sitting on the edge of the bed, holding the phone in my hand and biting my lip nervously. After a few seconds, Jennie texts back.

What’s going on?

I take a deep breath. *I think I’m in love with Jack.*

No, duh.

I’m serious, I text. I’m really falling for him all over again.

Well, it’s about time you realized it. You’re about to have a whole baby with the man!

I smile and almost laugh at that. Instead, I text, *I’ve just been so worried about making a huge mistake.*

You’re not. That man loves you. I couldn’t deny that. He’s only said it a hundred times. She texts, So, you’ve told him, right?

No.

No? Well, what are you waiting for?

I can almost hear her shrilly yelling at me. *I don’t know. I almost told him at dinner tonight, but I just couldn’t do it. I don’t know what happened. What’s wrong with me?*

You’re still afraid to take a chance on him.

I was. It was that simple. *I’m an idiot, aren’t I?*

No. Just scared. When you're ready, you'll tell him. And once you do, you'll realize that it's not nearly as hard as you think it is.

I look at this pearl of wisdom for a long moment, then I text her. *Thanks, Jennie.*

I set my phone aside and listen to the water run in the bathroom. It's funny how things work out. I rub my belly and smile. What started as a one-night stand is shaping up to be the love of my life.

Jack comes out of the bathroom finally and says, "You know, I think I'm going to go get a new car tomorrow," he says. "We're going to need, like a minivan or something, right?"

I chuckle. "Two kids do not make a minivan family.

"Not yet," he says with a raised eyebrow. As we go to bed, I realize that for the first time in my life, I'm feeling complete. And for the first time in a long time, I fall asleep in Jack's arms and I stay asleep.

The next day, over breakfast, Jack asks, "Do you want me to stay home until you have the baby?"

I look at him, a little shocked. "What?"

He shrugs. "I was just thinking it's getting down to the wire. Maybe I should take some time off so that I can be sure to be here for you when you go into labor."

I can't believe what I'm hearing. It's too much. "No," I say. "Go to work. I'll be fine."

He takes this in, then says, “You’ll call me, though. If you need anything?”

“I will.”

“Promise?”

“Jack.”

“I’m just saying I want you to be sure. That’s all.”

I put my hand on his and I say, “I’m sure.”

He nods, accepting this. “So, I decided to go in a little late and see about getting a car this morning,” he pulls out his phone and shows me. It’s one of those new Tesla sedans. “They have the minivans, too.”

“This is nice,” I tell him. “We’re not really ready for a minivan.”

He scoffs and turns to Martin, showing him the car, no doubt to see what he thinks. Martin’s eyes light up. “Is that going to be our car?”

Jack laughs. “I guess it is.”

After he leaves, I think about his idea of staying home until I deliver. I’m about two days away from my due date and now that I’m standing here in my kitchen thinking about it, it doesn’t actually sound like that bad an idea.

I’ve got this burst of energy, so I decide to use it up to clean the kitchen and the living room, and the bathroom. I feel good. Really good. Better than I have in ages.

It's because of Jack. Jennie was right. I just need to say the words to him. Say them with both feet on the ground and all my clothes on. (Saying during sex doesn't count). Once it's out there, then it'll all be right. He'll know I'm just as committed to him as...

I'm standing in the middle of the living room with the throw pillows in my hand...and I'm peeing myself.

No. No, this isn't pee. *Oh, no...*

I drop the throw pillows and pull my phone out of my pocket. Hands shaking, I managed to find Jack in my contacts and call him.

"Jack," I say. My voice sounds high and panicked.

"Sarah, what is it?" He hears it too.

"Come home. My water just broke...I think I'm in labor."

"On the way."

As it happens, Jack was at the dealership when I called and was in the process of putting the temporary license plate on the back of the car. I hear him pull up about ten minutes later.

I'm in agony. I'm sitting on the edge of one of the kitchen chairs, holding my belly as the pain swells up inside of me. He rushes in and, upon seeing me, rushes into our bedroom for the maternity bag he packed a few days after I moved in.

"Jack!" I yell as another contraction starts to come. He comes back out, back slung over his shoulder. As he helps me up, the pain subsides.

“Let’s go,” he says. As we walk out of the apartment, he says to me, “I got that car, by the way.”

Labor is the worse pain that I have ever experienced in my life. I’ve broken bones and had a kidney stone once. Nothing compares to labor.

Jack’s with me the entire time. Holding my hand and encouraging me to push.

“You’ve got this,” he keeps saying. “Baby, you’ve got this. You’re strong. You can do this.”

“I can do this,” I repeated. “I’m strong and I can do this.”

I’m in labor for eight hours. As we started to go into the ninth hour, the baby finally came and it was over. I laugh hysterically, merrily as the nurse puts the baby in my arms.

And just like that, I’m a mother. I’m holding this beautiful little girl...Oh, my...she is just so beautiful.

Jack is by my side. Kissing me on the head, his arm around me as we look at our baby. “She’s so beautiful,” I whisper. I feel tears start to come.

“She is,” he agrees. “I can’t believe how beautiful she is...”

We look down at her for a long moment and he looks at me and says, “You know, we never talked about baby names.”

I gaped and looked up at him. It’s true. We haven’t. It just... hasn’t come up.”

“Well,” I stammered, “Do you have anything in mind?”

“Not really,” he says with a chuckle. “God, kid, you’ve been in the world less than five minutes and we’re already screwing up.”

“Okay, well,” I chuckle, “I have a few ideas. Mia, Ava, Olivia, or Zoe, maybe.”

He looks at her, then touches her forehead with his finger. She coos up at him.

“Ava,” he says. “I like Ava.”

I’m looking at her and the moment he says it, I realize that she does look like an Ava. “Yeah,” I say. “I like it, too.”

He kisses me on my forehead, then kisses her. “Welcome to the world, Ava.”

I feed her then. As I do, I realize that as happy and complete as I felt last night, I feel even more so now. It feels like a ‘new me’ is born along with Ava like I’ve experienced a new birth. Suddenly, my life is going to revolve around this tiny new human – and I don’t mind it one bit.

Jack starts taking pictures of us with his phone and I turn my head. “I look terrible.”

“No,” he says with a laugh. “You don’t. You’ve never looked more beautiful.”

I look at Jack, watching him as he sends the photo to the babysitter to show Martin. *It’s not as hard as you think...*

“Jack?” He looks up at me, questioning. “I love you.”

And there it is. Ten toes down with my clothes on. Well, with a hospital gown on.

“What?” His eyes widen.

I smile at him. He’s really making me say it again. “I said, I love you.”

He kneels next to the hospital bed, next to me with hope in his eyes. “Do you mean that? I mean...are you sure?”

“I think I was sure for a while,” I say. “I just...I wasn’t ready before now. I’m looking at you, though...I’m seeing you here with me and it feels right, you know? This feels like it’s supposed to feel. You’re the only one I want with me right now and you’re the only man I want to be with.”

He smiles and leans over and kisses me deeply, his hands cradling my head. Our lips part and he leans his forehead against mine and says, “I love you, Sarah. I have always loved you and I always will.”

We’re happy, and I want this happiness to be with us forever. I can’t imagine leaving Jack’s side in this journey of raising Ava. I want him to experience every bit of it. Ava’s first step, Ava’s first word. I want Jack to be there for every one of Ava’s first.

I’m in the hospital for about a day before I was discharged. Seeing the new car, now in broad daylight with the baby in my arms, I’m a little impressed with Jack’s taste. It was nice and roomy enough for the four of us.

“I’ll take the baby,” he says, taking her and putting her in the car seat as I walk around to the passenger’s side. Really, I can’t wait to get home. I’m exhausted.

When we pull up to the apartment, there’s a banner on the outside of the door. “Congratulations,” it reads in silver and pink. It brings a big smile to my face.

The living room’s full of gifts for Ava and bouquets for me. It feels like Jack bought a whole shop of roses for me.

“What is all this?” I ask.

“Just a token of love for you and Ava,” he replies.

“This isn’t what I was expecting,” I reply.

“This is the teaser, baby. There’s a lot more,” he says.

“What?”

“Just wait for it.” He turns off the lights.

“Jack...what—”

Suddenly, the lights turn on, and our close friends and family are standing with bouquets of roses. Jack’s thrown a small party for Ava and me.

It’s so thoughtful of him. I can’t believe he’s done all this. Everyone gathers around us, congratulating us and cooing over the baby.

“You both look so good together.”

“I’m so happy that you guys are back together.”

“Jack is being a perfect ‘couple goals’ partner.”

“Congratulations to you both for the beautiful angel.”

Everyone congratulates us and compliments Jack’s efforts. And he deserves all the praise in the world.

We have a loud and festive dinner. A grand feast is prepared for everyone and while it all looks delicious, my eyes are bigger than my stomach. I eat pretty lightly for the rest of the night.

And when everyone leaves, Jack and I put Martin to bed and Ava in her crib. It’s been a perfect night.

As we’re lying in bed, we’re talking about the night and how he managed to gather so many people to come. It was like the baby shower all over again.

“You’re really amazing,” I say, “you know that?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty talented,” he says and I slap him playfully on the chest.

“I mean it, though. Thank you for today.”

“Sarah, never doubt the lengths I would go to make you happy,” he says, pulling me close to him.

“Haha... Okay. I don’t doubt your abilities,” I say. “You wanted me to feel special. Well, you’ve succeeded.” I look over at him into his warm and dark eyes. “You surprise me every day, Jack.”

Jack kisses me on my forehead. “I love you, Sarah,” he says.

“I love you, Jack,” I confess again. “You won me all over again.”

“Proud of myself,” he says with a smile on his face.

“You should be,” I chuckle.

We’re better together.

Chapter Ten

SARA

*E*leven months later.

Jack and I married shortly after Ava was born. We didn't want a huge affair, so we made an appointment at the courthouse and had a little reception afterward. Even though we had all the money in the world, neither of us was interested in a big wedding.

We bought a house on the lower east side of town in a beautiful neighborhood where Martin can ride his tricycle up and down the street without worrying about anything and there are plenty of other kids in the neighborhood. I gave up my career to stay home with Ava and to be a mommy to Martin and we've turned into the perfect nuclear family. All we need is a dog.

I feel blessed to be able to care for my children. Every day, I wake up and get to spend every second with my baby girl.

But lately, Jack's work days are becoming longer and longer, and he's started to "network" with his colleagues at the bar on most Fridays. He says the evenings out help him to unwind while building a strong bond with his staff.

He's the boss now, so he needs to maintain a happy work environment or...so he keeps saying.

But when he comes home drunk, my mind reels back to our college days when he partied often and I wasn't a priority.

The difference now is that we have a family to take care of.

I feel alone during these times when he's out god-knows-where. I would make plans, too, but my friends are either living the single life, dating and going out, or they're married with children, just like me, and busy as can be.

Jack's stopped asking me on dates; honestly, I'm exhausted most evenings anyway. He's still putting effort into helping me on the weekends by making breakfast and such, but I can see that his mind's not always fully there with me.

I can't help but wonder if he's regretting our marriage.

I wonder if I feel the same.

I wake up early on a sunny Saturday morning to make breakfast for my family. My wife Sarah, son Martin, and our daughter Ava are still asleep, so I tiptoe around the kitchen, trying not to wake them.

I brew a pot of coffee. Sarah's a coffee lover, so I know she'll appreciate it when she wakes up. Next, I crack a few eggs into a bowl and add some milk, salt, and pepper to make scrambled eggs for everyone. I place a pan on the stove and turn on the heat to medium-low.

As the pan's heating up, I take out some bread from the bread box and put a couple of slices in the toaster. I also take out some butter and jam from the refrigerator to go with the toast.

Once the pan's hot, I add a little bit of butter and let it melt. Then I pour in the eggs and stir them with a spatula. I make

sure to keep the heat low and keep stirring until the eggs are cooked through and fluffy.

In the meantime, the toast pops up, so I put them on a plate and spread some butter and jam on each slice. I pour the coffee into a mug and place it on the table. Finally, the eggs are done, so I scoop them onto a plate and put them on the table as well. I wake everyone up, and we sit together at the table to enjoy our breakfast together as a family.

It's a simple breakfast, but it's made with love, and it's delicious. I'm so happy to have my wife and children by my side, and I feel grateful for the time we have together.

Ava's excitedly digging into her scrambled eggs and toast and Martin is chewing on the toast while looking at a comic book. Sarah takes a sip of her coffee in silence. I can feel the tension coming off her, but that's her normal state late. She always seems pissed at me.

"You were rather late coming in last night," Sarah says. "Where were you?"

I'm annoyed at her questioning, but I don't show it. We don't like to fight in front of the kids.

"Just having a few drinks with Clark. It's no big deal." I drink my coffee and continue to check the messages on my phone.

"You could have called."

"Why? Because you'll wait up for me?"

She's glaring at me. I can feel her stare on the side of my face. "Maybe. Or maybe I'd just like to know you are safe or in a ditch somewhere."

I sighed. "I just had a few drinks," I say. "I'm a grown man, Sarah. You don't have to mother me."

She rolls her eyes and goes cold and silent. This isn't a new argument. It seems like we've been having this argument for years.

She gets up and leaves the room and I know I've fucked up. I follow her. "Sarah. Hey, come on, don't bust my balls over this."

"I'm at home," I say, "all day with these kids. I'm changing diapers and wiping runny noses while you're out palling around with your buddies."

"They're my colleagues—"

"They're your buddies," she yells. "God, I can't *believe* this. This is just like when we were in college. It's the same thing all over again."

"Don't start with that again," I say angrily. "You know what your problem is, Sarah. You're stuck in the past."

"*I'm* stuck in the past? I'm stuck in the past?! Am I the one who can't seem to stop partying with his homeboys while his wife and kids are at home wondering if he's dead or alive?!"

Her shouts have upset the kids. Ava starts screaming and Martin's looking at us with terrified eyes.

“Look what you did,” Sarah growls as she walks back into the kitchen and picks up the baby.

“Look what *I* did? You know what? You’re insane! You’re...” I stop myself. Martin has put his hands over his ears and the baby is crying even louder now. Sarah bounces her up and down to calm her.

“I’ve gotta get to work,” I say sorely and stalk out of the door.

I’m ashamed I let our argument get out of control. I don’t know what’s wrong with us lately. We’ve lost control, and it leaves a bad taste in my mouth.

I don’t want to argue with Sarah, and the fight’s just another reminder that even the most minor disagreements can escalate quickly. It’s essential to communicate effectively and not let emotions take over ... but how do we do that?

I come straight home from work. Sarah’s in the kitchen making dinner, so I go to Martin’s room, where he’s doing his homework, and sit on his bed beside him.

“Hey, kid,” I say. “How are you doing?”

Martin shrugs and he doesn’t look up at me. I sigh. “Listen,” I say, “I just came in here to tell you that I’m sorry about this morning. Your mom and I...were just having a little disagreement. That’s all.”

He gave me a look and I almost laughed. He could sure serve some glances this kid.

“Okay,” I said. “It was a fight. But we want you to know that it had nothing to do with you. You know that, right?”

He nods and I ruffle his hair. “We love you very much,” I say. “And we shouldn’t have fought like that in front of you and your sister.”

“It’s okay,” says Martin. I wish I could say the same thing to Ava.

That evening, we have dinner and Sarah is still pretty cold to me. I shouldn’t have said the things that I did. I wish I could take it back.

I can’t deny that my emotional baggage from my previous relationship with Sarah is affecting our current relationship. The hurt and pain from that experience still linger with me. I find it hard to fully trust Sarah and open up to her about my feelings. I’m constantly worried that she’ll hurt me again, and I can’t shake off that fear.

The next morning when I get up, Sarah is sitting at the kitchen table with her coffee in front of her. “Where are the kids?” I ask her.

“Ava’s still asleep,” I say, “and I already got Martin off to school. Have a seat.”

I sit down opposite her and she takes in a deep breath. “Jack, I know things are pretty rough between us right now, but...I want to move forward and get past this. I think maybe we need to find a therapist to help us with our issues.”

I'm hesitant to rehash our problems with a stranger...but I can't deny that we've got problems. "Yeah," I say. "Let's look into that."

I'm willing to give therapy a shot. Anything to help us let go of the past and move forward.

One week later, we're sitting in a couple's therapy office. I'm nervous that I'm going to say the wrong things.

I sit on the couch across from the therapist, feeling a mix of emotions. I'm a bit nervous and anxious, but I'm willing to put that aside to work this out once and for all.

The therapist is named Maggie. She's an older woman with a helmet of blonde hair and she's wearing beige colored clothes.

"All right," she says to begin the session. "Why don't we start with why you two are here?"

I look at Sarah, then I say, "I don't know. If I had to guess, I'd say that we're still struggling with trust issues."

"We dated in college," Sarah says, "And then we broke up and didn't see each other for six years and then we reconnected, and now..." She trailed off. She looked tired already.

"So you've had a prior relationship with each other that didn't work out," says Maggie. She's writing on a notepad. This suddenly feels suspiciously like a test.

"She left," I say. "Back then. She up and left without a word to me. Before that happened, she was acting a lot like she's

acting now.”

Maggie turns to Sarah. “Tell me how you feel about what Jack shared.”

“I get it,” she says with a sigh. “I guess I did give up on us before. But I was at the end of my rope. He’d hurt me one too many times and I had to protect my heart. I had taken a back seat in his life, and I didn’t think it was fair. I felt lonely and insecure.”

“And how do you feel now?” Maggy asks.

“I’m starting to feel the same way.” She rubs her arm, frowning. “Lonely, sad, insecure. I didn’t feel this way when I was single. I thrived at my job. I had friends and a social life.”

“And now?” Maggie continues.

“Now, my main communication is with our baby and our five-year-old.” She shrugs. “I feel like I don’t have a social life or any kind of support system.”

Maggie turns to me again. “Jack, how does what Sarah shared make you feel?”

“Overwhelmed,” I say honestly. “I have to work to pay our bills. I can’t help that I’m gone during the day.”

“But your hours are longer and longer, Jack,” Sarah says, sounding frustrated.

“You know I’m running a company now. I have to be there to make sure everything goes smoothly.”

She scoffs a little. “And what about how often you go out drinking? I’m home alone with our kids and you’re out having a blast. It’s not fair.”

“How’s it *my* fault you don’t want to go out with your friends?” I say too harshly and instantly regret my words.

“Jack,” Maggie steps in, “would you consider cutting down on going out with your friends and, instead, maybe getting a babysitter and taking Sarah out?”

I purse my lips, not remembering the last time Sarah and I had gone on a date. How would we even act?

“I can do that,” I say, wondering why I hadn’t seen this solution before.

“How would you feel about that, Sarah?”

Sarah smiles, her cheeks rosy, her blue eyes glinting. “I would love that.”

Maggie talks with us more, helping us understand each other’s perspectives and providing us with strategies and tools to communicate better and address our emotional baggage. She also gives us some homework exercises to do outside of therapy, such as writing down our thoughts and feelings and practicing active listening.

In the end, we’re left with Sarah and me setting some goals for our relationship, such as improving our communication and building trust, and Maggie reminding us that healing takes time. The big thing is that it’s important to be patient and kind to each other.

As the session ends, I feel a sense of hope and determination. I know we'll have a long journey, but with Sarah by my side and the therapist's guidance, I feel confident that we'll work through our issues and build a solid and loving relationship.

I find as the therapy sessions with Sarah and the therapist progress, I start to notice small changes in myself. I'm beginning to let go of the past and my fear of getting hurt. I realize now that Sarah, Martin, and Ava are my present and my future, and I don't want to miss out on the love and joy that they bring into my life.

I make a conscious effort to communicate better with Sarah and to express my feelings more openly. I try to listen more attentively and understand her perspective. I also make an effort to spend more quality time with my family.

Most importantly, I plan special date nights with Sarah, where we can reconnect and strengthen our bond.

With time, I notice that my trust issues are slowly dissipating, and I'm able to open up to Sarah more and more. I feel a deeper connection with her, and I know that she's my partner in every sense of the word. I also found myself becoming a better father to Ava. I'm more patient and present with her, and I realize how much joy and happiness she brings into my life. I feel a sense of gratitude for having such a loving and beautiful family. I realize healing is a process and it takes time, patience, and effort, but I'm on the right track.

All that being said, this morning, I woke up with an exciting plan in mind. I want to take Sarah and the kids to the water park for the day. I want to make some fun family memories with them.

“Everybody up,” I say as I go through the house. “Let’s go.”

Martin pads out of his room lazily, his hair all over his head. “What’s going on, Daddy?”

“Good question,” my wife says as she rubs the sleep out of her eyes. I go into Ava’s room and gently wake her by picking her up in my arms.

“We’re going to the water park,” I tell them. “So, come on, let’s get dressed and packed and get going.”

Martin rushes off to his room to get ready and Sarah asks, “What about breakfast?”

“We’ll get something on the way. Now, come on. We’re burning daylight.”

As a family, we start getting ready for our day trip, packing sunscreen, towels, extra clothes, and Ava’s swim diapers. Sarah even thinks of packing some snacks and drinks in a cooler. Once we’re all dressed, packed and ready, we load everything into the car bound for our adventure.

We drive through town until we reach the edge and now we’re riding through a stretch of farmland. Ava keeps chirping happily at the cows and horses as we pass them by, her chubby fingers pointing out the window. Sarah’s dark hair flows in the

breeze of her open window as she smiles at me, taking my hand and squeezing it. It's going to be a great day.

When we arrive at the water park, Ava's eyes light up the second she sees all the colorful slides and pools. Martin yells, "Daddy, look at the big one!" as he points to the giant water slide in the center of the park. "Can we go on that one? Please, Daddy?"

Sarah looks at me a little nervously and I look down at Martin. "It might be a little too big," I say. "We'll see, okay, champ?"

He seems a little disappointed, but he's resigned to it. I mean, we are at a water park in the first place. "Okay," he says with a little sigh.

We walk to the baby pool area first, where Ava can splash and play in the shallow water. Martin, being the amazing older brother that he is, holds her hand, and they kick their legs in the water together. We're there, too, sitting on the edge and splashing our feet as the two of them play in the water.

Martin's desire to ride the giant slide dissipates as we get a little closer to it and he can see just how big it is. At one point, he says, "Daddy, I think I want to stay on the small rides with Ava for now." He's a smart kid. I mean, the ride is pretty scary now that I look at it.

We mess around on the rides until around lunch, when we find the picnic area where we can sit and eat in the shade. Sarah keeps complaining about how expensive the food is and how she should have brought something for lunch other than

snacks, but I just laugh. We can afford it and today isn't about the money anyway.

And there we are, in the shade, the four of us. After Martin's done with his hot dog, he spots a couple of children around his age playing with a frisbee. "Daddy?" he starts and I nod before he finishes. And he's off to play with them.

Ava has fallen asleep in her mother's arms. She's still breastfeeding, but Sarah's been trying to wean her off. Right now, she's just barely hanging on to her, her eyes closed, suckling every few seconds. "This is nice," Sarah says.

"Yeah," I agree. "Really nice."

"We really ought to do this more often. I mean...can we afford more days like this?"

"We can afford whatever we like," I say with a raised eyebrow.

She just chuckles. "That's not exactly what I mean, but... well, I'd love it if this could be a monthly or biweekly thing. I like being out here with my family."

I see the sparkle in those blue eyes and I remember how scared she was about starting a family. Look at her now. *Look at us now.*

I scoot over to her and kiss Ava on the top of her head, then I kiss her gently on the lips.

"I like it, too," I say. Then, "I love you, Sarah."

She smiles. "I love you, too."

I find that as the days and weeks go by, I realize just how much my family means to me. I often catch myself staring at Sarah, Martin, and Ava, feeling a deep sense of love and gratitude for them. I realize my family is my everything and that I can't imagine my life without them. They bring me joy, happiness, and a sense of purpose.

My home with them is my sanctuary, a place where I feel safe, secure, and loved. I know that I can always count on them to be there for me, no matter what. I start to appreciate the small moments of everyday life with them, like reading bedtime stories with Ava, cooking dinner with Sarah, or taking a walk together as a family. Those moments are what make life worth living.

I understand building a strong family takes time and effort, but that it's worth it. I know we'll face challenges along the way, but we'll always have each other to rely on.

I am grateful and blessed to have such a loving and wonderful family; I know they're the most essential priority in my life. I promise to always cherish and protect them and ensure our love and connection never fade.

Chapter Eleven

JACK

I'm waiting outside Martin's kindergarten. Lately, Jack has gone back to working longer hours (something that he says is temporary. There's a big merger happening), so pickup has become my job. I don't mind it. I like seeing Martin's happy face when he comes bounding out of school. Plus, I get dibs on hearing about his day.

The bell rings, and children come running out of the school. I watch anxiously for him (always there's the fear that I won't see him in the back of my mind), but then I see him running past his friends, his backpack bouncing along with his long blonde hair.

"Hey, big guy. How was school?" I ask him as I help him into his car seat.

"I got a star from Miss Pattinson," he exclaims. He juts his wrist out at me, showing me the little golden star stuck to the back of his hand. His eyes are glittering and his smile's a thousand megawatts.

"Wow," I say. "That's pretty cool!"

"Yeah," he says, "I got it for being quiet and listening during storytime."

"That's awesome. I'm so proud of you!" I tell him, ruffling his blond hair affectionately.

"I'm going to show it to Daddy," he responds excitedly.

As we head home, I make a stop at the supermarket to get a few groceries. When I put Martin in the cart, he immediately starts using his imagination, pretending as if he's on board a ship at sea and thoroughly enjoying his trip in the market on the shopping cart.

I text Jack as I walk in, just to see if he needs anything. He responds with a mile-long list of things that we need. I sigh. I was only planning on being in here for a few minutes. Now, it's a full-on shopping trip.

But, when it's all done, I think to myself that this is fine. We do need all these things and I might as well get it all while I'm out. While at the checkout, Martin watches the clerk scan things one by one.

"That's a lot of stuff, Mom," Martin comments.

"Welcome to the family life, sweetie," I joke.

After backing up the car and buckling Martin in his car seat, we're on our way home. I suddenly feel drained from all the extra work.

I find the energy, though. I take Martin out of his car seat and start carrying the bags. "I wanna help!" he chirps. I smile and hand him a smaller bag and we start carrying the groceries into the house. It takes me about four trips to get it inside. Once that's done, I send Martin off to his room to do his homework while I put the groceries away.

By this point, Jack's home. I peek into the bedroom and see them both asleep on the bed. Jack was sitting up with a baby

book in his hands and little Ava's nuzzled up next to him, her dark hair in her face as she slumbers.

So...so. I guess dinner's on me tonight.

I cook and before long, we're all eating dinner the way we do every night. Jack's talking about his day, but I'm not really paying attention. I'm kind of spacing out a little. I think I'm just really tired.

"Can you put the kids to bed tonight?" I ask Jack when I'm done with the dishes. "I'm worn out."

"Yeah, sure. No problem," he says.

When I'm asleep, I dream of a happy family. Jack and I with our two wonderful children. In my dreams, we are all living a satisfying life, and both our children grow up to be successful and wealthy people. It's always this way in some version or another. I'm at graduations...weddings...I'm some fancy award show honoring either Martin or Ava (or sometimes even both).

Sometimes, I grow old and I'm surrounded by grandchildren. Jack and I are giving them hard candies and pushing them on an old tire swing in our yard...

And then, I'm dreaming about a childhood friend of mine who left for Canada abruptly. I dream I will meet her. And that we play in her Nan's garden, among the rows and rows of peonies and jasmine....a really loud bird is shrieking at me.

I open my eyes to an alarm blaring, shaking me out of my blissful dreams.

“Shut that thing off before I smash it to pieces,” Jack moans out, his face still snuggling into the crook of my neck, a heavy arm strewn across my waist.

I look over at the time on the clock. It’s set an hour before I have to get up. “That’s for you, dear,” I mumble, pushing at him. “Get up, you oaf.” I turn away from him and press my face deeper into my creased pillow to block out the light.

Jack grudgingly rouses from his sleep, and just as he reaches across and puts it on snooze, my alarm rings out. It’s Ava crying.

I swear I feel Jack smiling against my back. “And that, my dear, is for you,” he says.

“Ugh. Get off me. I can’t breathe.” I push him off and get out of bed. God, I feel like I just went to sleep.

Well, that’s one way to start your morning. I go to Ava’s room and pick her up, soothing her gently. She’s wet and hungry. Poor thing’s miserable.

“There, baby. It’s okay. Mama’s here,” I coo at her as I hold her. I go to the rocking chair in the room and sit down. She nuzzles her face into my chest, eager to be fed.

“Babe! I’m getting Martin ready for school. Can you start some breakfast?”

“Sure, babe!” I say it brighter than how I feel.

He peeks his head into the room and sees I’m feeding her. “How’s that whole weaning thing going?”

I narrow my eyes at him and he puts his hands up in surrender. “Sorry. I mean, you’re the one who said it was time.”

“Don’t you have a five-year-old to take care of?” I say.

“He’s brushing his teeth. Listen, if you want me to cook—”

“I got it,” I say, looking back down at Ava. Her sweet face is soothing enough for me right now. Jack takes the hint and backs out of the room.

I make breakfast and Jack and Martin eat it all up like a couple of beasts. I wonder if they even tasted it.

When they’re gone, I start with the housework. Housework, then Ava and I go to our “Baby and me” class, then back home where I get her lunch, and after lunch...

We normally play with her blocks, but I’m so damned tired still. My phone alarm goes off and I realize I have a meeting.

Not that long enough, shortly after I’d started weaning Ava, I’d started working from home a few days a week. Usually, I have the sitter come by and watch Ava while I check in on Zoom or stop in to make an occasional appearance at the job... but today, it just slipped my mind...and I’m due on Zoom in about five minutes.

I pick Ava up and open my laptop, bouncing her on my knee as I pull up the program.

“Who’s a good baby? Who’s a good baby?” I coo at Ava as she watches, chewing on her teething ring. The screen pops up

with my boss and the moment she sees my baby her face softens a little.

“The work-from-home life, huh?” she says with a laugh.

“Yeah. I’m sorry, I forgot all about our meeting today. I usually have a sitter.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I understand,” she says. “We’ll just go over the basics of the new projects and we can reconnect next week about it. How does that sound?”

That sounds good to me. We go over things and remarkably, Ava is being extremely well-behaved. As we get to the final points of the project, she starts to get fussy, rubbing her eyes and resting her head on my shoulder. She’s tired. *So, am I, kid. So am I.*

The meeting ends and I sigh, looking down at Ava as she whimpers up at me. “Okay,” I say. “Let’s take a power nap, all right? A quick fifteen minutes.”

I lie down with her on the bed and before I know it, Ava and I are deep in dreamland. I’m in my Nana’s garden again, playing with my friends, happy and fulfilled in the sun...

I’m jolted out of my sleep by the sound of my phone ringing. I sit up and realize that it’s nowhere near me. I can hear it in the living room. I get out of bed and scramble to find my phone amidst all the clothes and toys and a mountain of other things that have been scattered onto the couch and scattered on the floor. When I do find it, I see that it’s Jack.

“Hey. Hello?” I’m still a little groggy. I rub my face in an effort to wake myself up more. “What’s up? Is everything okay?” I sound breathless and flustered.

“Jesus, I was about to ask you the same thing,” he says, “I’ve been calling you for the last half hour. Where are you?”

“Um, I’m at the house. What’s going on?”

He sighs. “Sarah, it’s after two. Martin’s still at school.” His voice is strained and agitated.

“Oh, my God,” I breathe. I start looking for my shoes. “Oh, shit. I’m sorry, honey. I fell asleep.”

“Fell asleep? You’re shitting me, right?”

Dread coils in the pit of my stomach. His tone was so menacing and cold. I glance at the wall clock hanging on the wall next to the front door. Shit. Shit. Shit. It’s 2:39 p.m. How did I forget to pick up Martin? It completely slipped my mind.

“His teacher’s called me five times already,” he says, “and I can’t leave the office because, as you would remember, I told you we have an extremely important business meeting today.” God, he sounds so angry.

“Jack, I’m so sorry. I’m on my way,” I reassure him, grabbing my keys off the hook. I rush back to the bedroom and scoop up Ava as I balance the phone on my shoulder. “I’ll be there in a second.”

The guilt feels like it’s eating away at my heart like a termite in a woodpile. *Jesus, why did I sleep for so long??*

I shake these thoughts out of my head as I step on the pedal, keeping an eye out for the speed to make sure I'm not accelerating too much while my other eye watches Ava, safely strapped into her car seat.

I see Martin sitting on the bench in front of the school. He's not by himself, thankfully. The teacher is with him. I stop in front of them and Martin hops up, waving to his teacher. "Hi, Mommy!"

He's smiling. It's no big deal to him.

We pull off and I look at Martin in his car seat in my rearview mirror. "I'm sorry, kiddo," I say. "Mommy just lost track of time."

"It's okay," he says. He's swinging his legs a little in the seat.

I still feel terrible. He shouldn't have had to wait for me. "Hey," I say, "you want to get some ice cream before dinner?"

His face lights up and he nods his head feverishly.

"Okay," I say and detour toward the nearest ice cream parlor.

After ice cream, Martin goes to his room to do his homework, leaving me to start dinner. I'm feeling frazzled and harried like the day just never stopped since I woke up that morning.

That evening, we had dinner without Jack because it was one of his late nights. I'm left with the task of cleaning up the kitchen, helping Martin with his homework, and finally,

putting both of them to bed. I know that Jack is working long hours for a reason...but I can't help feeling a little resentful.

So...after everyone's in bed, I sit on the couch and wait for Jack. There's a fight coming tonight. He sounded like he wanted to lay into me earlier on the phone and even though it was just a mistake – the kind of mistake anyone could make – I know he's going to find a way to make me feel like the worst person on earth for it.

But the longer I sit here, the more pissed I get. For all his platitudes about being afraid of being alone, he sure has no problem doing that to me...

I wait for two hours. I'm watching the clock as the minutes go by and my anger is getting icier with every moment. If it's a fight he's looking for, he's about to find it.

He walks in finally and freezes upon seeing me on the couch. As he closes the door, I can see the disappointment on his face – his thinned lips and furrowed brow say it all. He hangs up his jacket and sets down his briefcase, then turns to me and says, “You pick up Martin.”

“Nope,” I say and he glares at me. “I just left him there at the school for the last nine hours. If you hurry, you might be able to get him before they lock him in.”

He rolls his eyes. “This isn't a laughing matter.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” I say to him.

“Hey,” he barks, his voice rising in volume. “Don't give me that shit. That is my son—”

“He’s *my* son, too,” I snark right back at him. “Or did you not mean it all those times you said it to me?”

He shook his head. “Oh, so this is some kind of pissing war over Martin, now?”

“I made a mistake,” I say, standing up and talking over him. My fists are clenched at my sides and I can feel the rage that’s been brewing for the last two hours start to bubble up to the surface. “People make mistakes, Jack. Instead of blaming me for it, maybe you could stop for a second and try to understand what happened.”

“What’s there to understand? You forgot about him—”

“Oh, like you’re some fucking saint,” I say bitterly. “Like you’ve never made any mistakes with him. Well, you’re just the perfect parent, aren’t you? I bet it’s really easy when you don’t even have to deal with them for eight hours out of your day!”

“I am here for him, for *both* of them! Don’t you try and make me out to be an absent father when you know damn well I’m not! I am here! Every day! And when it was just Martin and me, I was there for him every single day—”

“You weren’t here today!” I shrieked. I could feel the tears start to come now. “Do you even understand what it feels like to hold this entire house on your back because you want to support the person you love? I have to do the cleaning and cook the breakfast and get Martin from school and the groceries and whatever else you think I have time for and, AND I had a meeting today with my job because I don’t want

to be stuck the rest of my life as the damned background to your foreground!”

He’s standing there. Stunned. I’m in tears.

“I. Was. Tired.” I say this in measured tones. “Do you understand? I was tired. And if you want to take Martin and leave me because of that...then so be it. Leave. Get out. Just leave us here...” I say the last part in a fit of sobbing. Jack moves to me and sweeps me into his arms.

“I’m sorry,” he says as I sweep into his chest. “I’m so sorry, baby. I love you, okay? I’m not going to leave you.”

He holds me in his arms and rocks me until the sobs subside. Then he takes me to the couch and we sit down together.

“I’m sorry I was so hard on you,” he says. “I was out of line. I guess...I guess I just forgot how hard all this can be when you’re dealing alone.”

He kisses my hands and says, “You’re going to have some help while I’m working on this merger.”

I look at him strangely. “What?” My voice sounds cracked and raw from all the screaming and crying.

“Just while I have to do these late nights. I can hire someone or maybe Jennie or Stacy can come by, whichever you’re comfortable with. We’ll do that for a few weeks. After that, I’ll pull more of my weight around here.”

I study his face for any kind of deception. He’s being for real. I really reached him.

“Okay,” I say with a little laugh.

I lean into him and he wraps his arms around me again.
“Maggie always says that we’re a team,” he says to me softly.
“And we are. I’m not going to forget again.”

Chapter Twelve

SARA

It's Martin's birthday. He's six years old now, and I'm so happy that I get to share this milestone with our family and friends.

"Now make a wish and blow your candles out," Jack says.

I watch with pride as Martin blows out all six candles.

"Can I open my presents now, Mom?" he asks me, and I laugh.

"I think we better feed our guests some cake before we start opening the presents. You want to help me with that?"

"Sure!" he says merrily.

I glance around the pizza place, lit with video game lights. "Let's count how many slices of cake we need. Martin, Daddy, Mommy, Ava, Harris, Jennie, Stacy, Miller, Kenzie, Tyler, Mike, and Maggie. How many is that?"

"Uh," he counts with his fingers. "Eleven!"

“That’s right! Very good.” I smile. “Can you count out eleven plates and forks for me, please?”

“Yep, I can do that.” His big brown eyes sparkle as he separates the plates and spreads them onto the table.

I don’t know if I can love this little boy any more than I already do, but somehow I can. I wonder where his biological mother is and how she’s doing. Jack rarely speaks of her—usually, only when he sees something familiar in Martin. To be honest, I haven’t thought about her much, either. Just today, really. It is his birthday, after all.

Carefully, I cut the pieces of cake and set them on each plate and I give Martin the end piece with the most frosting, per his request. He goes around the table like a little helper, handing out the plates to our guests.

“Here you go, Ava,” he says as he sets the smallest piece on Ava’s high chair. Ava squeals with delight, picks the cake up with her bare hands, and smashes it into her mouth. She’s the spitting image of me now. Big crystal blue eyes and rosy cheeks. Her long black hair has gotten curly, though. Must be her father’s genes.

Jack comes up behind me and wraps his arms around my waist. “You did an amazing job with this party. It’s everything he ever wanted.”

I turn around and hug him back. “Pizza, video games, cake, and presents? It’s what *every* six-year-old wants.”

“Exactly.” Jack kisses my forehead. “Love you.”

“Love you back. We really are the lucky ones.”

I glance around at my family and friends. Stacy and Jennie are chatting at the end of the table. Unlike Ava, Stacy’s daughter, Miller, is diving into her cake, though she’s attempting to use a fork. Meanwhile, Jennie and Stacy are gossiping, mostly about Jennie’s dating life. From where I’m standing, it sounds disastrous. I realize how much I don’t miss being single. Dating had always been a crapshoot.

Jack sits next to me and we enjoy the Blueey-themed vanilla cake with chocolate frosting. He’s looking a little nostalgic. His eyes look far away like he’s somewhere in another time.

“Hey,” I say, nudging him. “You all right?”

He doesn’t say anything for a moment. Then, I see him thinking better of keeping quiet and he says, “I used to hate that his mother wasn’t at his birthday parties.”

I just smile a little sadly. Looks like I’m not the only one thinking about Martin’s mother.

He has you now,” Jack adds. “I mean...for all that it’s worth, you’re the only mom he knows and that’s how it should be.” He smiles and I smile with him.

His smile fades, though and he’s back in that other time. For all his honeyed words, he still wishes that Camilla had been more present. I can’t say that I blame him.

“What would you do if Camilla showed back up in Martin’s life?”

He blows out a breath. “I don’t even want to think about that. Camilla wasn’t the most responsible person in the world. You know, about a year ago, I heard that she’d spent a month in jail after she’d gotten drunk and decided to steal a car and go for a joy ride.”

“Oh, wow,” I say and he nods.

“Yeah. I heard it from one of my old buddies from college. Remember, Joey Mac?” I nodded. “Yeah, he and Camilla used to be cool until she ruined one of his rugs at a party one night. Don’t ask.” I snickered at that. “Yeah...he said that he’s been hearing about her for a while off and on. Apparently, she’s gone downhill.”

I bite my bottom lip thoughtfully. “That’s really sad.”

“It is,” he replies. “I wonder about her sometimes. Wonder if the worse ever finally happens, will I even know about it? I keep wondering about the day a friend of a friend calls me because she’s finally wrapped her car around a tree somewhere.”

I shake my head and look at Martin, who’s giggling along with his school friends. “I can’t imagine not wanting to know my child.”

“Camilla’s a breed of her own. I don’t know how else to explain it.”

“I think you are doing a pretty good job of it.”

He smirks a little and looks at me. He’s back in the present now. “In any case,” Jack holds my hand and kisses it, “it is

what it is. He's got you and me, and I think we've been a pretty good team."

"Agreed." I squeeze his hand.

We're good, he and I. After this year of being married, we're good. It's had its ups and downs, but what marriage doesn't?

I still wonder about him when he gets that far-away look in his eyes from time to time. Something is going on with him that he's not sharing. I believe that he believes that everything with Camilla is solved...but I don't know if that's true or not. There's still a lot about him that he's keeping shut off from me.

I don't question it today. Today is Martin's birthday and it's a time for celebration. And that's how we're going to keep it.

Chapter Thirteen

JACK

I'm having dinner with Sarah when my phone buzzes in his hand. I can't believe who's calling.

Camilla.

I freeze as the phone vibrates in my hand. Across the table, Sarah gives me a questioning look.

"Sorry," I say. "It's work. I'll be right back." I leave the dining room, walk into the den, and close the door behind me. I let the phone ring two more times before I answer, my heart pounding in my ears.

"Hello?"

"Jack," the familiar voice rings into my ear. "How are you?"

Anger boils inside my gut. "How am I? An interesting question coming from you," I say coldly. "Wouldn't you rather know about your son?"

"Of course," she says. She sounds different somehow. Almost...pleasant. "How is Martin?" she asks.

I'm surprised she remembers his name. Thank God Sarah and the kids aren't around me right now.

"He's fine," I say. "He great. Just turned six."

"Six? Wow. Time really flies."

How can she sound so goddamned cavalier? "What do you want?" Get the bottom of it already.

“I...I’m in town visiting my mother. I was wondering if you wanted to meet. I’ve missed you. We can catch up and have a few drinks, like old times.”

I’m seeing red now. The nerve! “No, Camilla, I don’t want to meet up with you. I don’t think my wife would approve.”

“Oh,” she says, “I didn’t know.”

“Of course not. How could you?”

She pauses. I hope I’m hurting her. I really hope I’m hurting her. “Are you happy?”

“I’m very happy,” I say. “In fact, we have another child. A little girl. My life is about as complete as it can get, no thanks to you.”

She pauses again, then says, “Jack...I know that we haven’t spoken since...” She sighs into the phone. “Listen, this last bit of trouble I got into...well, it landed me in rehab. And in rehab, they tell you that one of the first things that you’re supposed to do is make amends for the wrongs that you’ve done to people. You...you’re at the top of my list. I really did you wrong, Jack...and I’m sorry.”

The wind was taken out of my sails. I don’t want to stop being angry, though. “You expecting me to accept your apology?”

“No,” she says. “If you do...if you ever do, that’s on you. I just need you to know that...well, just that I’m sorry. That’s all.”

I don't know what to say. I'm standing in the middle of my den with my mouth agape.

"Have a good night, Jack." And with that, she hangs up the phone. I'm still standing there staring at my phone, not knowing what to do now. I've been angry at her for so long... can't I keep being angry? Is that allowed?

"Jack?"

I look over and see Sarah peeking her head in at me. She steps into the den and asks, "Are you all right?"

I put the phone in my pocket. I'm visibly upset, but I'd like it if she didn't see it right now. "I'm fine, honey," I say.

"That wasn't work, was it?"

I take in a breath and I'm finding that it shudders. I'm shaking with anger. "It was Camilla."

Her face changes. Her skin goes a little pale for a second. "Camilla...Martin's mother?"

"Yeah."

"Well...what did she want?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Jack—"

"I don't want to talk about it," I say a little louder, then I catch myself. It isn't Sarah's fault. I can't take this out on her.

"She wanted to apologize," I say a little softer. "For everything. She...said she's been in rehab and when you're in

rehab, they make you apologize to people, so she's apologizing."

Sarah stands there, studying me. Trying to figure out what I'm feeling. "You don't want to accept it, do you?"

"No, I don't."

"So...you don't believe her?"

"No, I do. It's just that I..." I stop, really thinking about what I was feeling. I take in a deeper breath. This one is more calming. "I'm used to being angry at her. I like being angry at her. This is going to sound really shitty, but I hate the idea that she's getting her life together."

Sarah walks up to me and hugs me warmly. All the turmoil just drains out of me. "You don't have to accept her apology," she says. "It's perfectly alright if you don't, you know."

We stand there in each other's arms for a long time until I say what I'm really afraid of. What's always been under the surface. "What if she wants to take him back?"

Sarah sighs. "Is that what she said she wants?"

"No." "Okay...then that's not on the table."

"But it might be."

"But it's not." She lifts her head and looks into my eyes. Beautiful jewels looking up at me. "Honey, you are in a different place than you were before we got together. You've got a family and your own home...No one in their right mind

is going to take a child out of this situation. And if they try, then we'll handle it."

She reaches up and touches my cheek gently. "You're not alone this time, Jack. I'm here. I've got your back."

An old feeling bubbles up inside of me. That feeling of abandonment that's haunted me my whole life. "Yeah," I say, stepping out of her embrace, "For now, anyway."

Sarah sighs and says, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Sarah, everything's great between us right now, but... what's to stop you from falling out of love with me? It's happened before. Why couldn't it happen again?"

She looks at me incredulously. "What are you talking about, Jack?"

"In college. When you left me without a word. You just... cut me off and never spoke to me again. I never even knew why."

Her face splits into a smile...and now she's laughing. "Oh, my God. Jack, you can't be serious."

"I am and I don't see what's so funny."

She shook her head. "The night that you came home and I was gone, where were you before that?"

I frowned, thinking back to that night and how I looked through the apartment, and all her things were gone. There wasn't even a note. "What does that have to do with anything?"

“Only everything,” she says and crosses her arms. “Think back. Where were you before you came home?”

“I...I was at a party.”

“I know,” she says. “I went to that party too because I was tired of waiting for you to come home so we could go out to dinner.”

I scowl at her, my memory clearly not processing that. “What? We didn’t have a date that night.”

“We did,” she says. “Remember, I’d just aced that economics exam. I came and sat with you in the cafeteria and I was really excited about it. Your two buddies Ted and Harris were there because it was Taco Tuesday. After I told you about my class, you said that we should celebrate and go to—”

“Montecellos.” The memory came back to me in a flash and all of a sudden, everything else fell into place. I put my hand to my head in shock.

“You forgot me that night,” said Sarah, “for like the hundredth time at that point.”

“Oh, jeez,” I say. I walk over to the corner of the couch in the den and shake my head. I couldn’t believe it. Six years lost over a misunderstanding.

I start laughing. It starts like a chuckle, then builds to a maddening roar until tears stream down my face. Sarah is looking at me like I’ve lost my mind.

“What is so funny?”

“That’s just it,” I say, wiping my eyes, “it’s not funny. It’s not funny at all.”

“What?”

“Sarah...That was the day my dad died. I heard from my mom earlier that day and I guess...I guess it messed me up more than I thought. Right after I got that call, Harris caught up with me and invited me and...”

“And you went to the party to forget about your dad. Oh, my God.”

She starts laughing and before long, we’re both laughing together. Back then, it was such an awful time for both of us. Now it just seemed so ridiculous.

“I’m so sorry I forgot about you,” I say, taking her by the hands. “I was such a shit back then.”

“Your dad died, Jack.” She says it like it was the simplest thing in the world. “Ugh. If we’d just talked about it in the first place...”

I wrap my arms around her waist and kiss her. “It doesn’t matter anymore,” I say. “However we got here, we’re here. That’s all that counts.”

“Yeah,” she says. “We’re partners in this crazy life.”

Something stirs in Sarah. “Lovers, too,” she adds. “Take me to bed, Jack,” she says with a wink.

“Sarah, you have no idea how good that sounds,” I say and lift her into my arms.

When I first met Sarah, I knew she was special. There was just something about her that made me want to be a better person. Over time, we grew closer, and our relationship became more than just friendship. We're partners in everything we do now, building a future as a family.

We both have such a special connection and understanding of each other. It's like no one else can understand us. We share so many unforgettable memories, from days out in the park to nights spent cuddling on the sofa and watching movies. I feel fortunate we found each other. Together, we are unstoppable, and there is nothing that can ever keep us apart - not even time itself.

Our relationship has become stronger than ever as they continue to build upon the foundation that existed years ago. This is just a different chapter in the story of two lovers reunited, but this one promises a happily ever after unlike any other.

Epilogue

SARA

*E*ighteen years later...

Ava's graduating and I'm one proud papa. I wrap my arm around Sarah's waist, and we watch our daughter walk the stage to receive her diploma. She smiles and waves at us.

"Yay!" Sarah shouts above all the other parents. "Go, Ava!"

Martin's standing on the other side of Sarah and jumping up and down like he's at a sporting event. "Whoop, whoop! Let's go, baby sis!"

I laugh, a mixture of emotions filling my heart.

Sarah and I did it. We raised two happy, healthy children, and we did it together.

Martin's starting his journey in medical school with dreams of becoming a psychologist. Ava's off to study abroad. She's always had an adventurous soul.

And Sarah and I are planning our empty-nester vacations.

First, a cruise to Mexico, then a flight to Europe, where we take the train throughout the countryside. We'll have the best adventures, and when we come back, we'll share all the pictures with our children. Yep, we're not done having the best time of our lives. Together. She's my best friend, and I'm pretty sure I'm hers. I smile, thinking about it.

Sarah looks at me. Her blue eyes are bracketed by soft wrinkles. She's matured so beautifully in the past eighteen years. She's more stunning than ever. And she's mine.

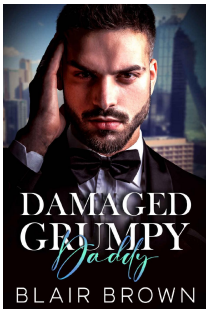
Tears fill her eyes, and she mouths, "We did it."

I nod and kiss her lips. "Yes," I whisper. "We're still doing it. Forever and always."

Her full lips curve into a beautiful smile, then she turns back to the stage and claps some more.

I'd say this is the happiest day of my life, but there's so much more life to live. Yes, everything happens for a reason, and I'm so glad.

Also By Blair Brown



I knew he was trouble the first time I set my eyes on the grumpy lawyer staring at me across the courtroom.

I've dedicated my life to becoming one of the most successful prosecutors in Hollywood.

I'm smart, determined, and don't back down from a challenge.

But when I face off against the charming and cunning defense attorney, Paul Riley, in a high-profile case, I realize that the stakes are higher than ever.

Paul is a smooth-talking, devilishly handsome single dad that leaves me feeling dizzy.

I know I shouldn't want him; he is totally off limits, but I can't help it.

I can't stand working with him. his arrogance boils my blood, but I can't stop letting him kiss me.

But no one can find out about our secret.

The risk of being together is high, but the reward could be even higher.

Will we surrender to our desires and risk everything we've worked for, or will our rivalry keep us apart forever..