

*She's sick of love  
but the doctor is in*

# Love RX



**DEVON ATWOOD**

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Love Rx

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*For the good girls who push back*

# Contents

## *Acknowledgement*

**1. Laurel**

**2. Lachlan**

**3. Laurel**

**4. Laurel**

**5. Lachlan**

**6. Laurel**

**7. Lachlan**

**8. Laurel**

**9. Laurel**

**10. Lachlan**

**11. Laurel**

**12. Laurel**

**13. Lachlan**

**14. Laurel**

**15. Lachlan**

**16. Laurel**

**17. Lachlan**

**18. Laurel**

**19. Laurel**

**20. Lachlan**

**21. Laurel**

**22. Lachlan**

**23. Laurel**

**24. Lachlan**

**25. Thank You!**

*About the Author*

*Also by Devon Atwood*

# Acknowledgement

I've never done one of these before, but not only is *Love Rx* my seventh novel, it represents a lot of things for me. It represents my acceptance of authorship (wait... I might actually be a writer) and it represents all the love and sacrifice those closest to me have poured into my passion. And that's the first thing I want to address. Thank you to everyone—my husband, my children, my family and friends, my readers, my editor and street team. You all make me a better person, and I could never continue to write without your support. My husband, especially, created the emotional safe space for me to begin writing again. I never could have put words on paper without him, and I owe him so much. I love you, Austin!

I wrote this book in less than two weeks... initially. This story poured out of me, and I found so much joy and release in writing it. Lachlan and Laurel will always have a special place in my heart. I did a rewrite after realizing that Lachlan had a voice to share as well, and I'm glad I did. He and Laurel made this book so fun.

If you're new to my books, welcome! I'm thrilled to have written something that grabbed your interest. If you've been with me for a while, thank you so much. You mean everything to me. We often think of writing as a solitary exercise, but that isn't true. What begins as a part of a writer's soul becomes a shared experience for us all. I find a lot of beauty in that.

Thank you again to everyone who reads, supports, and loves this writer. When I was a senior in high school, I completed a graduation project on what



profession I wanted to do when I “grew up.”

I chose writer.

I’m not sure I’m “grown up,” but I am fairly certain I am a writer. That is thanks to everyone in my life, so I’m giving you all the credit. I look forward to all the stories to come!

## One

# Laurel



“**M**iss Brook? There’s been an accident with your daughter, Calla.”

My heart stopped working. Questions bubbled straight to the surface of my mind, threatening to spill over and hiss with panic.

“She’s fine,” the director rushed to add. “But she tripped and hit her head on the corner of the table. We think she might need stitches.”

I blew out a breath of relief. I should have been horrified by that, but a gash to the head? We could work with that. I stood from my desk in the elementary school resource room, grabbing my coat and keys as I talked. “Is she still bleeding, or did it slow down after you put pressure on it?”

“Uh, eh,” the director fumbled, obviously expecting more hysterics from my end. “It’s slowed down a bit, but if we take away the compress, it’s still a... a lot.” She sounded breathless. Probably squeamish at the sight of blood.

If she’d had Calla in her care for more than a week, then she’d have developed a stronger stomach. But we had only moved to Montpelier a couple weeks before, and Calla was a new liability for the daycare center. It

wouldn't be the last time my accident-prone child bled all over their floors. Calla was a danger magnet.

"I'll be right there," I promised. I shrugged my coat over my shoulders, put my keys between my teeth, and loaded my binders and planner into the beat-up, army green backpack I had owned since the beginning of time. It had been my camp bag, my school bag, my college bag, and Calla's diaper bag. The thing was immortal.

But Calla was not, and once again, I was going to have to do some financial gymnastics to pay for her latest scrape. As I zipped up the bag, I prayed it wasn't as bad as they thought. I prayed the super glue I kept in our fridge at home would be good enough. The thought of fighting with the hospital over self-pay, poring over an itemized bill, and arguing with them about gratuitous charges, made the small headache behind my eyes worse, and I swallowed hard against a dry throat. Was my throat dry or sore? God, that had better be too much diet cola and not enough water—if I was sick, I would scream.

The resource room teacher, Mrs. Lark, looked up from her session with a small group of second-graders. They were seated behind a partition wall at a low table with reading books spread out around them. She paused, mid-flashcard lift. "Something wrong, Miss Brook?"

Mrs. Lark was a funny bird. She had the build of an army sergeant, and short, nondescript brown hair cut with severe bangs. Her general demeanor had all the comfort of a shin to a trailer hitch. She was also kind of my boss.

"I'm so sorry," I said, fast-walking sideways out of the resource room. "Calla fell and hit her head, and I think I need to take her to the... actually," I stopped, frowning. "Is there an urgent care, here?"

"Just the ER," Mrs. Lark said, blinking hard from behind her thin glasses.

*Shit*, I groaned internally. “Okay. I might need to take her to the ER. Bear River Memorial, right?”

“It’s the only one,” she said, like I was stupid.

I resisted the urge to give her finger guns. “Right, small town. I’m so sorry to duck out without finding a sub.” I wasn’t sorry. It was half past two and I only had one group of students left for the day, and since I was just a paraprofessional support in the resource room, my job was small potatoes for a seasoned professional like Mrs. Lark. Whose first name I still did not know.

“It’s perfectly understandable,” Mrs. Lark said, and then slammed her hand on the page a sandy-haired boy had begun to rip out of the book. The boy yelped, and his classmates guffawed.

I shifted the strap of my backpack, feeling antsy. “Okay, well, I should be back tomorrow, but I’ll let you know if something happens.”

“If she fell,” Mrs. Lark said, her tone level and practical, “then she should be in the best of hands. The doctors in the emergency department are well-known to our community.” Then she got a funny kind of twinkle in her eye that I had not seen before. It softened her bird-like features, and her mouth twitched with some amusement. “Dr. Cade is a particular favorite.”

*Intriguing*, I thought as I edged closer to the door. *Does he juggle while he stitches up his patients? Maybe he gives out extra stickers.*

“Well, let’s hope we get Dr. Cade,” I said with a weak smile. This small town had already made me keenly aware that secrets did not stay tucked away for long, and opinions remained carved in people’s minds longer than gravestone engravings. If I made a bad impression on a doctor everyone liked, then I’d probably be toast, socially. Not that I had much time for a social life, anyway, but if I could avoid being a social pariah, that would be choice.

I rushed out of the room and down the hallway, hurrying past walls decorated with fluttering kids' artwork and inspirational, rainbow-littered posters. I knew this was going to happen. I had just started this job last Monday, and already, I had to make excuses for myself. Usually, people understood when I had to leave early or call-in sick—the poor, single mom.

I hated it, though. I hated that the only card I had to play anymore was the pity card.

*You're kind of broken.*

I shook my head, pushing the voice to the far edges of my brain. I replaced it with the mantra I had printed out and stuck in my binder and had plastered on the desktop of my computer at home. *I am worthy of a peaceful life.* My inner voice snorted at myself. It never worked, but I kept trying it, anyway. If I didn't, the other voice would get too loud, and then I'd be entering dangerous territory.

I made it to my shiny, red SUV, clicked the key fob and hopped inside. The comforting smell of leather and french fries wrapped around me. The car was the only nice thing I still owned—or used. It wasn't mine, technically, but I paid for it every month.

I peeled out of the parking lot and thumbed through my GPS map while I drove, making sure I knew where the hospital was. It's not like it would have been hard to find. The town was so small, I'd have to be legally blind to not find it. But I liked to be prepared. I liked the control of knowing what my next three steps were, so I listed them in my head.

1. ) Pick up Calla and make sure the staff know I'm not going to sue them for my accident-prone child doing what she does best.
2. ) *Do not* keep talking when you get there. Just shut up and get out.

3. ) Assess the wound to see if we can get away with super glue. If not, then head down Second Street to the ER.

Number two probably wasn't necessary, but if I didn't say it in my head, then I'd forget. There was a reason my mom called me "Babbling Brook."

I made it to the cute, tree-themed daycare in a few short minutes, and already, they were in the lobby waiting for me. The daycare was really sweet, with a huge indoor playground to combat the horribly cold Idaho weather, and open spaces where the kids could run and play freely. Apparently, the eating area was too close to the playground, though.

The director explained in breathless tones how Calla had tripped on her own feet, and although the corners of the tables were made of rounded rubber, she still managed to smack her head hard enough to give her forehead a decent gash.

Calla sat on a hard plastic chair in the foyer of the facility, a paper towel held against her head and a cheese stick in her free hand. She grinned at me with her little, pearly white teeth that had cheese stuck between the molars. "Hey, Mom!"

"Hey, kiddo," I said, crouching down in front of her.

She kept the towel pressed dutifully against her forehead, and her enormous brown eyes twinkled with laughter. "I did it again."

"You did it again," I agreed. I smoothed a hand over her dirty blond hair. At five, it had finally grown a bit thicker, with feathery-soft curls and wisping tendrils, but for a long time, she had been a hilariously bald toddler. "How are you doing? Does it hurt?"

She shook her head. "Nope." Her gaze shifted from me to the middle-aged, blond director who stood nervously behind me. "I got popsicles. And

cheese.”

I gave a solemn nod. “Popsicles are the best. No wonder you feel better.” Calla giggled.

Behind the director, a couple of the younger staff stood with folded arms, their expressions sympathetic. They all wore the same dark blue polos with the daycare’s logo embroidered on the chest and khaki pants over clean, white tennis shoes. I didn’t know people still wore khakis. It kind of looked cute on eighteen-year-old college kids, though.

One of them had a lip ring and vibrant pink hair that made me intensely jealous. Could I dye my hair pink? Yes. Could I keep my job at the same time? Probably not. “Calla, maybe you’ll get to meet Dr. Cade,” she grinned.

Her coworker, a tiny thing with blond hair in a tight ponytail, slapped her arm. “Stop!”

That was the second time in thirty minutes this doctor had been mentioned. I looked between them. “Someone at school said something similar. Does he have a glitter beard or something?”

They giggled, and the pink-haired employee covered her cheek. “Oh my God. No, he’s just really—” She caught her director’s glare. “He’s really good,” she finished, sucking on her lip ring.

Huh. Interesting.

“We’re really so sorry,” the director reiterated. I couldn’t remember her name, but she was super nice. They had done Calla’s hair when I had showed up in a rush with a barely clothed child in my arms, and she had helped me find financial aid for the childcare costs.

I lifted Calla into my arms and gave the director a reassuring shake of my head. “No, no. It’s fine, really. She does this all the time. When she was maybe ten months old, she started walking, and her first three steps ended

with her face smashed into the coffee table. And I'm a terrible mom, so I laughed at first, and then I noticed that she was bleeding. It hasn't really let up since then, and it's seriously so frequent, she should probably be wrapped in Styrofoam peanuts. Next time it happens, you might as well lead with, 'She smashed her damn brains in again.' It'll at least give us a laugh." *Shut up, Laurel.*

The director nodded, her expression appropriately concerned. "Oh, gosh."

"Anyway," I cleared my throat, trying to combat some of the soreness that was creeping in where my tonsils were located, "thank you for... calling me." *Of course they called you, dumbass. Your kid smacked her head on a table.* "I'm sure I'll see you tomorrow."

"Please let us know if we can help in any other way," the sweet director said, and her offer seemed genuine.

It wasn't the first time the occupants of Montpelier had offered to help me in the fifteen days I'd lived there—embarrassing as it was, they seemed to sniff out my weakness easily. The Mormon population, especially, seemed raring and ready to save me from myself. There were lots of single moms in the world, but I guess I fumbled my way through it so awkwardly, it was hard to look away. I thanked her, and then I carried Calla to the car. She bounced her head side-to-side, and some of the blood oozed from her head onto my floral dress.

I resisted the urge to curse and shifted her so I could carry her like a baby, cradled in my arms. I gave her a squeeze. "You okay, kiddo?"

She gave me the first indication that she might be worried. "Do I have to go to the doctor?"

"Eh," I made a face, and when we got to the car, I set her on her feet. She wore a purple tutu skirt with horizontally striped pajama pants underneath



and a sparkly dog t-shirt on top. I let my five-year-old dress herself because our mornings were hectic enough without meltdowns. Let her look like Junie B. Jones; I wasn't out to get the Most Fashionable Mom award.

I peeled away the towel to get a look at the cut. White peeked out from the enormous gash that wept bright, thick blood down her forehead. I kept a poker face, but internally, I shrieked. *Jesus, that's the worst one yet.* I gave her a careful kiss on her soft, chubby cheek. "Sweetheart, we get to go see the doctor."

She gave me a skeptical frown. "Do they have to use a shot?"

"Maybe," I said honestly.

Tears started in her eyes, and I gave her a squishy hug, making sure to keep the towel against her forehead. "I'll be right there with you. You can watch a show on my phone, okay?"

"YouTube?" she asked, muffled.

I rolled my eyes. Insufferable YouTube Kids and their incessant unboxing videos that made my child want toys I couldn't afford to buy her. "Okay," I sighed.

"Yay," she grinned into my shoulder.

I found the hospital easily enough, and there were plenty of parking spaces. The hospital was so small, it could probably fit inside the elementary school. The building had been made with faded, dark brick and the overhang to the ER looked just big enough for cars and ambulances. The early spring weather smarted through my thin jacket, and moisture hung in the air below the dark, burgeoning clouds overhead. It looked like it might snow. Again.

My headache started a steady drumbeat with my pulse, and my throat constricted every time I swallowed. *Don't you dare,* I warned my body. *Don't you dare get a cold. We don't have time for that.*

I carted Calla inside, struggling to hold her, my backpack, and her towel to keep the blood from getting on their floors. I grabbed a couple of masks from the front table where they kept a supply of sanitizer and blue paper masks for the people like me who always forgot about them, and then weaved through the close-set furniture of the cramped waiting room.

At the window, I gave them our information and told them what had happened, and I was given a clipboard with information to fill out. Dread plunked into my stomach. This was going to be painful, financially. With a sigh, I started to fill out the application as self-pay.

As I finished up Calla's medical history, one of the enormous doors opened with an automatic hum, and a nurse stepped out. She wore bubblegum pink scrubs, and her bright, red hair had been pulled back into a ponytail. From behind her mask, light blue eyes smiled at us. She looked like the Little Mermaid playing nurse. "Calla?"

She had asked out of courtesy, but we were the only ones in the waiting room. I stood up, pulling Calla up with me. Calla had my phone in her hands, and the grating voice of the children playing make-believe with their dolls drilled into my ears. It stabbed my headache like a butter knife through my eye socket. Was it warm in the hospital, or was I getting a fever?

I followed the nurse back and answered her questions, telling her the story the daycare had told me. She made sympathetic noises and said cute things to Calla, who generally ignored her.

We entered a typical ER room with a gigantic bed, lots of life-saving equipment we wouldn't need, and a couple of hard, plastic chairs set against the wall. I deposited Calla on the white bed, and the nurse adjusted it so she could sit against the back comfortably.

The nurse's black tennis shoes squeaked when she turned to take Calla's

vitals. “Does she have any allergies, Mom?”

“She got a rash from penicillin once,” I said. “But other than that, no.”

She nodded, typing a quick note into her computer, and then took Calla’s temperature by running the thermometer across her good temple. She took Calla’s blood pressure, chatting about the snow we were expecting.

I had no problem chatting. We were well into exchanging stories about what a pain it was to remove snow from our cars in the morning when she finished her preliminary vitals for Calla—who still ignored us in favor of a blind box reveal—and then took a look at Calla’s head.

She winced. “Well, that’s a good one.”

“Yeah, she hit it pretty hard,” I said. But my voice shook a little. I was used to Calla’s injuries, but that gash was something else. It would definitely leave a nasty scar.

Calla looked up from the phone. “Wesley said he could see my brains.”

“No one can see your brains,” I said dryly.

The nurse chortled and brought a thick paste over from a cup on the sink counter. “It’s not that bad, I promise. Dr. Cade will take good care of you. He’s absolutely the best.”

The sudden shift in her tone caught my attention. This was now the third time someone had taken on a dreamy quality to their voice when they mentioned Dr. Cade, and more importantly, her voice had a kind of confidence behind it that made me think they were besties... or they were banging. Looking at her curvy, tight figure, I was fairly certain which one it was.

“This is a little numbing gel that will make it feel much better, and then by the time Dr. Cade is ready to fix you up, it won’t hurt a bit.”

As if on cue, a knock sounded on the door, and the doctor breezed in, his

eyes on a file in his hands. Like everyone post-pandemic, he wore a mask, and his eyes lifted as he closed the door behind him. “Calla?” he asked, looking toward my little girl, so tiny in the middle of the wide, white bed.

Calla went rigid. She knew the drill. And she knew there would be needles in her future.

“Hi, Calla,” Dr. Cade said. His voice rolled over me like a full yard of silk, deep in timbre and intoxicatingly soothing. That voice oozed care and competence, like he was born to help people.

Calla gave a limp wave. “Hi.”

“What’s going on today?” he asked, tucking the file under his arm and acting for all the world like he was there to hang out with her.

She visibly relaxed. “I smashed my damn brains in.”

I made a strangled sound before I could help it. “Calla.” Eyes crinkled with amusement, Dr. Cade turned to me.

I went into cardiac arrest.

## Two

# Lachlan



I thought about sending my brother a text: *Remington, I hate you. Move somewhere else. Idaho is boring.*

But he would probably have responded with a middle finger emoji, and really, what good would it do? Remington had chosen to move to our childhood hometown after finding a remote job that supported his young family, and I couldn't exactly blame him. His wife, Michaela, was from this town, too, and her family lived close by.

Happy wife, happy life.

I didn't have to live in Idaho near my only sibling, but it felt wrong to live in New York near the father who had mostly abandoned us in our childhood, anyway. At least in this small town, I had some family. And a life, whatever that might be. At the moment, that life consisted of stitching the gash of a clumsy kid. Again. I'd had three of them that day already.

After reviewing her chart, which was blissfully small, I turned to give the mother a reassuring smile. I nearly dropped my chart in surprise.

Enormous, sapphire eyes stared at me above a disposable, blue mask, blinked twice, and then did a quick up-down thing as she made a mental opinion of me.

But I wasn't thinking about what she thought about me. I was too stunned by her. I'd never seen eyes like that. They were blue, yes, but a rich hue like the deep end of a cold lake in November. Around her pupils, yellow fringed the black centers like sunflowers. Her bright, sunshine dress with puffed sleeves and a sweetheart neckline over her generous bust only accentuated my first impression that she was a knock-out. I let my eyes quickly take in the rest of her: Hands clasped together—no wedding ring—and her feet in strappy sandals had lifted on their toes in a nervous gesture. If this really was the patient's mother, she was very young. And... single. Possibly.

*Pull it together, Cade, I reminded myself. You're supposed to be assuring her that you're halfway competent. "You must be Mom?"*

She jumped, as if remembering where she was, and held out her hand in a jerky motion. "Yes, Laurel."

She had a voice like summer nights—soft and warm and imbued with a relaxing calm. When she grasped my fingers, her grip was firm, but she released my hand quickly, as if my skin scalded her.

Calla, the young patient, shifted on the table and the paper crinkled underneath her. Right, patient. Doctor. Job.

I gave Laurel a reassuring smile from behind my mask that I hoped would soothe her nerves. No parent came into my ER calm and collected. "Well, Laurel, it sounds like Calla bashed her brains in."

She laughed, rubbing her forehead. Her light brown hair, highlighted naturally here and there from time spent in the sunshine, fell in wisps around

her temples from a disheveled bun. “Uh, yeah. She fell at the daycare and hit her head on the corner of a table.”

I pried my interest away from the patient’s mother and turned to wince dramatically for Calla’s benefit. “Ouch.”

Calla pulled a face, wrinkling her freckled nose. “It only hurt for a little. Then they gave me a popsicle, so it’s okay.”

It was impossible not to immediately like this kid. She had wide, almond eyes like her mother, although hers were caramel-colored, and I could see from her comically exaggerated expressions that she had quite a sense of humor already. I put up my hands in defeat. “A popsicle? You don’t need me. Those fix everything.”

She giggled. “Nooo,” she said slowly. “You have to fix me, silly. That’s what Mom said.”

“Oh, do I?” I asked looking back to the mom, Laurel.

She smiled from behind her mask, and even half her face couldn’t hide the radiance of that look.

*Shit, am I going to have to dismiss her from the room? I’m about to forget all twelve years of medical training,* I thought deprecatingly.

Calla gave me a serious look. “Yes, and you probably have to give me a shot.”

That sobered me. Nothing sucked more than a kid who freaked the hell out over needles. It was best not to lie to them, though. I had found, with children, that a straightforward approach that gave them the illusion of control was the least painful course for scary things like needles and scalpels. “Hm,” I hummed. “You might be right. What else?”

“And probably stitches,” she said with all the confidence of a very young person with too many ER trips under her belt.

Small chart, vast knowledge—that made me uncomfortable. I approached her, zeroing in on the paper towel she held to her forehead. “Have you had a lot of scrapes, Calla?”

“So many,” she said, her eyes rounding dramatically. “Mom says I’m assidert prone.”

I pressed my lips together to keep from laughing. A glance over my shoulder at Laurel was all the question she needed. “We just moved to town,” she filled in. “But Calla has had quite a few spills since... she could walk, really. I can have her records forwarded to you if you want,” she said quickly. I heard worry in her voice, like we might judge her for her daughter’s injuries. “I do try to keep her safe. She just... likes to run.”

I didn’t miss that she said “I” instead of “we” when talking about her child. I mentally added it to the *Interesting Things About This Woman* list, which included a ringless finger, young age, and stunning presence that, so far, had felt like being bathed in sunbeams.

“You’d be surprised how many kids come in here with the same injury,” I assured her. I went to the sink to wash my hands, stepping on the pedal below the outdated, cream cabinets, and let the motions of scrubbing my chapped hands take over.

“I feel like we’re always in the ER,” Laurel admitted. “She hit her head on a rubber, rounded table corner this time. Those are supposed to be safe.”

I chuckled, watching foamy soap slide off my wrists. “I don’t have kids of my own, but I stitch up enough of them—more than once—to know that nothing is really ‘safe’ when it comes to daredevil kids.”

“I’m not a daredevil,” Calla protested.

“Apologies,” I amended, reaching for a paper towel, and drying off my hands. “Adventurers.”



Calla giggled again, and as I turned, still drying my hands, I caught the mother staring at me with unabashed gratitude in her thick-lashed eyes.

Sweet Jesus, she was beautiful. I didn't need to see the rest of her face under her mask to know that much. If she was married, I would... what? Be disappointed?

*Don't be a dick, Cade,* I thought with a mental shake. *This isn't the local bar. We're not here to pick up random women.*

I pulled a pair of disposable gloves from my pocket and stretched them over my hands. Then, I bent over Calla, lifting the paper towel, and assessed the injury. The laceration looked to be about two centimeters wide and four long, and as I poked around the inflamed tissue, Calla winced. But I didn't feel any structural damage underneath, which was reassuring. "How long ago did you say this happened?" I asked Laurel over my shoulder.

"I think an hour?" she answered uncertainly. "I came as soon as they called."

I nodded, using my fingers to test the damaged tissue. There was certainly some moderate soft tissue damage, but contamination looked to be minimal, and a few stitches would close up the damaged dermal layers. I gave Calla a conspiratorial look. "You're a smart cookie, Calla. You are going to need stitches."

"I like cookies," she said, as if concurring with a business proposal.

I sat on the rolling stool, wheeled it over to the metal table Angela had set out for me, and then pulled it with me back to the nervous girl. She might have been injured before, but her past experience with the process was clearly making her ill at ease.

Afraid to look at Laurel in case she messed with my concentration again, I gestured her over to stand next to Calla for comfort.

Laurel came forward immediately, standing next to her daughter, taking her hand in her own, and then perching herself on the edge of the medical bed. “What kind of cookies should we get when we’re done here?” Laurel asked Calla, clearly in an attempt to distract the child.

“Chocolate chip?” Calla asked hopefully.

“Definitely chocolate chip,” Laurel confirmed. “Here, let’s get a show going while the doctor does his thing. You pick.”

I smiled to myself as I readied things on the table next to me. I could do this with my eyes closed. Although, with the wound being smack-dab in the middle of the girl’s head, I probably should keep them open. “Okay, Calla,” I said, unfolding a blue drape casually. “What I’m going to do is give you a teeny, tiny pinch. No big deal after you smacked it open in the first place, right?”

Calla looked up from the show on her phone, her eyes bouncing between me and her mother. “Okay.”

“Then the worst part will be over,” I assured her. “After that, you won’t even feel me stitching things up.”

“Okay,” she said again, this time with a tremble in her voice.

I glanced up at Laurel, and she met my gaze. Worry pinched her dark brown eyebrows, pulling them together over her luminous, blue eyes. But her expression softened some, as if the reassurance I was offering her through my silent look had imbued her with some calm. It might have been my imagination, but I could have sworn something passed between us. It was like the charged air before a lightning strike.

I swallowed hard, looking to the side. That had been a mistake. Something about her was electrifying. Compulsive. Like it was impossible not to drink her in and want more. If I screwed up her kid’s stitches, I

doubted she would look kindly on me if my excuse was, “But you’re mesmerizing.”

“Okay, Calla,” I said, running through the steps in my head. I didn’t really need to—not anymore than I needed to run through the steps of driving a car every morning. But it would keep my brain occupied. “I’m going to have you scoot around and lie your head right here next to my leg.” I pressed a pedal at the base of the bed, lowering it.

Calla scrambled around and Laurel helped her. Both of them seemed to know the drill.

“I’m going to make you a blue ghost,” I joked, fanning out the blue drape for her to see. “This goes right on your face.”

“Spooky,” Calla grinned. She laid her head down on the scratchy paper, and I made sure to leave at least one of her eyes uncovered so Laurel could hold the phone for her to see.

With the drape over Calla’s forehead, I cleaned the wound and let the methodical practice of my experience take over. Calla flinched visibly when I injected the local anesthetic, and her little hands balled into fists, but Laurel was there, rubbing her arm and assuring her that I was almost done.

Laurel had scooted forward, and her knee pressed against my thigh as she consoled Calla.

*Ignore that, I told myself firmly. Not a problem. This happens all the time. At least she’s not trying to cop a feel, like Mrs. Leffler.* Not that I would have been offended if she had. Fucking hell, maybe I just needed to get laid. How long had it been?

As I worked on autopilot, threading Vicryl through the wounded tissue and tying precise, tidy knots, I allowed my mind to wonder at that question. Had it been a month? Two? I’d broken my own rule and slept with two

nurses last year. Regretted that. Then there'd been the tennis player from Salt Lake City.

Three months, then. Shit, no wonder I was salivating over Miss Daffodil Reincarnate. She even smelled like flowers, which was so nauseatingly sweet, I almost couldn't believe she was a real person.

I glanced down at Calla, noting that her interest was on the phone and her nerves had calmed down considerably. "What are you watching, Calla?" I asked.

"YouTube," she said absently, fully engrossed in some elaborate toy unboxing someone's parents had contrived for them.

"Ah," I smiled as I flicked my wrist and tied the Vicryl in a precise knot. "My nephews love YouTube." I braved a look at Laurel. "Their mom, not so much." She gave me a silent look of agreement.

I concentrated on the last few knots, but then spared Laurel another glance. "You okay, Mom? Most mamas get squeamish during this part."

I saw her shrug in my peripheral. "I'm good. Like she said, Calla's 'assidert prone,' so we've done this enough times that I stopped freaking out over it."

"Poor thing," I said honestly. A parent getting that call once was nerve-racking, but to see your kid stitched several times? Rough.

"She's tough," Laurel said confidently.

I spared her an amused glance. "I meant you," I said softly.

She blinked, staring at me again. She looked surprised that I had cared. Like it was possible not to care about her. She was vulnerability personified.

"It's not easy to see your child hurt," I added.

She cleared her throat and winced, swallowing thickly. I paused, letting my hands hover a safe distance away from Calla's head. I knew that motion.

I'd seen it hundreds of times in patients with sore throats.

Laurel avoided my gaze, looking down at the phone in her hand, which she held for Calla. "It did suck. If she wasn't so resilient, it would have been harder. We used to call her 'the tank' when she was a baby."

Surprised, I chuckled. "What a flattering name for a little girl."

She gave an embarrassed laugh. "Um, yeah. I might not be the most ooey-goopy maternal force on the planet."

I laughed outright at that. "I didn't realize motherhood was a dessert."

She looked up again, and this time I saw some kind of internal war being waged inside her head. Her eyes narrowed, then one eye scrunched, and she blurted out, "Well, I cannoli do so much."

I stared, blinked once, and then snorted into my mask. "Oh, my God, that was so bad."

"I'm so sorry," she pinched the bridge of her nose, like she was fed up with herself. "I'm so sorry. I'm an absolute dork, but you set it up. I couldn't ignore it."

"I'm charging you extra for assaulting me with that."

She groaned, laughing. "Yeah, put it on my tab."

I blew out a breath, trying to return my thoughts back to the last stitch in Calla's head. "I'm just warning you, my prices are outrageous."

"Oh, I can imagine," she said, humor still tinting her warm voice. Or, was that a raspy edge? I had to remember to ask her about it when I was finished with Calla. "I was told by several people, before we even got here, that you're the best."

I should probably have pretended to be surprised by that, but the truth was, there was a certain popularity that came with being the only doctor with

a workout routine. I snipped the last strand of Vicryl and pressed my lips together against another smile. “Did they? And what did you think?”

“I thought that maybe you performed extra services for them or something,” she said, her tone teasing.

My eyes flew to hers. She smirked behind her mask, eyes mischievous. *I take it back. She isn't innocent at all. Damn.*

“Am I done?” Calla asked, craning her neck to look up at me.

Good timing, kid. You saved me from asking your mother an incredibly unprofessional question. “Let me bandage your fancy stitches up, and you’ll be good to go,” I said.

Laurel stood away from the table, rubbing her temples and clearing her throat again. She was probably coming down with a virus. “Are you okay, over there?” I asked casually. I felt anything but casual, though. I wanted to plop her on my exam table and make sure she was alright. She struck me as the kind of person who would ignore her own health in favor of everyone else’s. And even the idea of that triggered something protective inside of me.

“Oh, yeah,” she rasped. “You know how the first two weeks of a job are. Exhausting.”

I nodded, laying an adhesive strip against Calla’s gauze bandage. “Sure, I get that. It just sounds like you’re sick.”

“Nah,” she waved a hand. But then she rested it at the base of her throat, like she longed to massage it.

Uh huh. “Don’t hesitate to come in if you think you need anything,” I offered, trying to make it sound nonchalant. What I really wanted to do was make sure she didn’t walk out of my exam room without getting treated herself.

“Thanks,” she said, and sounded sincere.

Calla sat up and poked her bandage with interest. “It doesn’t hurt anymore!”

“It might hurt a little,” I warned her, cleaning up after the procedure and removing my gloves. “Your mom knows what medicine to give you to help with that, so make sure you take it when she asks, okay?”

“Okay,” Calla said brightly.

Angela came back into the room with discharge papers cradled in her arm. She usually gave my patients their discharge and after care instructions, but I found myself reluctant to leave the pair. “Any questions, Mrs. Brook?” I asked Laurel.

She seemed tired, suddenly, like the worry for her daughter had singlehandedly kept her on her feet, and now that it was gone, she wanted to lie down and dissolve into a liquid state. “I don’t think so,” she said, her voice hoarser.

*Definitely sick*, I thought grimly. That wasn’t going to make for a fun weekend for either of them. “Okay, well, like I said, I’m here through Saturday if you have any questions.”

Laurel nodded. I turned to leave them, my misgivings gnawing away at my conscience. I had barely met the two of them, but the desire to turn back around and ensure they were safe and healthy tugged at my core like an invisible string.

But as soon as my hand hit the door latch, Clarice was there with another chart, and another problem, another patient, stole my attention from my misplaced concerns. It was a small town, but it was likely I wouldn’t see them again. All in all, that was probably for the best.

## Three

# Laurel



I managed to get us home before the fever roared to life, burning every molecule in my body with sweat-inducing heat. I got Calla set up on the couch with more screen time—I could beat myself up over that later—and chugged a few swallows of blue cold medicine. While Calla happily munched on the French fries I had grabbed from the drive-through on the way home, I lay on the other end of the couch, wrapped myself in a blanket, and prayed to God the shivering would stop.

*At the very least, I thought as I fought sleep, please make me stop thinking about the hot doctor.*

I mean, seriously, if you mated a cinnamon roll with an action figure, it would give birth to that guy. Accomplished and smart? Clearly. Kind but sexy? Abundantly.

Hotter than fucking Mercury? Devastatingly. I hadn't even seen his whole face, but just his caramel eyes, bulging muscles, and deft fingers had had me thinking all kinds of inappropriate things.



Certainly not things a *mother* should have been considering with her child lying on a hospital bed.

I couldn't remember what I needed to do in order to atone for the filthy thoughts that had played like a movie through my head in that exam room, but there probably weren't enough Hail Marys in the Vatican for that kind of immaturity.

And even worse, his hotness had only been exacerbated by his oozy, dessert-quality sweetness. Even after my bad cannoli pun. No, actually—Hell—he'd laughed at it. He might not have even hated it.

*That's your fever talking,* my inner voice chided.

Whether I was hot and bothered from the fever or from spending an hour around Dr. Cade, I at least understood why everyone had gone dreamy-eyed when they'd mentioned him to me. Dr. Cade was definitely memorable, but I had to let reason take over and admit that it would be better if we never saw him again. Honestly? My bank account couldn't afford it and my common sense wouldn't survive it.

\* \* \*

Whatever the virus was, it kicked me in the teeth. Or, rather, the throat, head, and every muscle in my body. I woke up on Friday morning barely able to type in a sub request in the database. I didn't know if they found one. I collapsed back into fitful dreams where everyone was five times larger than me and anything I touched tumbled from my grasp because my fingers wouldn't work right.

Calla woke a little after dawn. We had both fallen asleep on the couch, and she said in a sad, sleepy voice that her cut was hurting.

I sat up stiffly, craning my neck to peer across the tiny kitchen of our apartment toward the door to the cardboard box-sized bathroom. It was so far.

With a groan that barely made any sound at all through my swollen throat, I pushed myself off the couch and staggered to the bathroom. I found the last little dollop of purple children's acetaminophen, pulled it into a syringe at the exact amount for her weight, and brought it to Calla. She swallowed it, and her big, brown eyes watched me uncertainly. "Are you sick, Mom?"

I nodded, not wanting to speak. But I brushed a hand down the side of her face and gave her a weak grin, pointing to the TV. "Movie day," I rasped.

"Yay!" she jumped up enthusiastically. "Can I have juice and donuts for breakfast?"

I sighed, falling back onto the couch heavily. "Sure."

Mom of the Year.

Thankfully, our little apartment had everything within Calla's reach. Our living room had been built in a long, rectangular shape, and butted right up against the entryway door. On the other side, it led directly to the small but newly refurbished kitchen, and then to the right, two bedrooms and a bathroom finished off the modest, six-hundred-square-foot apartment. I liked it because I could see the kitchen, dining table, bathroom, and Calla's room from the couch. Even in a sleepy haze, I could keep an eye on her, and she spent the day happily playing with her toys, watching cartoons, and snuggling with me.

But I didn't get better. I chugged cold medicine in unhealthy amounts. I

drank tea. I didn't eat food because I couldn't force it down my swollen throat, but I tried to keep my fever in check. It wasn't working.

Worriedly, I remembered when I had gotten strep throat once as a kid, and I realized the symptoms were similar. But I couldn't have strep. That required a doctor's visit, and we would be hard-pressed enough to pay for Calla's stitches without me trying to find care on a weekend. Sure, Doctor Sexy Gaze had offered to help us if we needed, but as he had joked, his prices weren't cheap.

I couldn't afford a hospital visit. So, I suffered through Saturday, and eventually, I gave up drinking liquids, too. I figured if I gave my throat a few days to rest, it might get better.

By Sunday, I was an absolute wreck. My throat had closed up so badly, I could barely swallow. Calla was getting bored with the two-day movie marathon she had already endured, and she complained that her stitches were hurting again.

I knew, logically, they were probably starting to itch as they healed, but my baby girl was upset, and I couldn't have that. Plus, we were out of cold medicine, and I still clung to my delusions that it was just a bad virus, so, if I got some stronger stuff, maybe I would kick it before the next morning.

My ears had started hurting by then. I could barely think straight with the way my head pounded. I felt like someone had shoved acid-soaked cotton through my throat, nose, and ears. Despite that, I needed to get myself to the store. But the idea of getting Calla in and out of a carseat and pulling us both through the grocery store sounded like pure hell.

I sighed. There was nothing for it. I pulled out my phone and sent my mom a message.

*Laurel: Hey mom, can you take Calla for an hour?*

My mom replied immediately.

*Mom: Of course I can. Anything wrong?*

*Anything I can blame you for?* I mimicked in my head. My mother lived only five minutes from us, and that was one of two reasons I had moved to the small Idaho town. But asking my mother for help was like taking out an emotional payday loan. The interest was going to rake me over the coals.

*Laurel: I just have a cold and need to run to the store.*

*Mom: I'll be there in five. I'll bring some food.*

I sighed again. I had invited the vampire into my home, and I would just have to be brave and take the exsanguination like a woman.

She arrived in a flurry of expensive perfume and self-inflated importance, immediately looking around my apartment with her judicious, green eyes. She had a fancy set of tupperware clutched between her orange-manicured fingers, and her perfectly flippy, balayage hair drifted around her thin head like a middle-aged cloud of tidy perfection. “Laurel,” she said, her face wrinkled with disappointment. “What is going on here? Why has your house exploded like this?”

I was sitting on the couch, and I bent over as I struggled to lace up my gray sneakers. “Uh... I’m sick?”

She gave me a look that said, “So what?”

I sighed. “Sorry it’s a mess,” I scratched out. Talking felt like rubbing handfuls of thumbtacks against my vocal cords.

Calla jumped out from behind the wall, and my mom started, screaming. Calla cackled, “Got you, Grandma!”

My mom clutched her soft neck, “Goodness.”

I blew out a laugh, and my shaky fingers tied my shoestrings in a loose knot. “Be good, Calla,” I whisper-yelled.

Calla did a pirouette in her pajama pants and old dance costume, “Okay!”

“I brought food,” my mom said, giving me another hard look. “I assume there hasn’t been anything real in this house in weeks.”

I glared. “Thanks.”

“Well, looking at the state of things, it’s a good thing you called me,” she said.

*I’ll nominate you for sainthood*, I thought caustically. I stood with creaking joints and winced as my head pulsed with a lightning bolt of pain. My mom swept into the kitchen, opening the fridge to deposit her tupperware and then looking around with a faintly disgusted nose wrinkle.

I wrapped myself in a scarf and wished I could afford a better coat. The shivers were debilitating. “I’ll be back soon,” I rasped wearily.

“Go to a doctor,” she said, her voice full of disapproval and her nails clicking as she began shuffling contents on my counters. “I don’t know why you always insist on letting things fall apart long before you consider fixing them.”

Ouch. She was talking about Jason, of course. Because it was definitely my fault that he had found himself a more interesting woman in Norway. I nodded wearily. Whatever.

My drive to the grocery store was torturous. Whatever was going on with my ears made me feel off-kilter, and dimly, I wondered if I should be driving at all. Probably not. I pulled into a parking spot with my fender over the line and tires halfway into the adjacent spot with all the confidence of a drunk driver about to perform maneuvers. As I stumbled out of the car, I gave the lines an accusatory glance.

I remembered my mask, at least. Most people didn’t use them anymore where we lived, but I would hate for anyone else to catch my... *cold*.

I felt myself tilt sideways as I forced my feverish body through the blustery wind and to the sliding glass doors. Warmth enveloped me as I entered the store, but all it did was make me feel like I had been shoved into a kiln. I unwrapped my scarf, unzipped my coat, and tore it off, throwing it all in a cart. I didn't need one, but I was pretty sure I'd fall over if I didn't lean on something.

I scanned the enormous aisles with blurry eyes. When did they make grocery stores so huge? I didn't want to run a 5K, I just wanted cold medicine and acetaminophen. With sore muscles, I forced myself forward, realizing that the pharmacy was all the way on the far left of the store.

Fan-fucking-tastic. My phone made a fart sound. There was only one human I had given a fart ringtone to, and I pulled it out of the pocket of my sweatpants with hollow dread.

*Jason: Your mom says there's a bandage on Calla's head. What happened? I would really appreciate advance notice of injuries to our daughter.*

I mimicked his stick-up-the-ass speech by pulling a face and muttering English-accented nonsense. *Also, screw you, Mom.* She was always talking to my ex-husband like she was the last remaining life link in our marriage that had long ago died and moldered in a damp grave. My fingers typed back heavily, shaking so badly that my typos were rampant.

*Laurel: I gt sicf. Shes fin tho. She fell at dramatic*

*Laurel: \*daycare*

*Jason: Major injuries require notice from the custodial parent. We talked about this. If you continue to ignore the terms of our decree, I'll have to seek legal counsel.*

My headache was suddenly so bad, I could barely breathe. I knew he said

things like that to strike fear into my heart. I knew he did it because *he* knew I had no money to fight him in court. He knew my greatest fear was that a judge would decide he was a better parent for Calla than I was, that the money he made working for a slick computer tech company in Norway was more important than my paltry efforts at single motherhood. He did it because he had tricked me into the world's worst DIY divorce when we were twenty-two years old, and he was well aware of what sent me spiraling into panic.

I had learned that angry words did nothing to combat Jason's particular brand of assholery. Silence was a better tool.

I clicked the phone screen to black and shoved it back in my pocket.

Cold medicine.

Maybe it was the slithering, insidious feeling that entered my body every time I had to interact with my ex-husband, or maybe my body had finally had enough of my feigned ignorance about the severity of the illness, but black suddenly flashed over my eyes. I stumbled, my shoulder slamming into a shelf of Noodle-Os.

A couple of people gasped, and I felt strong hands on my arms. "Mrs. Brook?" asked a low voice.

*Whoa. Why does that sound familiar?* I froze, my eyes on the cans I had knocked to the ground. Hardly believing it was possible, I raised my swirling vision to the man who had reached out to steady me. I knew those eyes. Amber eyes that looked me over with sharp focus. *No way*, I thought with loopy bewilderment.

"Mrs. Brook?" Dr. Cade asked.

*Holy sheep*, I thought thickly. And then, somehow, the next words came out of my mouth for all to hear. "It's the hot doctor."

## Four

# Laurel



**H**umor crossed his beautiful features. Oh, God, his whole face, unmasked, was breathtaking. He had the most kissable lips I'd ever seen—light and dusky and pressing together as his expression shifted back to worry. He was clean-shaven. All-American. Pure perfection. He looked like fucking Captain America.

He frowned at me with assessing eyes. “Mrs. Brook? Are you alright?”

Maybe if I swooned a little more, he would pull me to his body. Wait, actually I was swooning. I felt my body lean like I was on a Tilt-a-Whirl. “I have a cold,” I barely managed to choke out.

He tilted his head, regarding me thoughtfully. “A cold?”

“Mhm.”

Dr. Cade had one hand grasping my upper arm firmly, and the other hand slid down to my wrist. I felt his fingers press the sensitive skin just below the heel of my palm. “I’m on-call for the hospital. I can take you there,” he said, as if testing the waters for my reaction.



“No,” I huffed, my breath hot and trapped under the mask. I started to extricate myself from his grasp. As much as I *intensely* liked the idea of him taking me pretty much anywhere, that wasn’t going to happen. I had maybe two-hundred dollars left in my savings account after paying for Calla’s stitches, and... what... eighty in my checking? Another hospital bill was not doable right now.

His grip didn’t budge. “You almost took out a row of—” he looked around me at the shelf, “—Noodle—Os.” He watched me closely, as if inspecting every blink and breath.

“It’s a cold.”

“It’s not a cold,” he said with assertive confidence.

I shook my arm, trying to loosen his hold on it. His hands were freezing. “Fine, I’ve been drinking. Let me go.”

“You have a fever, and I can see that your lymph nodes are swollen without touching you,” he said, undeterred. “You need medical attention, Mrs. Brook.”

“Miss,” I said, finally fed up with feeling like a forty-year-old matron. I mean, I was a twenty-four-year-old matron, and the epitome of a frumpy mom in my old college T-shirt, baggy sweats, and ratted brown hair in a messy bun, but I *was* single, for God’s sake.

Amusement twitched his lips. “Apologies. *Miss Brook.*”

How was I supposed to tell this perfect god of a man that I couldn’t go to the ER to take a strep swab because I was a loser with no money and no prospects? *Maybe don’t tell him all of that*, my rational voice reasoned. I swiped at his hand, and even to me, it looked silly. He was wearing a tight, white T-shirt made from some kind of athletic, breathable material, and it

accentuated how entirely useless it was to enter any kind of physical altercation with this man. He was all ripples and bulges.

Dr. Cade dragged the corner of his mouth through his teeth, looking away as he thought.

*Jeeeeezus*, I thought with an internal groan. *Does he do those things on purpose? Or does sexuality just come naturally to him?*

Finally, he looked at me again. “The health clinic is a block away. I have a key.” I blinked at him stupidly. “And I can give you a quick... once-over,” he said slowly, as if hoping I would catch on to something.

*Is he coming onto me right now?* I thought with hazy panic. *What is this? Like, a code for a hook-up spot? No, that doesn't make any sense. You look like an undead extra from The Walking Dead.*

Seeing my confusion, he sighed heavily. He leaned forward, surrounding me with the smell of his laundry detergent and a light, intoxicating cologne. He pulled me close to him, so his lips were just a whisper from my cheekbone. “I can give you free medical care. If you don't tell anyone.”

Free healthcare? Sexier words had never been spoken. I pulled back, looking at him with a mix of hope and puzzlement swirling in my chest. And then shame crashed down on it because he obviously saw through me, and there it was again.

The pity card.

*You're kind of broken.*

I gasped, pulling away from him completely, but he only let me go so far, stopping me from slamming into the cans again. “I, ah... I don't need—” my words literally got stuck in my throat. The world was starting to look prickly, like old-school TVs that fuzzed up when the movie ended. My breath fanned

over my face with gusts of lava-hot mugginess that made me want to gag. I wrenched off the mask, dragging in fresh air.

Dr. Cade looked genuinely alarmed. And then his features set into hard granite. “Okay, great, glad you agreed,” he said with sudden, louder volume. “Consent is important. I’ll drive.”

He reached into the cart, grabbed my coat and scarf, and started steering me toward the exit.

I stumbled along as jackhammers attacked my brain from the inside. I wanted to argue, but my throat was so closed up, it didn’t seem possible. And my limbs had turned to Noodle-Os, so I wobbled along with him, not sure what was happening with my life.

The cold smacked me in the face, and I almost curled in on myself like a frightened pill bug, but Dr. Cade draped my flimsy, polyester coat over my shoulders and hugged me close to his side. He had parked his car all the way in the back of the parking lot. Such a fit-dude thing to do.

His arm supported me so well, I barely noticed the wheezing thing my lungs were doing by the time we made it to his sporty-looking SUV. All white and clearly brand new, it reminded me of a Jeep. But like... a rich-guy Jeep. *I’ll bet it smells like leather and lemon*, I thought drowsily.

Wait. Was I really about to let this stranger pack me into his swanky, white wagon without putting up a fight?

“No one wants to kidnap a random, feverish chick,” he said in my ear, as if reading my thoughts. “Just let me help you.” He pushed a key fob and the car chirped to life. If he promised to keep holding me, I’d let him do anything.

We stopped at the passenger side door, and he leaned me into him, adjusting his hold so he could reach the door handle. I let my forehead press

against his solid chest, and I was pretty sure a little sound of contentment slipped out of my throat.

He angled his head down, looking at me. With quiet amusement in his voice, he murmured, “Oh boy.”

Then he opened the door and bundled me into the seat, which was unnecessarily high off the ground. What did he need this crazy thing for? Was he a part-time cartographer?

Another coat had been wrapped around me at some point—his coat, I assumed, and I inhaled deeply. I was wrong. The car smelled like leather and *him*.

Dr. Cade walked briskly around the front of the SUV, opened his door, and slid into his seat, pushing the starter button, then zipping his seatbelt over his body. He looked over at me. I stared at him with round, slightly terrified eyes.

What was I doing right now? Maybe the last of the cold medicine I had downed this morning was too much. Maybe it was making me wacky. Or maybe I was just dumb. We single women know better than to just traipse off with men we don’t know. At least, not without getting his full name, phone number, and address and texting them to someone so they’d know where to find my body.

But he was hot. My fevered brain seemed to think that was probably good enough.

He reached over me, and the stretch and pull of his honed muscles actually made me gasp a little. He misinterpreted it. “It’s okay, I’m just helping you with your seatbelt.” He pulled it down around me and clicked it into place.

I resisted the urge to run my fingers over the smooth contours of those

arms, dusted lightly with blond hair and ending with long, capable fingers I imagined were adept at driving women crazy.

Dr. Cade put the car into first, and using the heel of his palm, smoothly turned the wheel to carry us out of the parking lot. I watched with some awe as he effortlessly shifted the manual car, making those perfect muscles in his forearms contract. He glanced down at me. “When did your symptoms start?” I pointed to my forehead.

“The day you brought Calla in?” I nodded. “What has your temperature been?”

I shrugged.

He rolled his eyes. “Okay, have you had a fever the whole time, do you think?”

I nodded. I tried my voice, and managed to get out, “Cold medicine.”

“Alright, so you took cold medicine. What kind? Dextromethorphan? Phenylephrine?” I looked at him like he’d spoken Klingon. He sighed. “Blue liquid? Orange liquid? Little white pills?”

“Yes,” I rasped.

“All three? Not at the same time, though,” he said with a hint of consternation. I shrugged. “God help me,” he muttered. “When? Today?”

“Orange today,” I gargled.

“Your throat hurts, I assume. How about your stomach? Nausea? Vomiting? Diarrhea?”

I grimaced, shaking my head.

He seemed to be cataloging my answers, and I could just imagine his brain skimming imaginary fingers over files to find the one that fit my symptoms. “Blood in your urine?”

I shook my head again.

“Are you urinating normally? Are you getting liquids down?”

The last liquid I had tried had been a sip of orange juice Saturday morning. I made a so-so motion. He caught my hand, and with a quick glance away from the red light he'd stopped at, he looked at my fingers. His hands were cool and dry, and I was starting to think that maybe getting sick wasn't so bad.

“You're dehydrated, so no.” He placed my hand gently on my lap, but there was disapproval all over the glance he flicked to me. “You can't just ignore bacterial infections and hope they go away.”

I pressed my lips together. Easy for him to say. He probably had a 401(k) and stock market... stuff. I didn't even know what wealthy people did with their money, but I knew most of them had stocks. And health insurance.

We arrived at the health clinic, a small, brick building with practical architecture and darkened glass windows. He swerved around to the back, and after killing the engine, he came around to help me out of the car. Supporting me on one side, he pulled a ring of keys from his black jogger pants, and we went up the short flight of concrete steps before he unlocked the white door and let me in.

Inside the clinic, it was cold and dark, and we had entered the area of the building where there were offices lining the short hallway. He went into the first office on the right, flicked on the light, and motioned for me to go inside. It was his office, I realized. On the wall, his degrees hung in mahogany frames, their little foil seals glimmering in the bright, fluorescent lighting. They all listed his name as “Lachlan H. Cade.”

He unceremoniously dumped his coat on the dark-stained desk piled high with neatly stacked files and packets of paper. There was a swivel chair

behind his desk, and then two practical, padded chairs along the wall of the doorway. An enormous filing cabinet took up the whole right wall.

“Sit,” Lachlan said. His tone was surprisingly hard and a bit commanding. Like he wasn’t used to being disobeyed, and at odds with the charming persona he had shown to my daughter.

I sat in one of the padded chairs, resting my hands on the hard, time-worn wooden arms with trepidation. I was alone with a total stranger, and he had more or less just barked at me. I considered the part of me that was screaming for escape.

The other part of me wanted him to order me around a little more.

He left me in the office, and I slumped back, letting my head loll against the wall. I closed my eyes, and with sudden, shocking force, darkness closed around me like a heavy door slamming shut. I was so tired. Maybe taking a nap wouldn’t be the worst idea.

Cool hands touched my neck, pressing against the pulse that still hammered fast. “Laurel,” Dr. Cade said. “Open your eyes.”

I tried, but they were so heavy. “M’okay,” I mumbled.

I heard the velcro of a pressure cuff, and then it was around my arm. The rapid clenching of the bulb sounded, then tightening until I thought for sure I was going to lose my left arm, and then the hiss of its release sounded through the quiet room. The cold surface of a stethoscope bell pressed against the inside curve of my elbow.

Lachlan tore off the pressure cuff, and I felt something hard and cold pass over my forehead. A beep, and then he muttered, “Shit.” Then his arms were around me, under my legs and behind my back as he lifted me into his arms. “Laurel, open your eyes.”

He remembers my name.

I struggled to peel my eyelids back and succeeded momentarily. The world was a blur, and I was pretty sure he was carrying me through the darkened hallway.

“Hey, I’m going to help you, but you’re maybe one second away from me calling an ambulance. So, help us both out and stay awake.”

Alarm jolted through me, and I took a deep breath, forcing my eyes open. “There you go,” he encouraged, his voice low.

He couldn’t do anything without reminding me of sex. How did he get through his day without being pawed by raving, hormonal women? Apparently, I was on the brink of death here, and all I could think about was him saying those words with his fingers down my pants, encouraging me, urging me onward...

*Sweet baby Jesus*, I thought. Was horniness a side-effect of strep throat?

Paper crinkled under me as he set me down on an exam table. The lights were switched on, and I took in the boring, small exam room with framed pictures of watercolor flowers and encouraging phrases like, “Today is a gift. Give yourself to it freely,” and other nonsense that made about as much sense as the mantra I repeated uselessly to myself every day.

Dr. Cade was busy. He rifled through drawers and cabinets, pulling out things that crinkled in plastic packages, and he piled them on a rolling, silver tray like he’d used at the hospital.

“Laurel, you still with me?”

“Mhm.”

“Are you allergic to anything?”

“Penicillin,” I said drowsily.

He gave me a dubious look. “You’re *allergic* to it?”

“I got a rash when I was like two,” I said with difficulty.



“And you’ve never had it since?”

I gave him a shrug. I really had no idea.

“You probably had a reaction,” he said. “But I’ll use something else just in case.”

He was pulling a lot of stuff out of those cabinets. The dollar sounds went *cha-ching* in my head. Dr. Cade had said he would help for free, but the supplies were going to cost more than my next paycheck.

“Any chance you could be pregnant?” he asked.

I guffawed.

“That’s not a yes or no,” he said tersely. Apparently, he was in a hurry.

“No,” I said firmly.

He pulled on a pair of gloves and wasted no time, not even stopping to explain what he was doing. He swabbed the inside of my elbow with alcohol, and then ripped open a bunch of packages. I saw the saline bag on the table and freaked out. I didn’t hate needles, necessarily, but I’d had an IV when Calla was born, and I’d had bruises for weeks from their failed attempts to find my veins.

I sat up, suddenly, but Lachlan put a hand on my stomach and pushed me back down, not even looking up from what he was doing. “You move, and I’ll have to redo it,” he said with a warning glance. I stilled.

He braced my arm against the table and leaned over me, angling the long, intimidating needle toward my blue veins. I screwed my eyes shut, swallowing against the sharp pain in my throat. There was a stabbing pinch, and then Lachlan moved with practiced grace, removing the needle, taping down the IV against my arm, and fiddling with the blue clamps on the line.

I opened my eyes with a dubious squint. *Actually, that wasn’t too bad*, I admitted to myself.

Dr. Cade pulled an IV stand from behind the bed and kicked it over like he didn't have time for any of this bullshit, then hung the IV bag. Cold trickled into my arm as he punctured a tiny vial with a syringe. "You still here, Laurel?"

"Yes," I squeaked.

"Good. If you die in here, I'm going to lose my license."

I did the equivalent of a snort that didn't require the use of my throat. I was fairly certain neither he nor I were worried about me dying.

"I'm giving you some antibiotics first, and then I'll take a minute to get your vitals. How's the pain in your throat?"

*Like I swallowed the devil's cum.* I made a grimacing face and shrugged one shoulder.

"I thought so. I'll get you some Novocain to help you eat and drink later." Dr. Cade was focused on his work, his eyes on his hands as he injected antibiotics into my IV port. Then, he scooped up all the empty packages and stepped on the trashcan lever to dump everything into the empty receptacle. He peeled off his gloves with it, and then washed his hands.

I leaned my head against the plastic, paper-covered pillow and let my eyes drift closed again as cold trickled into my arm. I realized, for the first time in a really long time, I felt safe. With Lachlan busy and intent on fixing my traitorous body, I felt... protected. It was new and warm, and slightly ambrosial. Like, maybe, I was drunk.

I stiffened, looking at the IV in my arm.

Lachlan had turned on the computer monitor just across from the door, and he looked up from clicking. "What's wrong?"

"What's—" I winced. My throat was impossibly dry and sore. I pointed to the IV and gave him a questioning look.

“It’s just clindamycin, ibuprofen, and saline,” he said. “Why?”

I shook my head, closing my eyes.

“Why?” he asked again, his voice more insistent. He came to stand beside the exam table, and this time, he had a stethoscope around his neck and folded his toned arms. “Tell me.”

“Dizzy,” I rasped.

“Still?”

I nodded. He gave me that doctor look again. The one where his eyes were taking in every microparticle of my being, and if I hadn’t already been flushed with fever, I would have burst into flames of embarrassment. He was seriously so gorgeous. And smart. Why he was helping me, I couldn’t guess. I didn’t want to name what I *wished* his reasons were.

Lachlan stepped forward, leaning against the exam table, and felt under my chin for my swollen lymph nodes. He massaged around the back of my head, and I resisted the urge to close my eyes in gratification. It was stupid. So, so stupid. But I hadn’t been touched by anyone in years. The pressure, his closeness—it felt amazing.

He reached over and unhooked the otoscope from its place on the wall, and after fitting a disposable cover over the cone, he gently turned my head to peer into my ears. First my left, then my right. After making a low sound, like he was thinking, he deposited the cover in the trash at his feet, and then replaced it.

He rotated slightly, grabbing a tongue depressor from a jar on the counter, and still holding the light, he hooked me with his gaze. His chin lifted slightly, indicating something in my direction. “Open your mouth.”

## Five

# Lachlan



**A**ny desire I'd felt for Laurel when I'd caught her in my arms had been quickly replaced with stark fear. I should have taken her right to the emergency room. I should have insisted that she received proper medical attention. But the look of terror on her face when I'd suggested an ER trip was just as familiar to me as her symptoms. I knew that look when patients didn't have insurance and couldn't cover the cost of their care. And, sure, we could lie about her name and who she was, and the hospital would have to give her treatment, but I doubted she would go along with that, either.

Especially not when I could help her. So, I did. Even if she didn't want my help, it was either this way, or I was calling an ambulance. Even in the grocery store, especially after she'd removed her mask, I had seen the circles under her eyes, the chapped lips, the flushed face, and unfocused, dilated pupils. Her pulse had raced under my fingertips, and I didn't need a thermometer to feel that she had a raging fever.

And now, with my otoscope confirming my worst fears, I was more tempted than ever to scoop her back into my arms and take her straight to my

ER. The infection had spread to her ears, and I had a sinking feeling that her throat would look even worse. “Open your mouth,” I said.

She gaped at me, mouth slack but not intentionally open.

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. My initial assessment that she was some kind of innocent fairy had been dead wrong. The way her breath hitched when I held her against me, the way her already flushed face turned scarlet when I touched her—even when I had snapped at her, her deep blue eyes had hooded with desire, and it took every ounce of effort not to shake her shoulders until a bit of sense dropped into her head.

I tapped her chin playfully. “All the way.”

She seemed to startle herself out of a reverie, and obediently, her eyes screwing shut, she opened her mouth.

I pressed the wooden depressor on her tongue and leaned forward, shining my otoscope light down her throat. I hardly needed the light, though. It was obvious from the white, weeping sores and swollen tissue that she had one of the worst cases of streptococcus infection I had ever seen. Like, necrotizing fasciitis risk-factor bad. And if the infection had spread to her ears, then I had a sinking suspicion that her lungs were next.

“Congratulations,” I said briskly, clicking off the light and leaning away from her. “You managed to give yourself a case of otitis media in addition to your strep infection.”

She blinked at me and mouthed, “Huh?”

“The strep spread to your ears,” I explained. “Which is why you feel dizzy.”

Her mouth stretched to the side with an expression of “oops” like she’d forgotten a dental cleaning appointment.

I gave her a stern look. “You’ll be lucky if it hasn’t infected your lungs

and kidneys. Jesus, kid.”

Her brows slammed together, and she gave me a look that very clearly asked, “Kid?”

I leaned forward again, placing my hands on either side of the table and forcing her to lean away, her expression going taut with wary surprise. “Yeah, kid,” I said, daring her with my scowl to argue. “Because I’m ten years older than you. And because only kids do stupid shit like play pretend. You can’t pretend you’re not sick and hope it goes away. It doesn’t work like that.”

Laurel stopped breathing, and her lips parted again.

I couldn’t help but shift my expression to her mouth. She puffed out a little breath, and I found myself transfixed by those bow-shaped lips. Her lower lip was much fuller than her top, and she looked utterly kissable, even with a raging infection coursing through her. I felt my lips twitch. “You think you can make me a promise?”

Her expression spoke louder than words. *Anything.*

“Take care of your body,” I said, dragging my eyes down the length of her. Her faded, college T-shirt clung to her curves and draped around her in the most appealing, just-had-sex-and-woke-up kind of disheveled cuteness. “It deserves a lot more.”

And then this irresistible look came across her face, pressing her rosy lips together and causing her eyelashes to flare. Like she couldn’t believe I would give a shit about her wellness.

*Oh, I definitely care, I thought with some chagrin. Way too much for having been in your presence for all of an hour in total. And I’m starting to suspect you don’t have anyone at all who does care. And that’s just not acceptable.*

But if I was really going to care for her—and someone clearly had to—then I needed to pull my shit together and stop ogling her. As irresistible as her vulnerability was, she needed Dr. Cade. Not Lachlan the horny douchebag.

I curled my stethoscope off the back of my neck, fitted the earpieces to my ears, and sat on the edge of the paper-covered table. Studiously ignoring her fascinated perusal of me, I placed the diaphragm on her chest. “Deep breath in,” I said.

Her breath shuddered in and out nervously. I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling.

*Thud, thud, thud... thudthudthudthudthud.* Her heart increased in tempo suddenly. I glanced up at her and found her eyes scrunched shut and her lips rolled inward.

*Stop,* I thought, barely containing a laugh. *This woman is so endearing, I’m going to lose my composure completely. Who reacts to a physical exam this way?* I moved the diaphragm under her ribs, and she tensed, her heartbeat going haywire.

I was ninety percent positive her fast heartrate had to do with my proximity and not her illness, but I might have to try again later when she was calmer. I was more interested in her lungs, which, as I moved the diaphragm to the other side and then around to her back, sounded clear. *Thank God.*

She leaned into me a little, and I felt the urge to wrap my arms around her and squeeze her tight. *She’s not a stray puppy, Lachlan,* I thought. *You can’t take her home and give her shelter.*

Or... could I?

Thoughts erupted in my brain, firing along neurons, and conjuring up a

sudden litany of options. I broke contact, stood away from her, and looped the stethoscope around my neck again. “Your lungs are clear,” I said. She let out a breath of relief.

I washed my hands, my thoughts barreling down a long tunnel with inexorable force. I *could* help. I actually could make sure she was taken care of. But only if she needed it.

As I dried my hands, I asked, “Is it just you and Calla?”

She looked a little better. With fluids hydrating her and the antibiotics going to town on the infection, she already looked less peaked. She nodded once with a little smile, “Yeah.”

So, she was alone, then. “Who’s with Calla?” I asked, going to the computer.

I didn’t miss Laurel’s conflicted expression, when she said, as if admitting something undesirable, “She’s with my mom.”

“Is that... okay?” I asked, waking up the monitor and pulling up her digital chart.

“She loves Calla,” Laurel said immediately.

That didn’t answer my question. Which told me all I needed to know about Laurel’s support system: It didn’t exist. I typed notes into the computer, hoping that if I kept all this above board as a free service, CMS wouldn’t jump down our throats and require us to bill Laurel for the visit.

The best way to keep red tape from strangling her for medical care would be to offer it on a personal level. And I had a few ideas about how to make that happen. But I needed to be sure, first.

“I’m going to write you a few prescriptions,” I said, clicking away at her chart, “but do you not have any health insurance at all?”

She shook her head. “I don’t qualify for Medicaid. And I don’t make



enough to hit the threshold for the Affordable Care marketplace. My work offers some, but it's way out of our budget.”

I growled under my breath, typing the names of the prescriptions I'd used a little too forcefully. People like Laurel fell through the cracks all the time—hard-working single parents who made too much to hit the Medicaid qualifications, but who didn't make enough to afford the astronomical bill for private payer health insurance. It was maddening.

That settled it, then. My best bet was to give her care on my own terms, which if she agreed to, kept us out of the strict policies set in place for every medical establishment in the country, but would allow me to make sure she recovered well enough to stay out of the hospital. Which, if I didn't do, she would certainly find herself at.

The problem would be convincing her. She was clearly a bit prickly about accepting help.

“I can pay for the medicine,” she rasped. “I know it's expensive. Maybe there's some kind of payment plan—”

“Stop,” I cut her off, looking away from the computer. I caught her gaze. She seemed to respond to assertive care. So, assertive care she would get. “I'm going to tell you two things, and I'll answer questions about the second, but I'm not going to take 'no' for an answer either way.”

She swallowed visibly, and then winced.

“First, I'm going to pay for your prescriptions and all the supplies I used today. And I'll send in an order for everything else you'll need. They make Novocain lollipops that will help you eat, which is helpful.” She started to protest. I cut her off again. “And second,” I continued, “I'm taking you home with me.”

That stunned her into silence.

I started to list things off, tapping my fingers as I did. “You have a fever of one-oh-six which is causing mild loss of consciousness and prolonged, increased heartrate.” Okay, so maybe the heightened heartbeat was caused by me, but it still counted. “Your blood pressure is shit, you have a bacterial infection running rampant through your body, including otitis media, and you’re severely dehydrated. Any one of those things could get you admitted to the hospital, but you can’t do that,” I continued, ignoring the little spluttering sounds she was making. “So, this is plan B. And it’s not negotiable.”

“Plan B,” she replied, clearly trying to keep her voice even, “is I thank you and you send me home with medicine.”

I shrugged, shoving my hands in the pockets of my loose, black joggers. “I told you. ‘No’ isn’t an option.”

She held my gaze, as if waiting for me to crack and admit it was a joke. I stared back, deadpan.

“We don’t even know each other,” she said finally, an incredulous smile tugging on her lips.

I clicked the spacebar on the computer to wake up the screen again. Glancing at it, I listed off, “You’re Laurel Margerie Brook, twenty-four, up to date on all your vaccinations, you gave birth to a daughter at Ogden Regional Hospital, vaginal birth, no complications, and you are...” I leaned forward, getting a better look at the small print. “Divorced.” I didn’t need a chart to tell me that. She had all the haunted qualities of a young woman who had been through the relationship wringer.

She gaped. I returned my eyes to hers, hoping my intensity would smash through her misgivings. “Also, you sprained your ankle last year.”

She scoffed, “Okay, so you know, like... some of my medical history.

But you don't know me. I don't know *you*. What if I'm an axe murderer?"

"Why do people always say axe murderer?" I mused out loud, turning back to the computer. "Seems like a gun would be more practical."

"Well, I don't own a gun," she snapped.

"Do you own an axe?"

She blinked. "No. But I might be a broom murderer. What would you do then?"

"Terrifying," I muttered, smiling slightly. I tapped her plan of care into a box as we talked. "Listen, Laurel, I can't just send you home with medication, because your condition is precarious. You could easily take a turn for the worse, and if you're at home with Calla when that happens, what will she do? Because 'going south,'" I said, giving her a pointed look, "is not something you get to predict. It happens in a matter of minutes, and I don't think your five-year-old is equipped to call help for you." Laurel went rigid, her face stricken.

"It's either you come with me to my house," I said slowly, "or I take you to the hospital."

"You can't force someone to get admitted," she frowned. She wasn't at all certain of the truth of her own words, by the looks of it.

I folded my arms. "Watch me." I was completely full of shit, of course. I couldn't force her to get admitted, but I could *strongly* encourage my staff to take her into their care and ignore her protests. There were definitely lines we could blur without consequences.

Her internal war was on full display as her features flitted from angry to uncertain, and then melted into resigned.

"Plus," I added, hoping to snag her with some honesty. "I like you. And I know you like me."

Her eyes flared, sparking dangerously. “So, what?” she challenged.

“So, if you like me, then maybe you should trust me.”

She pointed at me. “Not the same.”

“Tell your mom you’re staying with friends for a few nights,” I pushed on. I almost had her... and if I didn’t, then I’d make an enemy of a lifetime and plop her in the emergency room and walk away. Either way, she’d be taken care of. I rather hoped she would take me up on my offer, though.

“I’m feeling way better,” she rasped out, starting to sit up. “I think you fixed me.”

Even from across the room I saw how her eyes became unfocused as darkness threatened to swallow her. I snorted softly.

“Listen, Dr. Cade, I’m really, really thankful. I know you didn’t have to do this, and I *think* you’re trying to be nice? Or you’re a pervert. But either way, I can’t come with you to your house.”

All valid points. But because Laurel didn’t know me, she also didn’t realize how tenacious I was about getting my way. And in this case, it was imperative that I got my way because her life was on the line. I finished typing up her plan of care, crossed the room, and then sat next to her on the table, one leg bent and the other supporting my weight on the floor.

Like she had done every time I got near her, Laurel leaned toward me, like there was some kind of magnetic pull between us.

Well, I felt it, too. And I wasn’t about to ignore it.

I reached out and smoothed a bit of tape over her IV that had started peeling away from her skin. Her fever made her so warm to the touch, it spurred the urgency I felt to get her settled somewhere and monitored more closely. She didn’t realize how dangerously she had compromised her health. “I get it,” I said. “It’s a crazy demand, and you’re being cautious. You should

be. And I'd be lying if I said the reason I offered my home wasn't because I found you to be kind of adorable."

She looked at me like I'd grown a hydra head.

"Don't look at me like that," I said seriously. "You're the cutest thing I've seen since the My Little Pony marathon I did with my nephew last year. And they have wings. I'd be crazy to look at you and just ignore that you need help." I shrugged, letting my hand fall to the paper, and I leaned my weight against it. "And I know you must like me because you nearly when into tachycardia a minute ago."

"Well," she said tightly, her fingers gripping the navy-blue fabric of her sweats, "that isn't really a good reason to spend the night at your house."

I gave her a look while I waited for the "but" I heard at the end of her sentence.

She sighed, looking down at her hands. "You know, I do everything right." I waited, wondering where she was going with that. "I fell in love with my High School sweetheart, but we waited until we were almost done with college to tie the knot. We stayed chaste for each other, like our mothers wanted for us. We got pregnant with Calla unexpectedly, but we made it work. We both graduated with honors." She looked up, a hint of amusement haloed around her grief. "I did homework while I was in labor with Calla."

"Somehow, that doesn't surprise me," I murmured, my voice gentle.

"And even after all that, after we worked our asses off and we committed to our marriage and our future..." she paused, as if searching for the right words. I waited for the nuclear bomb that had clearly destroyed her confidence and her life.

She shut down. "Anyway, it hasn't mattered. It hasn't mattered that I did all the right things, because even then, life doesn't just give you what you

deserve.”

I couldn't disagree, but I was still waiting to see where she was going with this. Tension radiated through me in waves like a charley horse all over my body. *Say yes*, I pleaded silently. *Just say yes*.

Her fists tightened again. “I did everything right, and it has gotten me jack shit.” She straightened, as if resolved, and found my gaze again. “Maybe it's time I did the crazy thing.”

A grin split my face. *Maybe it's still the right thing, Laurel*, I thought as relief smoothed over my tension. *Maybe the “right thing” is actually the crazy thing*.

## Six

# Laurel



I fell asleep in his car.

Maybe that was a bad idea. Maybe I should have been more alert and on edge. But I had rested on the exam table while Lachlan cleaned up, I had signed his consent-to-treat forms, and then he had made sure I gave my mom the exact address of his house—after all that, I felt like maybe this wasn't all that reckless.

Sure, it was sudden. And abnormal. But Lachlan hadn't given me any reason *not* to trust him. And this felt like a chance I should take. Something inside of me said that this was worth exploring. It might have been something in my pants, but regardless—it was something.

When the car hit rough gravel and slowed to a crawl, I woke with a sharp intake of breath.

Lachlan had one elbow leaning casually against the window and his other hand on the steering wheel as we rumbled along a gravel road slowly. “Hey. How are you doing?” he asked with all the confidence of a doctor who knew the answer to that question.

“Good,” I whispered. I wasn’t trying to be quiet. I just couldn’t talk worth a damn.

“You look like hell, but glad to hear it.”

I cast him a disparaging glance, but then his house rose into view as we leveled out our ascent. We were in the foothills of the nearby mountain range, judging by the dense forest enclosing the home from all sides, and the home had been built into the hill as if the forest had carved it out on its own.

The home itself had a modern build with straight, clean lines and horizontally striped railings on the balconies. But it had been built with stained cypress wood, so it looked like it was meant to be there all along. Wide, long windows comprised several of the walls so the misty forest around the home could breathe into the space effortlessly. The trim looked to be mostly black, some metal, and then some concrete, especially along the outdoor living areas which were recessed into the house and jutted out from the main building with tables and chairs, benches, and beanbag chairs. I had never seen anything like it in our small town.

I tried not to gawk, but it made my little updated apartment feel like a seedy motel room.

Lachlan punched a button on the console above his rearview mirror, and a heavy door opened to a pristine, organized garage. He entered, killed the engine, and the leather creaked softly as he turned to me. “Ready?”

“Sure,” I said, but my voice cracked. “Wait.” His eyebrows rose. “Listen, there’s something I need to get straight before I go into that house,” I said seriously.

He waited, but his fingers tightened around the steering wheel.

“Are you a ‘brony?’” He blinked. I gave him my best emotionless look. “The My Little Pony marathon was deeply concerning to me.”



His eyes hooded with annoyance. “You’re awfully pert for someone on death’s door.”

“It’s part of my charm.”

“Get out of the car, Laurel.”

I gave him a Cheshire Cat grin as he exited the car and came around to my side before opening my door. He held out a hand, and I took it, still feeling sluggish and woozy. Humor was the only weapon I had in uncomfortable situations like this. What else was I supposed to do when I had decided to put my welfare in the hands of a stranger? *Be serious?*

He held my hand firmly, supporting my weight up the two concrete stairs and through the sticky door that sealed and unsealed with a satisfying *shwick*.

His house was immaculate, of course. Modern and masculine, with black and natural wood finishes, it had wide, open rooms with wall-to-wall windows overlooking the foggy trees below. We crossed a short hallway with a laundry room to the left, and then we were in the open living area. With a kitchen to the left—slashed down the middle with a black granite island bigger than my entire kitchen—and the sunken living area to the right, the house seemed to trickle down the hill with the trees. I stared at the wall of windows to the far right, drinking in the peat moss greens, misty browns, soft grays, and muted beauty of the cloudy day.

Lachlan must have been worried that I had lost strength because he wrapped an arm around my waist and tugged me onward. We crossed the wide space, and my worn tennis shoes squeaked across the waxed, pine wood floors. His bedroom, apparently, was directly ahead of us on the ground floor. I didn’t think I could be more amazed by his house, but his bedroom was jaw-dropping.

The low platform bed rested under a towering wall of reclaimed wood,

which had been installed along the wall to the row of ceiling-to-floor windows at the far right. White, fluffy rugs and hand-woven throws added warmth to the polished, hardwood floors, and a small sitting area had been arranged by the window wall. Beyond it, a deck with black, metal railings looked out over the misty forest.

Rental apps, eat your heart out.

I suddenly felt *really* guilty about being in this man's pristine palace in the mountains.

And then I felt like I was going to be sick. My stomach lurched, and I stiffened, swallowing back watery bile.

Lachlan reacted, lunging to the side as I fell to my knees. Like he was the star forward for Real Salt Lake, he kicked a galvanized metal trash can right to me. I grabbed it and heaved. There wasn't anything in my stomach, but maybe the IV had put some liquid in my system. I vomited burning liquid, and tears smarted at the edges of my eyes from the torturous pain of the bile along my strep-ravaged throat. My ears rang and felt like they might actually explode.

Lachlan was there, rubbing my back and making sure the strands of hair from my messy bun didn't get into the vomit. I hated that he was there, watching me do that. And, in direct opposition, I was really glad I wasn't alone.

When the convulsions in my stomach finally stopped, I sat there on my hands and knees, shaking like crazy and covered in a thin film of sweat.

Lachlan pulled me against him, and his arms pressed me soothingly to his chest. "It's the fever," he said. I felt his voice when he spoke. It filled my whole body with pleasant vibrations. "Let's get you hooked up with some

fluids again, and I'll push some more antipyretics. How much daytime cold medicine did you take?"

I shook my head. "Like... three swallows?"

"Good God, woman, how are you still alive? Do you always take medicine that way?"

"No?" Yes.

He sighed. "How about *when* you took it?"

"I guess it was maybe seven this morning."

"Okay, that should be good enough. I'll give you acetaminophen and one of those Novocain lollipops I promised you."

That sounded intriguing. And gross. But it probably wasn't worse than the acrid bile still lingering on my tongue.

He helped me to my feet again, and this time, I staggered toward the bed, all feelings of guilt washed away with the contents of my stomach. I wanted to lie down on those bleach-white blankets, burrow myself into whatever downy comforter Dr. Luxury definitely had on there, and escape into oblivion.

Sure enough, the sheets were crisp and smelled like the same laundry detergent I'd noticed on him. He eased me into the bed, and of course, he unlaced my old tennis shoes with clever fingers that had my mismatched socks out of them in seconds.

I logged that away for later.

I swung my legs under the swishy comforter and sheets, settling against the pillows.

Pure bliss. I closed my eyes with drowsy appreciation. Dr. Cade noticed, and I heard him give a low chuckle. "I'll go get a few things from the car and be right back. Mind your IV port."

“Mnh,” I groaned. “Wait,” I forced my eyes back open.

Lachlan paused at the end of the bed.

“Are you sure this is, like... legal? And are you okay with all this?”

He gave a faint smile, slipping one hand casually into his black jogger pants. “It’s not exactly orthodox to snatch a random woman from a grocery store and take her to my house, but it’s not illegal.”

“Oh, this isn’t your usual pickup technique?” I joked, my voice drowsy.

Lachlan made his way back around the bed, his eyes brimming with silent laughter. “I think there are probably easier ways to get women in my bed.”

“Ew,” I said with a scrunch of my nose.

He shrugged, a smile still tugging at the corner of his perfect lips. He sat on the edge of the bed, drew in a breath, and looked out the wall of windows that overlooked the forest below. “I’m not sure what’s come over me, to be honest. I’m usually a lot more boring than this—or predictable, at least.” He flicked a glance my way. “But I’ve been thinking about you since we met. When I saw you were about to keel over in the canned goods aisle, I guess I just acted. And now I’m creepy instead of predictable.”

“Super creepy,” I said solemnly. Except that you’ve done nothing but think about him, too, you dweeb.

His light, hazel eyes swept over me. “You really could have died, you know.”

I swallowed, and then winced. “Who dies from strep?”

“About five hundred thousand people a year,” he said, his eyebrows raising slightly. “Usually because it goes untreated.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.” Lachlan leaned a little closer to me, searching my expression. “I’m glad you agreed to come, Laurel. Really.”

“It didn’t sound like you were giving me many choices,” I replied wryly.

“There’s always the hospital,” he shrugged, standing again. “But my bed is a lot nicer than theirs.”

*And you’re way more fun to look at than the nurses,* I thought, my eyes growing heavy again.

“Alright, I’ll be back,” he said. I nodded, letting my eyes close. He gave another soft laugh. “Ah, Laurel. You are cute.”

I smiled, wondering if I had dreamed that last thing he’d said. Then I drifted off to a heavy sleep. It was the kind of sleep that overtook me at the end of a long day of vacation. Or, more accurately in the last two years, the kind of sleep that knocked me out after a full twenty-four hours of work.

And that was bad.

Really bad.

Those were the nights the shaking and crying happened. The deepest sleep is what triggered my strange, wakeful dreaming that transported me back to that painful night that ended with me on my knees and my heart shattered.

How badly do you want to fix this?

I couldn’t let this happen while I was in someone else’s house. Would not let it happen.

I can’t live with a dead fish anymore. You don’t care about me.

I tumbled down, down, down, like Alice through a rabbit hole. But there were no pills to take that would make this madness end.

Show me how much it means to you, Laur.

\* \* \*

A sharp pain lanced through my nightmares, and my eyes flew open. I stared at the natural wood, vaulted ceiling, and my brain spun on its axis, slowly winding down like a coin flattening its whirl before settling.

“Sorry,” an assuasive voice said.

I turned to my left, toward the edge of the bed, and saw Lachlan sitting there. He still wore his white athletic shirt and black jogger pants, but his feet were in moccasin slippers, and he had pulled on a black, zip-up hoodie. The room had darkened, but beside the bed, the soft glow of a lamp cast shadows on the strong planes of his face. Golden eyes blinked over to mine briefly before returning to his hands.

He had my IV line between his fingers and pushed a syringe of clear liquid into the port. It burned, and I sucked in a breath through my teeth.

While I had slept, he had set up a pseudo-hospital arrangement with an IV stand, a low table littered with simple medical supplies, and pillows all around me, including under my arm. There were more pillows than I would have expected at a bachelor’s house.

Unless he wasn’t a bachelor. I had never asked.

Dr. Cade let my arm settle against the plump pillow, and his hands folded in his lap. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

*I’m glad you did*, I thought with shaky relief. That had been a close call. I didn’t need *that* kind of embarrassment heaped onto the teetering tower I had already built today.

But then he tapped my wrist with a forefinger. “Who’s Jason?”

Unconsciously, my fingers curled into fists. “What?”

“Who,” he repeated, tilting his gaze to mine, “is Jason?”

*Well, Hell.* “Why?” I asked, panic scrabbling at my mind, threatening to

break free.

“He won’t stop texting you.”

I blew out a breath, relieved. And then it froze in my lungs. *Wait, why is Jason texting me? If it’s dark here, then it’s super late in Norway.* I sat up quickly, and then regretted it. My head spun.

Lachlan produced my phone from his pocket, giving me a pointed eyebrow raise. “Don’t get too worked up. Your blood pressure is the shittiest thing I’ve seen outside a hospital in a long time.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I mumbled, my heart rate kicking up a notch. Jason’s messages were like a nasty drug. I wanted them sometimes—needed them, even. Any contact from him was like a hit. But then I immediately felt the negative effects. *The nausea. The headache. The pounding heart. The sheer panic.*

*Jason: Your mom said you disappeared with someone today? I don’t mean to be rude, but I worry about Calla out there with you sometimes. Is everything ok?*

*Jason: I just want to remind you about our agreement—if you’re seeing someone, per the custody agreement, I have a right to know who will be in Calla’s life. Especially if you’re taking overnight trips with this person.*

*Jason: Laurel, I’ve been really patient, but you disappeared, and your mother doesn’t know who you’re with. If you’re not safe, I feel like the only responsible thing to do would be to contact the authorities.*

*Jason: If I don’t hear from you in an hour, I’m contacting the police.*

Heart hammering, I looked at the time stamp. Forty-three minutes ago. Fingers shaking, I texted him quickly.

*Laurel: I’m fine. I’m with a friend. It’s none of your business and Calla is safe with my mom. Stop texting me.*

Three dots appeared immediately, as if he had been waiting for my response.

*Jason: Call me so we can talk about this.*

I sucked in a breath with a labored pull, like my airways were the size of a paper straw.

Suddenly, the phone disappeared from my hands. Lachlan didn't even glance at the screen before tossing it onto the bed next to me. "I don't think that person is a very calming influence."

"No," I agreed, still trying to pull in air.

"Relax," he said. He took a deep breath in, mimicking what he wanted me to do. "Breathe."

I did, sucking in a breath through my nose.

"Be calm. This is a neutral zone," he said, still mirroring the deep breathing he wanted me to do. "Whatever you think is so dire, I can promise you, it can wait until you're feeling better. Is Calla okay?"

"She's fine. It's not really about her," I said, and the tempo of my runaway heart calmed to a harsh thump that banged in my ribs.

"Okay, then. It can wait. Most people don't fall apart when they get a strep infection," he said, and his hands settled comfortably on my shoulders. "Unless they were already fighting health problems. You don't look like you sleep well. Or eat well. Or breathe fresh air all that often."

He was right. I didn't. Any of it. And God, was I mortified that he could *tell* just by looking at me. *I must look worse than I thought.*

"So, just take a breath. Relax. Let your body do its thing," Lachlan said. His voice was pitched low, almost breathy, and it imbued my senses with a rush of calm.

As my body unraveled the tension that had coiled it tight, I got enough



oxygen to my brain to realize how damned awkward this whole situation was. I tried to smooth it over with snark. “Next, you’ll tell me we’re doing yoga with goats in the morning. Namaste.”

He gave me a look like he knew exactly what I was doing. But it amused him all the same. “If you promise not to call whoever that ass is tonight, then I’ll go with you and do sayasanas with goats.”

“Pinky promise?”

He hooked a pinky around the hand of my bruised, IV arm. “Sure. Pinky promise.” He paused, and then shook his head. “You really are a kid.”

I sniffed in mock outrage. “How dare you. I have a credit score. And a juicer.”

“Do you *use* the juicer?”

“Of course not. I’m a cool adult. I eat marshmallow cereal for breakfast and cut the crusts off my sandwiches,” I retorted.

“That explains a lot,” he said with a roll of his eyes. His pinky was still around mine, and he gave it a playful squeeze. “How are you feeling?”

*Surprisingly, not bad.* I felt like maybe my fever was down to a manageable level, and I could talk better. I shifted my sore shoulders, “I think... better. A lot better.”

He nodded. “Good. Fluids and medicine are *super* complicated remedies. You definitely couldn’t have done that on your own.”

I jerked my hand away from his, giving him a glower. “When you say it that way, I sound like a doofus. I’m just busy. And... frugal.”

“Water is free,” he drawled.

“You know what else is free?” I asked, starting to lift my middle fingers.

He pinned them to the bed at my side, and the motion pushed me down into the pillows. Lachlan leaned over me, his eyes shimmering with humor. “I

can think of a lot of things that are free. And healthy. And fun.”

I exhaled a short breath, staring at him. I licked my bottom lip with a dry tongue. “Like... common sense?” I quipped.

His smile flashed white in the shadowed room. “Hm. Common sense is healthy.” His eyes darted down my body and then back to my face. “In moderate amounts.”

Arousal flared to life inside of me.

Lachlan leaned back, releasing my hands, and then stood with a stretch. My eyes followed every sinew and taut muscle like he'd attached strings from my pupils to his lean, solid body. With a groan, he bent to the table with several white, packaged things on it, and held up a rectangular lollipop with a silver wrapper. “How's your throat?”

“Uhm, sore-ish?”

He unwrapped the candy and then handed it to me. “Put that near the back of your throat, as much as you can stand it, and suck on it for ten or fifteen seconds. It's going to taste like you're sucking ink from a pen but try not to get that all over your mouth.” His eyes glittered. “I just got you talking again. I'd hate for you to get all tongue-tied.”

I swallowed hard against the swollen tonsils in my throat. He was watching me, his hands low on his narrow hips, his eyes intrigued.

I slowly hovered the candy into my mouth, avoiding my tongue and sticking it right in the back of my throat. I gagged a little, just enough to make me cough softly, and his eyes widened.

*Hah*, I thought with a little smug satisfaction. *So, I'm not the only one.* Although, what he saw in the bedraggled mess I must have looked, I couldn't begin to guess. Maybe he had a thing for beat-up strays.

I sucked on the lollipop, and we kept eye contact. It sent ripples of heat

straight between my legs, and I swirled the acrid candy around the back of my throat. It began to numb everything pretty quickly. With one hard swallow, I popped the candy out of my mouth. My brows lifted slowly. He almost looked angry. I handed him the candy, my expression overly innocent. “Thanks.”

Lachlan took the sucker, and I saw a muscle work along the hard ridge of his jaw before he popped open a pill bottle and dropped the Novocain lollipop into it. He dragged in a breath through his nose, and then like a mask, he shuttered whatever he was fighting against. Dr. Cade clicked the pill bottle closed and placed it gently on the table. “Now you’ve had some Novocain, I can get some food in you.”

I made a face. Nausea still bounced around in my gut, and I couldn’t imagine actually trying to swallow something past the inflated balloon in my esophagus. But Dr. Cade didn’t take “no” for an answer. Naturally.

He brought me a bowl of soup that wasn’t even hot. He said lukewarm was better for my throat. It was brown and green with little, floating grains of something, and a lot of vegetables. I gave him a “what the fuck?” face.

“It’s lentil soup,” he said, as if it were the most obvious thing the world.

“What in the hell are lentils?”

“Oh my God, you child,” he said sitting down hard next to me. He poked my finger holding the spoon. “Eat it.”

I swirled the spoon around the soup, not the least hungry and definitely not interested in *lentil soup*. “You like to cook healthy stuff, huh?”

Lachlan had one knee up on the bed and watched me with overbearing expectancy. He leaned his elbow on his knee and his face on his hand. “Yes.”

“I think the last soup I ate was Campb—”

“Don’t say it,” he said, wiping his eyes with his thumb and fingers like it

was too painful to hear. “Please don’t tell me that you still eat canned chicken noodle soup when you’re sick.”

“Chicken and star soup,” I corrected.

He inhaled and then groaned, like I’d told him I sacrificed kittens under a full moon for funsies. “Alright,” he said, resigned. He took the bowl from my hands and padded back out of the darkened room. When he returned, he had oatmeal with a giant lump of brown sugar in the middle. “That’s the best I can do. Take it or... well, take it. You’re eating this.”

I swirled the brown sugar into the oatmeal, and my eyes flicked to his. I tried to bite down a happy smile. This was really sweet. My previous assessment that Dr. Cade was a melt-in-your-mouth, walking cinnamon roll had not been at all wrong.

He sat down on the side of the bed again, and this time he reached over and untucked my lip from my teeth. “You’re really freaking cute, you know that?”

I didn’t. But it took my breath away to hear it.

Lachlan gave my chin a little shake before releasing me. “Eat that, and then I’ll take one more round of vitals. If you pass, I’ll take your IV out.”

That sounded promising. Mostly because I knew he’d be touching me again, and I was starting to think that I was getting addicted to the dopamine release his touches gave me.

Suddenly, the doorbell rang.

Lachlan got a perplexed look on his face but stood with another stretch. He pointed to me before leaving. “Eat that. All of it.” Then he was gone.

I picked at the oatmeal, listening to Lachlan speak with what sounded like two different people at the door. Wait, were those flashing lights? A feeling like I’d missed a step and was about to tumble down a staircase dropped from

my heart to my gut. I started to rise, but then realized I was still attached to the stupid IV bag.

There were definitely lights out there. Blue, red, blue, red, mixing in a violet haze that filled me with ice-cold dread.

With a shaking hand, I looked down at the IV tube in my arm. Pain was okay. Pain would ground me. I peeled away the tape, and then with one trembling yank, pulled out the tube. It was longer than I had expected, and felt like pulling a hair out of the back of my throat. I gagged, but rushed to the window wall with the bowl clutched to my stomach like it could anchor me to my rational thoughts.

Yes, those were police cars. From my vantage point, I had a clear view of the front door to the right. Lachlan stood talking with the police officers. They looked angry. He had his arms folded. Their voices drifted through the cavernous house in a jumbled murmur, but I caught a word.

“Mr. Forsmythe.”

The bowl of oatmeal crashed to the ground.

## Seven

# Lachlan



I rarely, if ever, got visitors outside my brother and his family. I knew they were busy getting ready for spring break and their trip to San Diego, so we'd already agreed we could meet up for dinner when they got back. The only reason they would come to my house tonight is if something dire had happened.

It would be in line with the wacky day, but I seriously hoped it was a lost Jehovah's Witness or something.

Blue and red lights flashed outside the stained glass of my front door. My dread intensified. Fearing the worst, I opened the door to find two local cops standing on the wood and iron front steps. I recognized one of them from the—several—speeding tickets I had racked up after getting my new SUV. Whatever it was, we weren't starting off on a great foot.

The officer I hadn't run into before, tall and soft-bodied with a large nose, glanced down at a paper in his hands. "Good evening. Is this 233 Pineview Way? Home of Lachlan Cade?"

I held out a hand, "Dr. Cade," I smiled.

That had the desired effect on the tall officer. Recognition lightened his features. “Oh, Dr. Cade. That’s right.”

The other officer, shorter, older, and ten times crankier, glowered at me beneath a pair of dark gray eyebrows. He was like an angrier, wrinklier Mario. “Is Miss Laurel Brook in your home, sir?”

*Ignore the doctor thing. Shrewd, Mario.* Except his badge said Capaccio, but whatever. “She is,” I said easily, slipping my hands in the soft pockets of my joggers. “She isn’t feeling well, and as her friend, I’m just giving her a place to rest while she recovers.”

“Can we talk to Miss Brook, please?” Capaccio asked. “In addition to a welfare check request, we were informed that she might be in possession of a stolen vehicle.”

That piqued my interest. “Stolen vehicle?”

The other cop, whose badge said “Hauke,” glanced at the paper again. “A red SUV registered to Jason Forsmythe?”

*Forsmythe?* I thought, wrinkling my nose. *Is he her ex-husband or a British villain with a twirled mustache? What a ridiculous last name. And what the actual fuck Laurel? Your ex-husband owns your car? Are you for real?* I gave the taller cop a congenial eye squint. “So, her ex-husband who lives... where?”

“Not relevant,” Mario grumbled.

“Hm,” I hummed, looking between the cops. “Well, I don’t see a red SUV here, do you?”

Hauke looked around a little stupidly. Capaccio squinted one eye. “So, Miss Brook is not possession of this vehicle?”

I looked around for their benefit. “Nope. I brought her here myself after I ran into her at the grocery store. Laurel is really very sick. She has a

contagious case of strep throat, she's resting at the moment, and she's hooked up to an IV. And I happen to know for a fact that contact with her ex-husband in any form is emotionally distressing for her. So, unless you have a warrant...?"

Mario glared. The taller cop looked like he would very much like to get back in his car and back out of my driveway. Mario grunted, "I don't suppose you're willing to present proof of her safety?"

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and showed them the address, phone number, and explanation I had texted to Laurel's mother before we had left the clinic. "This is Laurel's mother. You're welcome to call her and verify that we have both spoken to her and she knows about Laurel's whereabouts and safety."

Although, I reasoned, if they knew that Laurel was here, then they had likely already visited with Mrs. Brook and gotten my address. They were ticking off boxes and crossing their t's so to speak.

Mario jotted down Laurel's mother's phone number—which, again, I suspected he already had—while Hauke peered over his shoulder at the message. The tall cop gave me an apologetic look. "We're sorry to disturb you, sir. Doctor. Mr. Forsmythe just wanted to make sure she was in a safe location."

I didn't bother to respond to that stupidity. He did not give a flying fuck about Laurel's safety, and everyone standing in my doorway knew that. This was some kind of sick power move from wherever he lived, and I wasn't going to let it slide.

A crash sounded from my bedroom, not loudly, but enough to send my heart racing. "Are we good here?" I asked with a worried glance toward the bedroom door.



“We’ll be in touch,” Capaccio rumbled.

I closed the door firmly and then jogged through the darkened house across slick floors back to my room. Laurel had probably just knocked something over, but on the off chance—

I slid to a halt in the doorway.

Laurel stood in front of the window wall, her cobalt eyes round and terrified, staring blankly at the bright cruiser lights. At her feet, a smashed bowl of oatmeal had splashed up her sweatpants and all over the window. A glob of it plopped softly to the ground.

Her arm, limp at her side, dripped a thin, steady stream of blood onto my waxed pine floors. She had ripped out her IV and must have dropped the oatmeal bowl without really realizing what she’d been doing. The vacancy in her gaze told me that whatever fears lived inside of her had taken control of her completely.

I took a cautious step across the room.

She snapped out of it, eyes bouncing around the room before they landed on me. “Oh, shit,” she said. Her voice cracked, and looking at her standing there, her soft hair tousled down her narrow shoulders and blood staining her light skin, I felt something almost foreign.

It took me a couple seconds to recognize what it was. Protective instinct. I wanted to wrap her in bubble wrap and keep anything from hurting her again. That look in her eyes, the darkness that coiled beneath quipping jokes and glazed expressions—it made me want to kill something. Or someone, as the case was. That asshole was in for a rude introduction to Doctor Fuck Around and Find Out.

Laurel sniffed, looking around, and then crouched to her knees. “Shit, I’m so sorry. I was just—I don’t know. I’m such a mess.” She picked up shards of

ceramic, trying futilely to clean them up. “Do you have some paper towels?”

I ate the distance between us with sure steps and took a knee beside her, grabbing her hands to stop them from getting cut. “It’s okay,” I said softly. I helped her to stand, and not wanting to freak her out, because seriously, it looked like a murder scene, I bent her arm at the elbow to staunch the bleeding.

She looked down despairingly. “Oh, God.”

“If you didn’t like my food,” I joked, gently guiding her back to the bed, “you could have just said so.”

Her eyes flew to mine, and after she realized I was joking, she released some pressure with a little exhale. “Ah, yeah,” tears spilled over her eyelids while she gave me a shaky smile. “Sorry.”

My heart broke in half. It did. There was no other explanation for the sudden, sharp pain I felt in my chest, like someone had dragged a dull scalpel through my pericardium. Everything in me screamed to make sure that look on her face never, ever happened again.

Still keeping a firm hold on her arm and trying valiantly to keep the blood from ruining anything else, I said, “I’m going to suggest a bandage, and then maybe you can take a bath.”

The flashing lights outside the window retreated.

Laurel let me lead, but then stopped short before the bed. “No, don’t. I’m a mess.” I slid a meaningful look her way. *I know you are, Laurel. In more ways than one.*

She pulled away from me, trying to retreat from the bed. Irritation slithered between the layers of compassion I had heaped on top of my fear for her. “Laurel, it’s my bed. I don’t care. Just get over here.”

“It’s a *nice* bed,” she insisted.

“Get. On. The bed.” My tone caused her to roll a derisive look my way. Good. Rather than despair, I forcefully guided her to the bed, but before letting her sit, I reached over and swiped up a package of gauze.

As I pressed soft gauze against the bleeding wound, Laurel’s eyes traveled over the path of blood she had splattered all over the white fur rug and floors. “Shit. Oh my God, Lachlan, I’m so sorry. I wasn’t thinking.”

I held the gauze between my thumb and her elbow with a hard grip, and with my teeth, I tore open a package of neon pink self-adherent wrap. I leveled a stern look her way. “I’m not mad about the mess.”

She glanced down at her arm and then back to me. “You’re mad I took out the IV?”

I wound the pink wrap around the gauze with practiced motions. “Yep.”

“Sorry.”

I leaned to the side, grabbed a pair of medical scissors, and cut the adhesive with a firm snip. “If I take your vitals and they’re shit, you get another one.”

She grimaced. “I guess that’s... fair.”

I finished with the dressing and ripped open an alcohol pad, wiping off the worst of the blood on her skin. Although, for the sheer amount she had spilled on everything, I would have been better off grabbing a hose. “With a nasty ear infection like you have, it’s no wonder you lost your balance and dropped the bowl. I didn’t say you could get up and walk around.” She puckered her lips in annoyance. I gestured toward the mess. “Am I wrong?”

She muttered under her breath about me being overbearing.

That about did it. She thought this was overbearing? It wasn’t overbearing to care about someone at a basic level. It wasn’t overbearing to expect that she took the *tiniest* care with her own well-being, but something

inside this woman had shattered into pieces, and instead of mending them, she was letting them wound her over and over.

I might not have known her for more than a matter of hours, but I'd be damned if I just looked the other way while Laurel Brook slashed away at her own soul while no one was looking.

The universe had dumped her in my lap, but I'd been the one to pull her closer. I'd never been one to question fate, and I wasn't going to start now.

Overbearing. I would damn well show her overbearing.

## Eight

# Laurel



**L**achlan’s muted gold eyes went darker, and he shoved me onto the bed. I landed with a little “oomph,” and he kneeled on one knee in front of me. He grabbed me by the hips, his hands searing through the fabric of my thin T-shirt, and he slid me right to the edge of the bed so my feet were between his legs. “Laurel, every *second* you’re with me, I find new reasons that you’re in need of a goddamn adult.”

I swallowed. His hands were strong and grounding. His knees braced me on either side with comforting pressure. I could have drowned in his eyes; they were like the lightest, sweetest coffee. *I like this*, I realized. *I really, really like this. The logical part of my brain thinks maybe I shouldn’t, but it feels so good. Like getting a surprise birthday present in the mail.*

Jason had been a child himself when we had married. He was a lazy, smart kid—the one who did well without trying and saw no need to go the “extra mile.” Which meant that I had raised Calla on my own, whether we had been married or not. He had no interest in boring, adult things like chores

or balancing a budget. I did my best. I did. But to have someone take over for a few hours right now?

Heaven.

Especially when I worked so many hours and felt like the hustle never ended. When I wasn't working as a paraprofessional at the school, I taught English to Chinese students overseas, which meant weird hours late at night or early in the morning. I'd worked for twenty-four hours straight many times. I'd start at three-thirty in the morning, go to school, and sometimes stay late for a reading program.

Then when I got home, I'd give myself an hour to get Calla her dinner and (surprise) a movie before running into my bedroom office to start lessons at six in the evening. It wasn't until three in the morning when I usually collapsed into bed to catch a few hours of sleep before school.

That was my reality. It had been my waking nightmare to struggle and fight, only to realize, like a slowly drowning person, that I wasn't going to make it. I wasn't going to succeed and create the life that Calla deserved.

So, Lachlan doing this "let me take care of you" bit? As an independent woman, I should have hated it. Instead, I craved it. And I craved him just as badly.

But, I realized with a sinking heart, I couldn't let Lachlan take over a responsibility that wasn't his. My stumbling course through life wasn't his fault. I formed my fears and anger and grief in a little ball and shoved it right back where it belonged. Locked deep, deep in the recesses of my subconscious. I molded my face into a coy, incredulous smirk. "You want to be my sugar daddy, Lachlan?"

"Don't be flippant," he glared.

I had expected my jab to wound his masculinity, but he wasn't at all

phased by my snark. I sighed. “I’m serious. You can’t just... None of this is your problem, Lach.” The shortened version of his name had tripped out of my mouth before I could think too hard about it.

A smile wavered on his lips. “Shit, that was adorable.” I bit my lip. He adjusted our position so he sat beside me, but his foot braced on the floor in front of mine, like he wanted to make sure I wouldn’t get up again. “It is my problem now,” he said, “because that charming asshole—Jason, was it?—sent the cops to my house.”

The snarling beast of my dark shadows reached out a claw to grip my heart. I held my breath. *Why?* I thought. *Why would he do that?* “Oh my God, I’m so sorry.”

“They said he reported his car as stolen and gave the police my address for a ‘welfare check’ on you.” The tension around his mouth told me everything I needed to know about how he felt about the situation.

My brain started to whir. “He said I stole his car?” Lachlan nodded once. I frowned. “But it’s my car.”

“Is it?” he challenged.

He knew something. He understood something I didn’t, and it was starting to make me feel stupid and furious. “Yes, it’s my car. I pay for it every month.”

“Whose name is on the lease?” he asked.

My confidence crashed against a realization like waves against a cliff. “Jason’s name is on the lease.”

“And who is it registered to?”

I brought a hand to cover my eyes. “Jason.”

“Laurel,” he said consternation. “Are you serious? You divorced him, but he owns your car?”

I let out a disgusted sound and let my head fall to my knees. Maybe if I folded myself in half, I could keep myself from falling apart completely. “Yes,” I said, my voice muffled.

He rubbed my back, his palm flat and smooth and gratifyingly slow. “Laurel, why do you let this person stick his fingers in your life like this? Does he have some kind of hold over you? You’re not over the relationship?”

“No,” I said quickly, sitting up. “No, I’m well over it. Him. It’s just... Our divorce was done without a lawyer. And when I did it, I trusted him still.”

He closed his eyes with exasperation. “How bad is it?”

“Pretty bad.”

Lachlan gave a little nod. “Okay. I want to know more about that, but we’ve got an oatmeal situation. I’ll take your vitals and then maybe we can get you a bath. Sound good?”

“Yeah,” I said weakly. I felt like the dumbest person alive. “Wait,” I said, suddenly, stopping him before he could stand. “What did you tell the police?”

“I told them the car isn’t here, so I didn’t see how you could have stolen it,” he said with a quirk of a smile. “And then I showed them my text to your mother and told them they could contact her to corroborate my story. Although, I suspect they already had because they knew exactly where you were and whom you were with.”

“Uh, wow,” I couldn’t help but let my gratitude show on my face.

“Adult,” he said with a pointed flare of his eyes before bending down to grab supplies off the table.

I narrowed my gaze. “You know what, you keep saying that, but if you had *any idea*—”

He popped a tongue depressor in my mouth. “Shut up. I’m taking your



vitals.”

I glowered.

He wrapped a blood pressure cuff around my right arm, and then with those strong hands of his—the ones I couldn’t stop looking at—he pumped the bulb until it constricted my blood flow painfully. Then, he settled his stethoscope into his ears and pressed the cold bell against the inside of my elbow.

I sucked in a breath and pulled the stick out of my mouth. “Why do you all do that so effing tight?”

“Shush,” he murmured. The pressure released, and he stared at the needle on the gauge of the pressure cuff.

My heart rate ticked up in pace as I watched him. He breathed deep and even, his eyes focused on the gauge as he listened. My lungs did a funny hitch, and I felt like I was going to start vibrating with pent up energy. I literally couldn’t think of anything in this whole world I’d rather look at than this man doing his job.

He loosened the valve so the cuff deflated rapidly, and the blood returned to my hand. He wrote something down on the table to his right, and then he clamped an oximeter on my finger that glowed with a blue light and immediately started blinking with readings.

Lachlan sat on the bed next to me and placed the diaphragm on my chest just above my right breast. “Deep breath,” he said.

*Oh no*, I thought with an internal groan. *I can’t do this. I cannot do this. We need to find an impartial doctor. An ugly one. A doctor that’s not this guy.* My heart started to hammer so hard, I was absolutely sure it was going to launch out of my throat. I tried to pull in a breath, but I felt like there was a bag of rocks in my lungs.

Lachlan blew out an annoyed breath, dropped the stethoscope, and suddenly pulled my face to him with both his hands. “Is there *any* way I can get you to chill out when I do this?”

I ran my lip through my teeth, wincing. “Probably not.”

“You’re messing up all my readings,” he frowned.

“*You’re* messing up my readings,” I accused.

That made him smile. Reluctantly. “Miss Brook,” he said in his serious doctor voice. “I need you to cooperate so I can get you clean clothes and a bath. Do you think you can do that?”

My lips were dangerously close to a grin. “No.”

“Jesus,” he muttered. His hands around the sides of my face shifted so his fingers cradled the back of my head, and then he lowered his mouth to mine, capturing my lips in a crushing kiss.

I gasped, but not in shock. In relief. In blissful, warm, velvety relief as his dusky lips moved against mine with unrelenting, almost punishing force. I brought my arms up around his neck, and almost without realizing what I was doing, I lifted myself up and straddled his lap. Up on my knees and angled above him, I gave Lachlan as good as I got. My fingers found his hair, burying my knuckles in its perfectly conditioned, soft texture.

Dimly, I felt an awareness that I was nasty and sick with strep, so I kept my tongue tucked away, but there was enough of his lips that I could savor the firmness of his kisses for days, and days, and days...

Lachlan ran his hands down the side of my ribs, down my hips, and all the way to my legs in one searing path. His palms hooked under my knees, and with one deft tug, he pulled me down so my ass was right on his lap, pressed against the hard erection perfectly outlined through the slick material of his joggers. My legs wrapped around his back, and I leaned into our kiss

with intoxicating hunger. I groaned as his erection pushed against my slit, already growing wet with need.

He answered with a soft sound of satisfaction.

One of Lachlan's hands steadied my lower back, keeping me pressed hard against him, and the other slid up my shirt, trailing a path to the sports bra I usually only wore when I wasn't planning on going anywhere. It was loose and nearly useless, but comfortable. His fingers slipped under it easily, and I gasped as they found my breast, flicking over my nipple and then cupping my breast firmly.

I felt like a furnace. I was going to burst into flames. I started to unconsciously rock against him as he tortured my mouth with his. A sheen of sweat started to gather on my brow and at the small of my back.

Lachlan paused, and then his lips slowed. His hand left my bra, and he brought it up to my face where his thumb caressed my cheek. Pulling away from our kiss, his voice was husky as he said, "Your fever is back."

I swallowed against my swollen throat, breathing hard. My eyes rose hesitantly to his. "So?"

He huffed a laugh. "I really didn't bring you here to paw you like an animal."

"You're not. I'm the one drooling over you. I like being pawed."

I felt the shake of his silent laugh. "Still. A little caution might be healthy."

"I hate healthy," I whined, already dreading that he was going to stop us. I didn't want to stop. I'd never felt this turned on in my life. I'd never felt so much burning need for someone. Not that I'd had many chances, but even so.

His lips pressed into a smile. Sighing, I let my forehead fall to his shoulder. "Okay. I'm sorry. We can slow down." I paused, thinking. "You're

going to get strep.”

“I don’t have tonsils. It’s possible, but not likely,” he said, shrugging one shoulder.

“Oh.”

He clicked his tongue. “I didn’t get a pulse/ox reading. I didn’t get a respiratory reading. I didn’t get a temperature. You’re killing me.”

“Sorry,” I groaned, too comfortable with my head against his shoulder to move.

His arms wrapped around me with a comforting squeeze. “It’s straight-up malpractice, is what it is.”

“Mnh,” I agreed sleepily.

He held me quietly for a while, and I breathed evenly, loving the feel of his arms around my back, pressing me into him. He adjusted us slightly, tucking my arms between my breasts and his chest, and two of his fingers found the pulse at my wrist.

I got nervous again, shifting as my heart threatened to gallop, but he kissed my temple, “Shh. Just rest for a minute.”

So, I did. I closed my eyes, turning my face so my nose nuzzled against his strong neck, and I rested. My heart slowed. My breathing evened out. A few minutes later, he shifted me again so he could hold me with one hand, and I felt him reach over and write something on the paper. He ran the thermometer across my forehead and made a disapproving sound but didn’t force me off of him. Then he settled his arms around me again, and he rested his cheek on my head.

I wasn’t sure how long we stayed like that as I dipped and crested from sleep to dreamy content, but a really selfish part of me didn’t want it to end.

The realistic part knew it had to.

Eventually, I fell into a shallow nap. I knew he had shifted me onto the bed, but I stayed weighted in a dreamy state. After a while, he coaxed me awake and got me to the bathroom where a bath had been drawn in the dark stone garden tub. Everything had been made with knotty pine, rustic, dark stonework, and gleaming silver fixtures. Lachlan had folded a fluffy, white towel beside the tub, and he handed me a stack of clothes.

“I’m trying to guess your size, but I think my pajamas will stay up if you cinch them in.” They were made of buttery soft, red plaid, and the matching top buttoned down the front.

I wasn’t tiny. I couldn’t be sure of my size anymore because I mostly wore leggings, but after having Calla, I had definitely gone up some pant sizes. It was my ass more than anything. I tried to assess the difference between Lachlan’s well-built, but muscle-honed hips and mine. If the pants were too small, I would *die* of embarrassment.

Or I would just walk out naked.

Toss up.

He left me alone to bathe, and I melted into the warm water with relish. His shampoo had that minimalistic, high-end look to it, and it smelled like money.

I could feel my body doing its thing, forcing me to fall into a restive state and battle the infection in my throat and ears. But I really was starting to feel a lot better than I had in the morning. My head ached and my throat burned, but I could swallow water, at least.

And Lachlan had been firm about that one. He had given me a black tumbler filled with ice and water that had a thick, plastic straw through the lid. After taking more acetaminophen, I drank the whole thing slowly. And

then, when I had to pee so badly I couldn't stand it anymore, I drained the bath and toweled off.

The pajamas fit pretty well, and I had to cinch them up a little, but they would stay up, at least. I looked askance at my dirty underwear and decided commando was the way to go. The pants were stupid long, and the button-down shirt hung around me like a Halloween robe, but I buttoned it up as far as it would go, which still left a deep "V" over my sternum. Hot.

With my hair clean and cascading around my shoulders in damp waves, and my spirits restored, I walked quietly out of the bathroom with the tumbler clutched between my hands. I left my dirty clothes folded neatly in the corner between the tub and shower, and hoped he'd ignore them so I could take them home and wash them later.

Lachlan lounged on his bed, scrolling through his phone and wearing a pair of thick-rimmed, black glasses that looked like they cost more than my kidney would fetch on the black market. He wore a heather gray Henley that stretched across his chest in an obscenely delicious ripple, and he'd changed his joggers out for a white pair. He looked over as I passed the window wall. Then he lifted himself on an elbow, his eyes glued to me. I could have sworn he looked... gobsmacked.

I guess the difference between bedraggled urchin and freshly washed matron are striking enough to make an impact.

The oatmeal mess was gone, and even the blood had disappeared. The room smelled like bleach and some kind of light fragrance that mingled with the chemicals. I glanced out the windows and stopped short. Lachlan had floodlights that cast a bright glow on the forest below. Fat snowflakes drifted down like God had thrown wintry confetti over my sleepover.

Only, I was pretty sure I didn't want God to know what I did at my

sleepover.

I joined Lachlan on the bed, setting my tumbler down on the nightstand and crawling under the blankets to sit cross-legged next to him.

He sat up, one leg stretched over the side of the bed and the other bent in front of him.

I poked the middle of his glasses. “Cute.”

Lachlan gave me a sheepish side grin. “I’m old. I know.”

“Thirty-four isn’t old.”

“Old enough to know when someone’s in trouble,” he said, his tone sobering. “Tell me what’s going on with you. I want to help.”

I made a “yuck” face. “How about we talk about you? I don’t know anything about you. Except that you probably never eat s’mores for dinner.”

“That’s... you don’t actually eat—” he stared. Then he saw my mischievous grin and rolled his eyes. “We can trade questions,” he said with a little eye squint.

“Fine. I’m going first. Why do you live in the buttcrack of Idaho?”

He laughed and pushed his glasses further up his nose with the back of his hand. “Coming out of the gate swinging. I grew up here.”

“Yikes,” I grimaced dramatically.

He rolled his eyes. “Okay, my turn. What’s up with your ex?”

“You’re going to have to be more specific,” I said, and my eyes strayed to my phone, which I had decided would be better to ignore.

“Why did you get divorced? Let’s start with that.”

Pain stabbed my ribs. I tried to ignore it. “He... fell in love with someone else. His w-wife now.” I couldn’t even say the word without threatening to fall apart. Christ, I had issues.

“So, he cheated on you,” Lachlan clarified.

“Yeah.”

“M’kay. If he’s remarried, then why does he keep telling you what to do?”

I pointed a finger, “Nope. My turn.” I thought about what I wanted to ask next. There were so many questions. “What were you doing when you intercepted me yesterday?”

He seemed surprised by my choice. “I’m out of coffee and chia seeds.” I stared, blinking. “What?” he asked.

“You’re kind of a freak, Lachlan.”

He grinned, making a “maybe” gesture. “I didn’t have a lot of control over my life as a kid, so I guess I picked my body to take control over.” He paused. “In a healthy way,” he added.

I figured as much. He looked like the spokesman for *Ideal Body Monthly*. Except that probably wasn’t a real magazine, but I had no idea what healthy people read.

“Okay, so why does your ex care what you do if he’s remarried?”

“I wish I had an answer for that,” I said with a wrinkle of my nose. “And I don’t know why I let him. I feel attached to him through Calla, I guess. And through...” I paused, wondering if I should even admit it.

“Through...?” Lachlan prompted.

I was starting to feel like he could coax literally anything out of me. Like I’d give him my beating heart on a medical tray if he needed it. “Hurt, I guess,” I admitted with a shrug.

He nodded, his eyes straying away in thought.

“If you’re so hot and healthy then why are you single?” I asked.

Lachlan gave me a look like my question was crazy. “You really come out of left field sometimes, you know that?”



“Yeah.”

He looked down, fiddling with his phone. “I guess I work a lot. And what little free time I have, I’d rather spend it with my brother and his kids. They live like two miles from here, and they have the best life. His wife, Michaela, is really genuine, and they’ve got the whole white picket fence thing going on.” He tilted his head with uncertainty. “I’ve had plenty of relationships. Hookups. Whatever. They just haven’t panned out.”

“Did you bang Ariel?”

He gave me another “okay psycho” look. “Who?”

“The nurse with the red hair and pink scrubs. She looks like Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*.”

He laughed and rubbed his eyes under his glasses. “Uh, yeah. I did.”

“I knew it.”

“A *long* time ago,” he clarified. “Okay, cheeky, those were two questions. Why do *you* live here? I’ve never seen you in town before this week.”

Was it really that small of an area that I stuck out like that? “That’s kind of a... story.”

He turned to face me, cross-legged, and leaned his chin on the heel of his hand, waiting.

“Eh, well, I was living in Logan while Jason went for an internship with a computer tech company in Norway. When he... told me... about his wife, he wanted me to file the divorce. We didn’t have any money, and I was really out of it, like, emotionally, I guess.” I stumbled over the story, knowing how foolish it would make me look. “So, I filled out the paperwork myself. I read it. I know I did, but there was a lot to it, and I didn’t totally understand everything. I have a bachelor’s,” I rushed to add. “I’m really not stupid.”

He gave me a reprimanding look. “Of course you’re not stupid. You don’t

have to explain that to me.”

“Well, I do... because you’re going to wonder if I’m missing half a lobe when I tell you this.” I gathered my courage and continued, “I checked a box that said I couldn’t move one hundred miles away from where we lived at the time. I literally can’t remember why I did that. Maybe because I thought it wouldn’t matter? Maybe I thought it would make him feel better about me claiming full physical custody of Calla? I really don’t know. Even though he was in Norway, I thought it would give him some security and prove that I wanted what was best for Calla. On top of that, he was giving me six hundred dollars a month, but the way the paperwork had it, I thought they wanted it in a weekly amount. So, I put one-fifty.”

Lachlan had a pained expression on his face.

“Jason promised that none of the ‘particulars’ mattered, and he would always support us and always make sure we were comfortable. But when push came to shove...” I shrugged. “One month he was giving us the six hundred he was supposed to, and the next it was only one-fifty. And he forbade me from moving outside the one-hundred-mile radius. For Calla’s stability, he said.”

“Wow,” Lachlan said, his brows knit together.

“I know. I’m pathetic. I get it.”

“No,” he said, his anger starting to radiate from him in tangible waves. “*You* are trusting and caring, and *he* took advantage of that. It’s not a weakness to trust people, Laurel. The weakness is his—for abusing it.”

I shrugged, unconvinced. I wouldn’t be in this mess if I’d been smarter. “Well, anyway, I did get a defiant hair in my brain, and I moved as far inside the radius as I could. Montpelier is near the edge of that boundary, and I was

able to find a job as a resource teacher here. My mom lives here, too, which,” I cringed, “is fine, I guess.”

“Hm,” he said. He brought his knee up and rested his forearm on it, turning his phone idly in his hands as he thought. Wearing those glasses and staring off into the distance, I imagined him younger and in school, rocking all his classes and getting an A in chemistry. We would have never even looked twice at each other in high school.

Hell, I didn’t get why he looked at me now. But he had kissed me first. And he had kissed me like he fucking meant it.

“And you never took him to court over it?”

I brought my knees up and groaned, pressing the heels of my hands to my eyes. “I did.”

“Oh God, it gets worse, doesn’t it?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said tightly.

“Tell me.”

I forced a breath out through my lips and flopped back on the pillows to avoid looking at him. “I filed a motion to have the distance thing revoked and drained my measly savings to get the world’s crappiest lawyer. Jason came at me with everything his new, enormous salary could afford, and they were so invasive. They made me give up my diaries, my social media data, my texts with everyone I’d ever known, my whole life. They scrutinized every decision I made with Calla, and he started building a case to take her from me. I wiggled out and settled out of court.”

“Mother of God,” he muttered. “What did you agree to?”

“He gets to call every day. And I have to talk to him and conference about Calla whenever he requests, within a twenty-four-hour notice, which he does at least twice a week without fail. He gets her for three months every

summer when she turns six. I have to tell him when I switch jobs, move houses, or enter a relationship with someone who could be ‘significant’ in Calla’s life. Also, I have to find a way to pay for half of Calla’s plane tickets to Norway three times a year. He gets her for Christmas and Thanksgiving on alternate years and every spring break. And nothing on the old settlement got fixed, so I’m stuck with all of that, too.”

“Jesus,” he said softly.

“Yeah.” I stared at the vaulted ceiling. “I fucked up.” And that’s not even the worst part. I can’t tell him the rest of it.

*Show me how much it means to you, Laur.* I banished Jason’s ghost of a voice back to its locked box, but it kept wanting to writhe out.

“And when you can’t meet those stipulations—because let’s be real, you probably can’t—then, what?”

“That’s how he gets to tell me what to do.” I turned my head to look at him. “To keep him from holding me in contempt of court.”

“Holy Hell,” Lachlan said. He had a hand on his chin and rubbed his mouth. “That’s a God-awful mess, love.”

My heart trilled at his endearment. “Yeah,” I breathed again.

He let loose another breath, and then suddenly tipped himself over, stretching out his long body with his head supported by one hand so he was pressed against my side and looking down at me. “Well, that’s a tangle. But we’re going to stop thinking about it, okay?” He brushed a hand up and down my arm at my side and sent goosebumps skittering along my arms. “Neutral zone. Don’t get worked up about it.”

I forced the gnashing demon inside of me to get back in its box. “Got it.”

“I mean it,” he said, his voice taking on that commanding edge that gave me giddy shivers. “Men like that... they bluster and threaten, but he’s not

going to take you to court just because you missed a few calls. So, check in with Calla and your mom tomorrow, but otherwise, stay off the phone.”

I gasped, sitting up fast. “Oh my God, my job.” I scooted myself toward the edge of the bed, but Lachlan hooked an arm around my waist and dragged me back.

“Whoa, Turbo.”

“No, I need to go! I called off on Friday, but I have to be back there tomorrow.”

He laughed, and his arm tightened, forcing me against his broad, solid chest. “No. That’s not happening.”

“Lachlan,” I ground out, pulling at his iron arm. “I’m serious. I can’t lose this job.”

“You’re not going to lose your job. I’ll call them tomorrow as your physician and explain that you’ll be out for a couple more days.”

“A couple?” I asked, my voice tripping up an octave.

He nestled me into the curve of his body. His face bent to drop a soft kiss on the curve of my cheekbone. “At least.”

I deflated immediately. How was I supposed to argue with him when he did things like that?

“Get some sleep, Laurel,” he said, and his fingers traced my hairline with excruciating gentleness. “Everything can wait until tomorrow.”

I glanced at him sideways, “Wait, you’re not sleeping here too, are you?”

“It’s my bed,” he said in mock outrage.

“I could move to the couch,” I offered.

“Laurel. I’m not going to molest you in your sleep. You’re exhausted. I’m exhausted. Just go to sleep, okay?”

My lids dropped heavily. “Mnh.”

He let out a breathy chuckle. “I like that sound you make.”

“Which?” I asked sleepily.

“That groggy thing you do. It drives me crazy.”

I smiled cat-like. I drove him crazy? I liked the sound of that. I was already spiraling into dreams. I didn't know how long this fantasy in Dr. Cade's house would last, but I wanted to savor the moments I could. I knew it couldn't be like this forever... but I had the here and now.

That was good enough.

Nine

Laurel



**M**y first alarm went off at one o'clock in the morning. I scrambled to find it, my head pounding with panic at the insistent, droning bell. Lachlan had it on his side charging, and he lifted his head to find it. He made a groggy sound as he turned it off, and then cast a sleepy, questioning glance at me.

Thank God he hadn't let my phone die. That was the only thing that kept me from falling too deeply into REM sleep. The only thing that kept me from having the waking dreams. I apologized with a mumble and held out my hand for the phone. He handed it to me, made me drink some water, and we fell asleep again.

I put the phone on silent and tucked it against my breasts so the buzzing would only disturb me. Hopefully. His bed was enormous, so I scooted as far to the edge as I could and let myself fall back into the heavy void of a healing sleep. My body desperately craved the sleep, but I kept the alarms on.

Three AM.

Five AM.

Seven AM.

I finally let that one wake me up all the way and forced my eyes to crack open. There was nothing like waking up in a warm cocoon of dawn when the world had fallen into an icy stillness. I watched the snow fall in the hazy morning light, amazed at the amount we had gotten overnight. It was March. “In like a Lion,” apparently.

As I watched the charming picture of a winter Western forest through the glimmer of pristine glass, I heard the bathroom door open.

Lachlan snapped me out of my woolgathering with an electric shock. He had a towel around his waist and another over his head as he strolled out, toweling off his hair. The sharp cut of his pelvic muscles carved a hard V down to the low hem of the towel, and his chiseled torso rippled with his movements.

I gaped.

He lowered the towel from his hair, heading straight for the long dresser across the room from the bed. He paused, catching my expression. His eyes darted back and forth, “What?”

I made a high-pitched, strangled sound. Half a grin lifted his mouth.

“*Doctor Cade*,” I said in mock outrage. Or maybe I wasn’t kidding. I was a little aghast.

Lachlan opened the top drawer of the dresser. “Something about human anatomy bother you, Miss Brook?”

“This isn’t anat. and phys.,” I ground out, but I sat up to get a better look anyway. “You couldn’t have brought your clothes with you to the bathroom?”

He chose a few crisply folded articles and shot me a sideways eyebrow raise. “Do you wish I had?”



“No.” His grin widened.

“Christ,” I muttered. My eyes were riveted on the smooth hills and valleys of his body.

“Jesus won’t save you from those thoughts,” he teased. With a lift of his clothes, he turned and headed back to the bathroom.

When the door had closed, I flopped back on the pillows. I either needed to get *a lot* closer to Lachlan or *a lot* further. I knew which one was practical, but I was having a hard time convincing myself to commit to it.

I reached for the black tumbler beside me hoping some of the ice from last night had melted and there would be water at the bottom, but of course, Lachlan had already filled it with fresh ice water. The man was perfect. Did he make any mistakes?

Probably not. Those didn’t really go hand-in-hand with his job.

I took a few sips of water, and then I realized I really needed to pee. Like urgently. All the fluids were doing their job, which was good, but my bladder was going to explode. And it wasn’t the strongest thing after Calla’s pregnancy.

I wiggled out of bed, doing a little squeezing-my-legs-together dance, and then decided I had better find the other bathroom in his house. It was a giant palace of a cabin, so I was certain there were other toilets. I walked briskly through the living room, ducked around the kitchen, and peered around the corner near the garage where I’d seen the laundry room. No such luck. There was a set of floating, modern stairs, so I hurried up the curving staircase to a loft-style floor. Sure enough, there was a powder room next to an office.

After I’d peed the Niagara Falls, I washed my hands and stared at myself in the mirror.

Yikes.

My long, brown hair had dried in the exact way I hated. The roots had gotten bent and stuck up like a cowlick, and the top layer had dried straight and frizzy while the bottom had curled tightly. *Why are you like this?* I demanded of my hair. *Why can't you pick one? Is it curly or straight?* Frustrated, I folded forward to flip my hair over and pull it into a knot.

*Smack.*

I felt a sharp lance of pain above my eyebrow, and then stars danced across my eyes. I cried out through my swollen throat, and then stumbled backward against the toilet.

“Fuck!” I shouted, clamping two hands over my forehead.

My feet kicked the knotty pine cabinets in front of me as I writhed, waiting for the pain to ebb. Of course. I *would* thwack my head on the bathroom counter. Of course, I would.

I stood gingerly as the pain subsided some, and hesitantly removed my hand from the spot. Blood gushed out of the cut over my eye.

*Fffuuuuuuck.*

No way I just did that. No way I just tore my head open while Dr. Abs-a-lot prepped his perfect self for his perfect day in the bathroom below me. He already thought I was a hot mess. I guess destiny wanted to nail the coffin shut on that one.

“No,” I moaned, grabbing toilet paper to press against the gushing blood. It was so much blood. It flowed around the toilet paper, soaking through it immediately. I unrolled an unholy amount of toilet paper and shoved it against my head. The cut stung, but I willed it to stop bleeding.

*Maybe he won't notice.*

“Laurel?” his voice called from somewhere downstairs.

*Okay. We just have to find a way out of the house before he notices. We*

*can change our name. Enter the witness protection program.*

“Laurel?” he asked again, this time closer. He was coming up the stairs.

I groaned and leaned forward. The blood from my head started to soak through the massive wad of toilet paper. Head wounds were so obnoxious.

Lachlan knocked on the bathroom door. “Hey, sleeping beauty, you in there?”

I held my breath. Maybe he would keep going.

He tried the doorknob, which I had locked. Silence. Then, “Laurel, if you’re conscious, you’ve got like three seconds—”

“Yep,” I said loudly. “Hey, yeah, I’m in here.”

“... You okay?”

“Totally,” I said, my voice slightly manic.

More silence. “You sure?”

“Absolutely.” I paused. “Hey, can I have a Band-Aid?”

His voice took on a suspicious dip. “Why?”

“I have a... pimple.” Blood started to drip on the sink. I panicked and started trying to wipe it up.

“Uh, okay. I’ll be right back.”

While he was gone, I tried to dam the flow of bright red blood, but it was everywhere. The more I moved, turning to get more toilet paper, the more it bled down my arm, dripping on the sink and floor.

When he knocked, I was trying to balance a new fistful of toilet paper on the gushing cut while using my foot to wipe at a smear on the floor. “Can you just slip it under the door? Thanks.” I sounded breathless.

“Laurel,” he said, his voice laced with suspicion.

“You’re awesome, thanks!” I said brightly, like none of this was a total catastrophe.

The Band-Aid slid under the door, and I snatched it up. It was super small. What the hell? *Oh, I told him it was a pimple. Makes sense.* I used my teeth to help me peel back the paper from the little Band-Aid.

Total shit show. I managed to get the backing paper off, but the blood was everywhere, and the more I wiped, the more appeared, until I lost patience and tried to smack the Band-Aid on top. It slid right off the angry gash. I groaned.

“Hey, cutie, I don’t know what you got going on in there, but you’re obviously losing the battle.”

It looked like I had butchered an animal in the bathroom. I leaned against the door in defeat. “Hey, Lachlan?”

“Yeah?”

“If you laugh at me, I’m going to punch you.”

I heard the struggle to keep his face straight in the way he croaked out, “M’kay.”

I unlocked the door and shoved away from it, pressing the bloody mess of toilet paper above my eyebrow.

He poked his head in, and then his amber eyes widened. They bounced all over. The floor, the sink, my face, my feet, and back to my face. “What the fu —”

“Don’t. Laugh.” I gritted out.

His lips sucked between his teeth. I saw the struggle to keep himself from reacting, and then he seemed to slip on his calm, collected mask. “What happened.”

“I was trying to fix my hair.” He gave me a confused face. “I smacked my forehead on the counter trying to... flip my hair.”

The monumental effort the man went through to keep from laughing was

award worthy. The twitching and ripples that contorted his features in minute movements were fascinating to watch. Finally, with a bracing breath, he held out a hand. He motioned with his head for me to exit the bathroom, like he didn't trust himself to open his mouth.

Before I could cross the threshold, he yanked the fluffy, gorgeous hand towel off its ring and replaced my toilet paper gauze with it. I started to protest that we'd ruin it, but he made a "no" sound in his throat and pushed me forward.

The towel worked a lot better than toilet paper at stemming the bleeding, thankfully. He guided me down the stairs, his hands on my shoulders, and then we stopped in the kitchen near the island. He pointed to the floor at my feet, "Stay."

I gave him a mock salute.

"Smartass," he muttered, and ran back upstairs.

I stood in the pristine kitchen, shifting nervously from foot to foot. I'd probably ruined any chance of him seeing me as a capable, attractive woman. To be fair, I had probably ruined it before this. Or would have soon after. But I couldn't help the crushing despair that twisted my gut at the thought that Lachlan would look at me any less than he already did. I wanted to be a cool, sexy woman.

I was a total goob instead.

When Lachlan returned, he had on a navy-blue scrub top and held a black duffel bag. Heaven help the serger stitch that tried to keep the arms of those sleeves from ripping in half.

He dumped the bag on the counter and came to stand before me. I was eye level with the base of his throat, and he framed my face with his hands.

He tilted me up to look at him. He stared at me. And then suddenly his face broke with a snort, and he laughed.

I scowled. “You promised!”

He gritted his teeth against the laugh, and his chest shook with the effort of stopping. “I’m sorry. You just look so ridiculous right now.”

I ground my teeth together. Lachlan blew out a steady breath, his lips still quivering with a smile. “Okay. Let’s see it.” He cautiously peeled back the light blue towel, and one of his fingers probed around the wound.

I jerked back, and he shuffled forward with me. “It’s not bad. Head wounds just bleed a lot.”

“I know,” I said.

He chuckled. “I thought Calla was the ‘assidert prone’ one.”

“I’m not accident prone. I just have bad luck.”

“Right. Well, a Band-Aid isn’t going to cut it, anyway. But we can get away with some Steri-Strips.”

“You got into your official doctor clothes for no reason,” I teased.

“If I had to bet,” he said as he turned to the duffel bag on the counter, “I’d put money on you finding a way to ruin my clothing anyway.”

“Oh.” I thought back to the IV mess I’d made last night, and then looked down at the little droplets of blood on the plaid fabric. “Oh my word, I suck. I’m so sorry.”

“The nerve,” he said with an impish smile. “Stop apologizing for things you didn’t do on purpose. Come here.”

I stepped over to the counter, and he tilted my chin up. My heart rate spiked. *I might have to keep maiming myself just to get a hit of his touches.*

Lachlan’s eyes were focused as he peeled back the towel. “You shouldn’t use toilet paper on open wounds,” he chastised. “I’ll have to flush it before

we seal it up.”

“Great,” I said with heavy sarcasm.

“I don’t want to hear it,” he drawled. “Get over to the sink. No, don’t put the damn towel back on. Just go. Lean over the sink and—watch your head!”

I had followed his instructions and leaned over the sink, but everything was made with shiny chrome, and his faucet was unnaturally long. I whacked it with my temple before I realized. With a hiss, I clamped my hands over my blood-slick forehead and leaned over in agony.

Lachlan pressed two frustrated hands on either side of my head as I leaned over the sink. “Okay. That’s it. I’m wrapping you in blankets and saran wrap for... ever. Are you okay? Where did you hit it?”

My teeth hurt from clenching so hard. “Fine,” I bit out. “I’m fine.”

“Do you need glasses or something?” he asked. His hands gently smoothed my hair back, and he twisted it to get it out of the way.

“Very funny,” I mumbled, starting to stand. Blood dripped steadily into the mirror-fine finish of the sink.

“I wasn’t kidding.” He pushed my head down. “Stay. Don’t move.” I started to look at him and he pulled in a hiss between his teeth. “Don’t. Move.”

I went stone still.

Lachlan rifled through the bag, and I heard soft, plastic clicks and the rustle of packaging. Then he was in front of me again and he wrapped an arm around me, cradling my head to the side and facing his lean stomach. His hand supported my head so I was angled just right to rinse the gash. He smelled like his cologne and detergent, and his warm, solid body gave me the irresistible sensation of protection and safety. And there I was looking like, well, me.

I flicked my eyes up to look at him. “On a scale of one to Margot Robbie, how hot do I look right now?”

“You look like a pain in the ass,” he said, but he was smiling. He had a clear, plastic bottle with a long, thin nozzle angled off of it. He started to squirt cold saline over my forehead, and I steeled myself against the burn of it. “When you hit your head, did it hurt right away, or did you black out when it happened?”

“It hurt,” I said with a little laugh. “I saw stars, but I didn’t swoon or anything. That’s for delicate, charming ladies.”

“Laurel, can you be serious for like five seconds?”

“Sorry. Yes, it hurt right away. No, I didn’t pass out.”

He finished rinsing the cut and dried me off with a towel, carefully avoiding rubbing against the cut. “It doesn’t sound like you gave yourself a concussion but tell me if you start to feel nauseated or dizzy.” He helped me to stand upright, and then with no other warning, put his hands on my waist and lifted me onto the counter.

I blinked at him. My hands had automatically gone to his shoulders, and eye-level with him, I could see every detail of his sandy brows, the freckles from days in the sun, the little wrinkles starting to form at the corners of his eyes. My eyes widened as I stared at him.

His attention was on the gash, assessing the seriousness of it. “Yeah, I think we can do Steri-Strips.” He looked at me, finally. “You have to be careful with them, though.”

I gave him an innocent look. “I’m careful.” His face said, “Yeah right.” Lachlan grabbed the packages he would need and returned to stand between my legs. I swung my bare feet idly, wondering how bad the scar would be. It kind of matched Calla’s.



He wiped my forehead with a cleansing wipe and then with quick efficiency, pulled the gash together with the strips. He put three of them over the little wound, and then finished it off with a square, adhesive bandage. I liked watching him get in the zone. His eyes sharpened and I could practically see the cogs working behind them.

He stepped back and folded his arms. Then he snorted, laughing again.

“Okay,” I said derisively, sliding off the counter. My head was starting to pound again, and my throat was closing off with soreness. “Yes, very funny. I’m going to go clean the mess.”

“No,” he intercepted my motion and steered me toward the bedroom. “You can clean the blood off yourself, but I’ll handle the bathroom. Go drink some water and lie down.”

“You’re very bossy,” I clipped.

“Cry me a river. Get in there. If I find you anywhere but my bed, there will be consequences.” I hitched a breath and looked over my shoulder at him. He smirked. He knew exactly what he’d done.

Smug bastard.

It didn’t take long to clean the mess off my face, neck, and hands. Nothing I could do about his pajamas. I went back and settled myself on the bed, drinking the ice water from the tumbler with heat staining my cheeks. I couldn’t just sit here while he cleaned up my mess again. I had hated it when Jason had sat on the couch while I cleaned baby toys.

I got up, but Lachlan passed by the doorway with rags and bottles of cleaning solution. He gave me a threatening look. “Sit.”

I narrowed my eyes. He glared back.

With a defeated sound, I plopped back down. Looking at the sheets, I realized I could at least make the bed. I crawled across the bed, straightening

the comforter and checking to make sure the white sheets had stayed firmly tucked around the corners. I slid off the other side, adjusting the pillows, and then yanked the comforter up in place. The bed was huge. It probably took two people to get it as perfectly crisp as he'd had it when we'd arrived. Still, it was worth trying.

I trudged to the other side, fighting the sudden onslaught of symptoms again. I knew it took a while for a body to recover from strep, but the process was infuriating. I tugged the other corner up, smoothing out the top. I leaned against the bed to fluff a pillow, and suddenly two hands had my waist. I went momentarily airborne, and then landed on my back with a soft *plop*.

Lachlan leaned over me, trapping my legs between his. "I told you," he said, his voice low and playful. "Consequences."

"I'm in bed," I eeked out. My heart tapped at a fast tempo.

His nose rubbed against the side of mine. "Loopholes aren't allowed."

"Mnh," I said, making the sound he'd said he liked.

His gold-brown eyes hooded. "Nice try. Cute sounds will not bribe me into giving you a lesser sentence."

I tingled all over with anticipation of what exactly Lachlan might consider a punishment.

Then a phone rang, and he groaned. "I'm on-call," he said with an apologetic look. He pushed himself onto his knees, still trapping my legs, and pulled a black phone from his back jeans pocket. "Dr. Cade," he said.

Another shiver went through me. Why was that so hot?

He listened intently, turning his head to look out the window. "Yeah, it really came down. How bad?" A slight sigh, and then, "Okay, I'll be there in twenty. Yeah, send her to CT. Thanks." He hung up and gave me a tight-lipped look that said, "well that sucks."

I smiled. "I'm pretty sure that was bound to happen. Was it the snow?"

"Yeah," he pushed himself off the bed, pocketing his phone again. "I'll run out and be back as soon as I can. Do not," he said with assertive emphasis, "clean anything. Just sit on your butt, take the pills I put on the counter for you, and drink water. And eat food. I have leftovers in the fridge."

He disappeared into a walk-in closet next to the bathroom, and I saw him flick on the light. He came out with a white button-down open at the front and a tie between his teeth. He slung it over his neck and ripped a pair of black socks out of the top drawer of his dresser. "If you feel light-headed, or your fever spikes, *call me* and I'll come right back."

Lachlan issued his directives while he rushed to pull on his socks and black sneakers, and then buttoned his shirt as he looked around for something.

I watched him with a big, dopey smile on my face. He was *so cute*.

He found his wallet in a natural wood dish on his dresser, stuck it in his other back pocket, and turned to me as his fingers flipped up his collar to work on the tie. "Um," he said, eyes on nothing as he thought. "I think that's it. Anything here is yours. I shouldn't be too long." He brought his gaze to mine, and his fingers on the tie stilled. "What?"

"I just like watching you do the doctor thing," I said with a grin.

He gave me an answering smile. "Yeah, good thing I kidnapped you. My evil plan to get you to fall in love with me is working."

I coughed out a laugh.

"Seriously, I'm just going as a consulting physician for a head injury. Once they pick my brain, I'll bring some lunch." He pulled a watch out of the dish and clasped it around his wrist. "Do you need anything before I go?"

“Nope.” I made a shooing gesture. “Go save people.”

His phone rang, and with another wave at me, he answered it, hurrying out the door with his tie still half-done and shirt untucked. “Dr. Cade. Yeah, tell him I said *CT* for a reason.”

I stared at the empty doorway he’d gone through with a realization that dawned slowly but surely.

His evil plan *might be* working.

Ten

## Lachlan



**M**y evil plan was going to backfire.

I had joked that my evil plan was to get Laurel to fall in love with me, but the truth was, I was the one who liked her. A lot. When she'd lost her composure during my exam the night before, I hadn't been able to stop myself from kissing her. I wanted to taste her like a starving man needed sustenance—my mouth literally watered at the sight of her. It was delusional and addicting all at the same time.

I usually got pretty hyped up when a new Call of Duty version would come out and I had even taken off work to play it once, but *never* had I felt the kind of delirious obsession I experienced when I was around Laurel.

No woman had ever even come close.

I couldn't put my finger on why, either. Laurel was impetuous, careless, and clearly tangled up in a dangerous web of problems that would scare any sane man away.

But she was also clever and empathetic. She had so much depth to her character, so much pain and joy wrapped up in her five-foot-three, *sexy-as-*

*Hell* body, I wanted to drink her in every day. Refreshing, revitalizing, delectable Laurel. Even the woman I had dated for two years hadn't vined around my heart the way Laurel had in one day.

It was crazy.

And yet, I would be crazy to let her go.

She clearly had an attraction to me, and I could work with that. What I couldn't work with was her obvious inability to give two fucks about her own well-being. I wasn't all about changing other people, but I would have to teach her the value of that one. Because if I cared about her, then I'd damn well ensure that she did the same.

I left her on the bed and prayed to God she actually stayed there. *Fat chance*, I thought, knowing the truth. Knowing her, she would try to shovel my driveway or something.

*Shit.*

I would have to hurry with whatever Clemens had called me in for, and then I could take her vitals again and make sure the infection was abating satisfactorily.

See? Distracting. Addictive. And I didn't want it to end.

As I backed out of my garage, a call lit up the display on my SUV. The name Amos Brady accompanied his number, and I tapped the green button to answer the call, my attention half on getting out of my snowy driveway and half on his call. "Hey Brady, what's up?"

"Cade," his voice intoned on the other end. We called each other by our last names, a habit from medical school, and I had gotten so used to it, I caught myself using my own last name in my thoughts.

Dr. Brady, a brilliant neurosurgeon based in Salt Lake City, had the kind of baritone voice that choirs dreamed about. But he didn't sing. He saved

lives. And he did it brilliantly.

Brady, as usual, got right to the point. “They dropped our funding.”

I mashed my teeth together, fighting the urge to curse. Brady hated cursing, and I did my best around him, but it was nearly impossible with that kind of news. “On what grounds?”

“It’s like you said,” he replied wearily. “The preliminary findings are promising, but without the MRI 3T data, we don’t have the numbers to bring it home.”

Brady and I had been working on a new imaging program called “connectomics,” which used state of the art imaging to map out the neural circuitry of the brain. If we could develop it, it would help understand the connections between neurons and provide some insight into brain functions and disorders. We had worked our asses off together during our residency in Salt Lake to get the thing off the ground, but we kept hitting a wall.

Mainly, a funding wall. The imaging we needed to back up our research had only recently been made available, and the machines were expensive to get our hands on.

“Did you give them the literature on the 3T in Colorado? I thought we sent that over.”

“It’s no good, man,” Brady said. Defeat colored his tone. “Without the funding, we can’t get to the machines. And without the data, we can’t get funding.”

Despite Brady on the other line, I swore. Gratuitously.

“Classy,” he drawled.

“You know what, Brady? Fuck that.”

He sighed deeply, his breath static over the phone. “I’m sorry. We’ll keep trying. I spent all night looking for new grants. There’s a federal one we

could go for.”

Yeah, us and every other Dr. Schmuck in the country. I loved research. I hated writing grants. “Yeah, alright,” I acquiesced.

“We’ll keep trying,” he promised.

“Keep me updated.”

Brady hung up, ever to-the-point, and I gripped the heated steering wheel as I reached the end of my long driveway. Well, that soured my mood. It was hard enough being two hours away from him, working in a small-town hospital and going crazy from boredom most of the time. But without our research, I would really lose my mind. Without it, things just felt... empty.

Or, they had.

I thought about Laurel sitting in my bed, her steel blue eyes folding in the corners as she smiled mischievously during our banter. I had felt like there was a gaping hole in my life for a while now. I suddenly wondered if that hole was exactly Laurel-sized. And if maybe she might be willing to fill that space.

And that, I realized, was entirely unlike me. I didn’t just let people squirm their way into my life.

Unless they were accident-prone, loved junk food, and had an aversion to lentils. Then, apparently, they could waltz right in.

As I drove into town, I dialed up my favorite restaurant on Main Street, placing an order for a late lunch, and then called Clemens back after I’d ignored his call twice. I only lived fifteen minutes away, but the dude was annoying as fuck when we had a busy ER.

“What’s up, Clemens?” I asked.

“How do you feel about performing an emergency craniectomy?”

“I feel like our hospital isn’t equipped for that.”



“I called for a life flight to U of U, but the storm has them grounded,” he said. He sounded panicked. “This woman has minutes, Cade.”

I stepped on the gas. “Okay, I’m coming. Do you have the imaging ready for me?”

“Already in the operating room.”

Shit, this was going to be a long day.

Remington called me just as I had peeled off my gloves and gown and exited the operating room. The nurse behind me turned off the flatline monitor, and I swallowed against a thick throat clogged with emotion.

It had been a longshot. Anyone would agree with that. The damage done to her brain had been inoperable and unreparable, and trying to stabilize her for a life flight was a massive, one-thousand-yard-long shot that never stood a chance of landing.

But still, I’d lost a patient. My first in months, actually, and I couldn’t help but think that she might have been spared if she’d lived in a bigger city with a better-equipped facility.

*That’s horseshit, and you know it,* I thought as I pulled out my buzzing phone from my scrub pocket. *She died the moment that semi T-boned her. Don’t let this get into your head, Cade.*

“Hello,” I said wearily.

“Whoa,” Remington replied, his kids loud in the background and his voice slightly out of breath. “Who shriveled your dick?”

“Lost a patient,” I mumbled.

Remington went silent. The sound of his raucous boys suddenly died down, and I heard the loud swish and click of his backyard door. “I’m sorry,

man. What happened?”

“Semi versus compact,” I said with a sigh. “She didn’t stand a chance, but I tried anyway.”

“Hey, they’re lucky to have a world-class neurosurgeon in their ER. She stood a better chance with you than with anyone else.”

A ghost of a smile pulled at the corner of my mouth. “Thanks. No, I knew going into it that the outcome didn’t look good. Still sucks.”

“Yeah, it does. How long has it been?”

“Couple months,” I replied, rubbing my forehead and shuffling into the tiny, outdated locker room.

“The last one was an older patient, right? Heart attack?”

Remington was a lot of things—frat boy turned family man, tech guru with a yoga obsession, part-time crime solving sleuth leading a small army of online geniuses who solved cold cases. But more than anything else, he was observant, and he cared. Like, really cared. He cared about his family, he cared about the people in his orbit. And he remembered little details like which patient I’d lost and when.

“Yeah, only she wasn’t that old. Fifty-four.”

“Damn. Well, I’m sorry, man. You’re a good doctor, you know that, right?”

I knew it. It didn’t make losing a patient any easier.

“Hey, you can move back to the big city anytime, you know,” Remington said for the thousandth time since I had moved from Salt Lake to Montpelier three years ago.

I frowned as I unlaced my sneakers. “I’m starting to think you want to get rid of me.”

“Nah, I just feel bad. You were saving all those brains and doing research

shit in SLC.”

“I like *My Little Pony* marathons better,” I said honestly.

He snorted. “Okay, well we just have to find you a chick and get your roots down, then.”

I paused too long as my brain latched onto an image of Laurel sleeping soundly in my bed, her chocolate and caramel hair loose down her shoulders and her lips parted slightly as she let out little puffs of air.

Remington made a long, drawn-out sound of discovery. “Ohhhh man. What was that? What was *that* pause? Who did you meet?”

“No one,” I said too quickly. I kicked off my shoes and wedged the phone between my ear and shoulder as I shucked off my scrub pants and reached for my black slacks.

Remington made a buzzer sound. “Wrong. Try again.”

I sighed through my nose as I shoved my foot into the pantleg of my dress pants. “No one, *yet*. There’s a... maybe.”

“So, what, you fucked her, but you found out you kind of like her?” I scowled at the phone. “Don’t look at me like that,” Remington guessed correctly. “Come on, who is she?”

“How about I answer that if she’s still around when you all get back from your trip?”

“Fair enough. Get some, brother.”

I rolled my eyes. “Sorry, was there an actual reason you called?”

“Yes. Leif wants to know if he left his Pinkie Pie toy at your house.”

“He did not,” I replied, buttoning my pants and pulling the phone away so I could yank my scrub top over my head.

“I didn’t think so. Pretty sure the kid left it in his classroom. Too late now.”

They were leaving a few days before Spring Break for their trip, but I had a feeling a certain teacher who worked at the school would be more than willing to look for it while they were gone. “I might have a connection there. I’ll see if we can find it while you’re away.”

Remington’s voice faded away as he shouted to someone, “It’s a teacher! He’s fu—er, *seeing* a teacher!”

Michaela’s voice, even further away, shouted back, “It had better not be Ms. Janie or I swear to God, Lachlan! We *like* her!”

“It’s not Ms. Janie,” I rolled my eyes.

“Not her!” Remington relayed loudly.

“Jesus,” I muttered. “I’ll look for the toy. Anything else?”

“Nope. Happy humping.”

I hung up and tossed the phone onto my bag. I was most decidedly not humping Laurel. But the suggestion had merit. I knew she was attracted to me, and if our little make out session yesterday had been any indication, then she was just as full of pent-up sexual energy as I was. But she was under my care at the moment, and I wasn’t about to jump her when she was still healing. She was probably passed out, starving because I was late bringing lunch, and needed soup, medicine, and some kind of movie marathon to keep her stubborn ass in bed.

I finished dressing and only bothered to put on my tie because I needed to finish my consultation with Clemens and the team at U of U who had been waiting for news on the life flight patient. I hated delivering bad news, but as the consulting physician and surgeon who had stepped up to the plate, that was my responsibility.

When I had finished our meetings, I didn’t bother to change out of my lab coat before getting out of there. I checked my watch and wondered if Laurel

had found something else to eat. I hoped she had. I couldn't remember what was in my fridge, and it seemed more likely that she would just chew on the inside of her elbow than go for chia seed pudding.

Finally, I made my way out of the hospital and managed to swing by the restaurant to pick up my (late) lunch and hurried back down the winding backroad interstate that led to my mountain driveway. I had figured, if I was going to trade the city for the mountains, I might as well go all in. I was glad I had. It was a little lonely at times, but you can't beat that scenery.

As my G350 revved up the slick, steep road, I checked my watch. It was almost three. Not terrible, but I hadn't kept my word to come back by lunch, and I hated myself for that. God only knew what Laurel had gotten up to while I was gone.

I was relieved to see that she hadn't attempted to shovel snow, at least. I pulled into the garage, grateful that I'd splurged for a silent motor so it wouldn't wake her if she was sleeping, and tried my best to keep quiet as I eased the car door closed. I sneaked through the garage door, my bag of Styrofoam containers held out silently in front of me.

I toe-heeled my shoes off at the door and padded silently across the wood floors, surprised that none of the lights were on even though the cloudy, snow-laden day had darkened the kitchen and living room. I deposited our lunch on the counters, cocking an ear for any hint that Laurel was somewhere in the house.

Silence.

Foreboding filled me. An image of her lying on the bathroom floor with her head bleeding and a pool of red around her like a renaissance halo slammed into my brain. I hurried across the kitchen to the bedroom and

poked my head through the door. Empty bed. My comforter was gone, but all was silent. What the hell?

A soft “uh,” sounded from my forest-view sunroom.

That was a weirdly familiar sound. But not one I expected to hear with visions of Laurel hurt and debilitated somewhere dancing across my eyes.

“Huh,” a breathy Laurel voice moaned. My jaw went slack. No way. I backtracked slowly, angling my body toward the forest-view room which jutted out over the hill from my living room.

A little Laurel-sized shape wrapped up in my white comforter made another soft moaning sound.

Oh. My. God. Could I be this lucky? I eased my way across the floors, my eyes riveted on Laurel as she lay on my linen couch, her head thrown back and two spots of rosy color on her cheeks. Her hand moved deliberately under the blanket.

Jesus Christ, she was gorgeous. *I should say something. I should let her know that I'm here, but either way, she's going to be massively embarrassed. Not that she should because this is delicious. What was the gentlemanly thing to do here?*

Desire rushed through me and sent blood hammering through my veins straight to my cock. Screw the gentlemanly thing. This was amazing. *She* was amazing. I leaned against the wall, transfixed by her quick movements and pleased noises.

*Fucking hell.*

## Eleven

# Laurel



I did my best to pass the time. I took a shower after rifling through Lachlan's drawers for some joggers and one of those Henleys I'd wanted to rip off his body. He actually had a pair of salmon-colored joggers—trendy—and a white Henley that sagged off my shoulders. I showered and dug through his stuff again until I found a package of new razors. Bingo.

After showering and shaving *everything* (was I being too hopeful? I didn't think so), I brushed my hair with my fingers and tried to encourage the waves to dry nicely.

I checked in with Calla and Mom, biting my tongue the whole time. My mom had moved them both to her place, and Calla just *loved* the fancy guest room. Grandma was loving their little sleepover, and I could take my time doing *whoever* it was I was doing.

I couldn't even contradict her... maybe.

Despite that, I was grateful to her. She loved Calla, and while she had Jason's mentality that she could do a better job than me, I knew where hers stemmed from—her utter failure when I was younger. She'd been more

interested in finding a meal ticket for us when we were younger than being at school concerts or having family game nights.

A nagging voice in the back of my head asked if that's what I was doing here with Lachlan, but I ignored it. It wasn't the same. Was it? No, whatever this was, it wouldn't last long. I wouldn't let it. But I could indulge in some flirting and maybe a little rest—maybe I had earned it. Just a bit.

I drank water, took my pills, and stole a scratchy piece of *nature bread* from Lachlan's pantry. The bread stuck to my throat, but I forced it down because I was starving. I tried to play on my phone, but Lachlan hadn't left the Wi-Fi password, and I had terrible service up in the mountains.

He did have a TV with a million channels in his room, so I clicked that on, flipping through the programs and settling on a home renovation show with two plucky hosts and a pair of nervous homeowners. I watched a couple hours before I fell asleep, but my dreams were fitful. Fever dreams really sucked. They were full of anxiety before some kind of strange sex dream took over and I woke up all sweaty and bothered.

A glance at his clock told me it was one, and I had slept for a good two hours.

I couldn't remember if Lachlan had wanted me to take more medicine around lunchtime. He'd said he'd be back around lunch, but with his line of work, I imagined that often went awry. I couldn't fault him for it.

I got up, stretched, made the bed, and wandered around, bored. I explored his house. I washed the two dishes in his sink. I peeked out the windows, wondering if he was close. I briefly considered trying to shovel his driveway, but it was enormous. And I didn't have any kind of snow gear. If I got myself sicker, then I'd only miss more work, and that wasn't the brightest idea.

I came across his laundry room and a basket of washed but unfolded



laundry. Bingo. Something to do. I folded his laundry, moved the clothing from the washer to the dryer, and found his dirty clothes hamper in his room.

After I started a load of laundry in the washer, I felt sick again, with my head smacking against the back of my eyeballs and ears ringing, so I headed down the steps in the living room to a cool alcove made almost entirely of glass. It stuck out from the house like a patio would, but it was warm and strangely cozy, even exposed to the forest. The couches in the space were huge, stuffed well with some kind of memory foam on the top layer, and I dragged the white comforter off the bed to snuggle down on the couch.

I stared at the trees, drinking in the dusted landscape from all angles. Even the ceiling in the glass box was transparent.

I looked at my phone and saw that it was three PM. He was taking longer than he'd said he would. I sighed, imagining Lachlan in his white doctor coat, doing what he did best. And then my mind wandered, and it devolved into fantasies.

Lots of fantasies.

Really dirty fantasies.

I started to squirm under the blankets thinking of him in that lab coat, the things his fingers did, the way he had touched me yesterday when I'd straddled him.

*He's so confident and commanding, and just... hot,* I thought with a groan.

My fingers wandered down to my pants, and with a furtive glance around the open forest, I confirmed what I already knew—it was just me and the trees.

And my fantasy.

I slid my hands under the waistband and started to play with myself,

moving my fingers in little circles and dipping into the hot moisture. The problem with me and orgasms was... well, they didn't happen much.

*You're kind of broken.*

I banished Jason's voice from my mind and reminded myself what I'd read in a Cosmo article once. It didn't have to be about the actual climax. I could still enjoy myself.

And I did. I played through fantasies in my head that I knew wouldn't ever be real, but they turned me on so much, I threw back my head and closed my eyes, letting my body shake with the intensity of my arousal.

*Hell, I might actually get there,* I thought with excitement. The thought of Lachlan fulfilling my dirtiest doctor fantasies was driving me wild. I felt my toes start to point as I drove myself closer to the cliff. I'd probably do what I always did—overthink it. I'd remember that I can't actually throw myself off into the abyss. But I could try.

Feeling myself getting close, my skin started to dew with sweat, and my breathing increased in tempo. With my head tilted back, my eyes hooded open slightly, fluttering against images of Lachlan's hands and body. And then I realized there was a shape across the room.

I gasped, my hand jumping out of my pants and back going rigid.

Lachlan leaned against the glass wall just in front of the opening to the living room. He had on a lab coat over the white button-down and tie, and he'd switched his jeans for neat, black dress pants. He still had a stethoscope around his neck, and his arms were folded. He gave me a look full of scorching heat and amusement. "Don't let me stop you."

"Oh my God," I gasped, and smashed my face into the plump couch cushion. "No," I moaned. *This can't be happening. Maybe it's a dream. Maybe I fell asleep and I'm having a nightmare.*

He chuckled darkly, and I heard his footsteps cross the glass porch. “I thought the idea of you sleeping in my bed would be the best kind of homecoming, but I’m one thousand percent wrong.” He stopped just before me and leaned down around my frozen body. “*That* is the best thing I’ll ever come home to.”

*Oh my God, this is real. This is actually happening to me, and I have to be alive in my skin knowing that he saw me do that.* “No,” I groaned again, shaking my head against the cushion. “I’m so sorry.” My cut smarted.

“Don’t stop,” he said, his voice low and encouraging.

I made an inarticulate strangled sound.

Lachlan eased me away from the cushion, and whether I wanted to or not, he turned me on my back so I faced him. He pinned my hands on either side of my head so I couldn’t cover my face, and his knee dipped the cushions down as he straddled his body over mine. His gaze seared me with heat. “What were you imagining?”

His molten, gold scrutiny had burned away the rest of my embarrassment. I swallowed against my swollen throat. “I, ah... you.”

He slowly took in my body, down, then back up. “How so?”

Did I dare say it? “You kind of fulfill every... doctor fantasy... I’ve ever had.”

“Not yet I haven’t,” he promised softly.

*Sweet honey badger. No way he’s into that.*

He straightened, unhooked his leg from the couch, and stood before me with his hands in the pockets of his lab coat. “Miss Brook, if you’ll remove your tops and bottoms and wait in the bed next door, I’ll be there momentarily for your exam.”

My heart did a somersault. I stared at him incredulously. He leveled a

stern look my way. *Ho, shit, we're doing this.*

I sat up, still looking at him warily, expecting him to crack. He stared at me expectantly, brows raised slightly. He glanced at his watch without taking his hand out of his pocket, as if he was a very busy man and I was being an inconvenience.

I scooted off the couch, my face still flushed and hair disheveled. He watched me patiently. Heart kicking against my ribs fast, I backed away, around the couch, and then turned to walk briskly to the bedroom. He wasn't joking. He was really going to do this.

I slid into the bedroom in his overly large socks and peeled my shirt over my head as I went. The joggers fell off easily, since they were a good bit too big anyway, and then I stepped on my socks to get them off. I'd taken away the comforter, so I slipped under the wrinkled sheet, pulling it up to my chin.

*What are you doing, Laurel?* I thought with tightening nerves. *You're not some sex goddess. You've had one guy, and he never made you orgasm once.*

*You're kind of broken.*

But maybe, I reasoned as I sat there, my chest rising and falling rapidly, maybe I would still enjoy it. Maybe he would. I had said I would try the "crazy" thing, right? Well, this was fucking psycho, so box ticked.

Doing the thing.

Lachlan entered the room, hands still in his pockets, and turned to close the door. He had a file in his hand just like he had the first day I'd met him, and as he crossed the room, he checked its contents. "Miss Brook?" he asked.

I couldn't say anything. I just gawked.

He closed the file and looked up. His look could have started a forest fire. "What seems to be the problem?"

*I'm way in over my head,* I screeched internally. I took a deep breath. *No,*

*Laurel, come on. You can do this. You want this. You've wanted this for a long time. You don't always have to be practical. Not in the world's sexiest doctor's bed. You got this.* I let the sheet fall, revealing my breasts and waist.

Lachlan's pupils dilated, turning his golden eyes almost black.

"I... think there's something wrong with my heart... beat." I amended the symptom quickly before he got the wrong idea. Or, rather, the right idea.

"Hm," Lachlan glanced at the file, eating the distance between us slowly. "I see. How long have you had this problem?"

"Thirty hours and—" I checked the clock, "—seventeen minutes."

He looked up, lips twitching. I could read his thoughts. *Cute.* He cleared his throat. "I see. Can you describe your symptoms?"

"Uhm," I looked around, and my nipples hardened as a heater kicked on and wafted lukewarm air over me. "It keeps beating. Really hard. And I can't breathe sometimes."

"Sounds uncomfortable," he said placidly.

"Yeah. But I kind of like it? Sometimes I think maybe I'm dying, and then sometimes I think maybe it's the best feeling. I don't know. It's weird."

His bottom lip ran through his teeth, and I saw him struggling to keep his composure. "Gosh. How confusing." He sat on the edge of the bed and pulled his stethoscope off his neck. Without batting an eye, he snapped the sheets aside.

I gave a soft gasp, drawing my knees up.

"Lie down please, Miss Brook."

That problem with my heart started up in earnest. I slid down on the bed, and his eyes watched me hungrily. Heat slid around my pussy.

Lachlan fitted the ear buds of the stethoscope to his ears and shifted his position so he could sit beside me at an angle. He leaned one hand on the bed

on the other side of my body next to my hip. “Let’s take a listen, shall we?” he asked. His voice was smooth whiskey that burned me up inside.

“Okay,” I breathed.

He placed the cold bell on my right breast. His heated gaze held mine. “Breathe in for me.”

I could no sooner take an even breath than I could take my eyes off him. I felt like I was going to hyperventilate.

He pushed his bottom lip out slightly, frowning. “Hm.” He moved the bell, and his fingers grazed my nipple as it went to the spot just under my breast.

I sucked in a breath.

Keeping the bell against my ribs, he flicked out a finger over my nipple again. “Does that make it worse?”

“So much worse,” I groaned, and my eyes fluttered closed.

“On a scale from zero to ten,” he said, his voice husky. His free hand came up to my left breast and kneaded it gently. “What’s your pain level?”

I moaned. I couldn’t even form a coherent word. His right finger shifted, and he pinched my nipple with the slightest pressure.

My back arched up with a twitch. Desire shot straight between my legs. “Oh my God,” I huffed.

“Zero to ten, Miss Brook.”

“Four,” I gasped.

“Hm,” he hummed.

*Not the hum, I thought, remembering the first day I’d met him. I seriously can’t stand it. I’m going to burn up.*

His left hand trailed down my sternum, tracing a hot line all the way down my abdomen. He pinched my nipple lightly again, and I twitched. I

didn't know my nipples were that sensitive. An ache started building right at my core.

His left hand glided up and down my slit, and my eyes flew open. My mouth opened with a hot gust of air.

"How about now?" he murmured low. "Does that make your symptoms worse?"

"Yes," I strained.

His left fingers dipped through the folds, and an electric current shot through me as his fingers circled around my apex. He rolled a fingertip over my nipple.

My hands grasped fistfuls of sheets. "Five," I whispered.

"Already?" he asked, his left hand starting to rub up and down the length of my clit. He pinched it between two of his fingers with clever pressure that suddenly made me feel like there was no oxygen in the room. "That is serious."

My breasts heaved, but he showed no mercy. Stethoscope set aside, he worked my nipple with his right hand and my clit with the other. *Six.*

"Spread your legs for me."

I obeyed, bringing my knees up and spreading open for him to get better access. His right hand moved to my other breast, rolling and gently tugging on the nipple until I felt like every nerve ending had been exposed to icy air. I stared at the ceiling with hazy eyes.

Lachlan stopped the rubbing motion, and I made a moaning sound. "Seven."

"I see. Pressure here?" He pressed against the opening of my pussy.

"Yes," I gasped.

His middle finger dipped inside of me, colder than my core and just big

enough to fill me with toe-curling satisfaction. *Eight.*

He started to move in and out, and I saw stars in my vision. He had his finger hooked up, hitting an electric spot that I didn't even know existed. Every time he grazed it, I let loose an exhale that ended in a soft moan. The flicks and twists he lavished on my nipples were driving me to the brink of insanity. Behind closed eyes, I imagined the cliff looming closer and closer.

Then his thumb found my clit, and I bucked. He pressed hard, and the wet sound of his finger driving in and out of me acted like a runaway train toward my climax. *Nine!* My core ratcheted so tight, I was afraid I would break. *Too much. Too close.*

Suddenly panicked, I sat up.

Lachlan stopped abruptly and his hands were around the sides of my ribs, steadying me. He looked me over with concern. "What's wrong?"

"I—" My breaths were coming fast, and I felt myself winding back down after I'd been so close to the edge. I felt my face crumble with disappointment and shame. "I have to tell you something."

"Okay," he looked me up and down. His dusty eyebrows were tipped up with worry.

"I can't... finish." He tilted his head, trying to understand. I brought my knees to my forehead, my fingers clutching the roots of my hair. I couldn't look him in the eye when I said it. "I can't orgasm. During sex."

He made a derisive sound. I looked up, frowning. He had a "yeah right" look on his face. "Like hell you can't."

"No, really," I rubbed my forehead, and then winced when my fingers snagged on the bandage. "I've tried. I tried a lot. I can count on my hand the number of times I've tried and barely gotten there myself. Honestly, I just stopped trying after years with Ja—years of let down, I guess." I gave him an



apologetic look. “I should have said something. But I thought maybe it would be fun even without an orgasm, but it wasn’t. It was just making me...” I stalled, searching for the words.

“Frustrated,” he filled in. “But close.” He looked confident. Sure of his words. “You panicked because you were almost there, and your brain has you convinced you can’t.”

I shook my head. “It’s not something I convinced myself of. I think it’s my body. It’s weird or broken.”

“Who told you that?” he asked. There was a scalpel-sharp edge to the question.

“No one,” I hedged.

“Twatface,” Lachlan muttered. I gave him round eyes. “Not you,” he said, and then *tsked*. “Your pissant ex-husband. What, is his dick two inches tall that he had to blame you for his fumbling inexperience? Unbelievable.”

I blinked, letting him rant. Was he right? Had Jason been impatient with me?

“Let me show you,” he said. I stared at him. Guilty. Angry with myself. Frustrated. He took my chin between his fingers. “Let me show you.”

I swallowed hard. This was doomed to failure. When he couldn’t succeed, he would get angry with me. He’d tell me what to do, and when it didn’t yield any results, I’d end up finding a way to gratify him in whatever ways exhausted his anger with me. And then I’d have to hear how broken I am again.

“Laurel” he said, undeterred. “I have a prescription for you. Are you ready?”

I rested my head on my arms, trying to radiate how sorry I was.

“Close your eyes.”

With a sigh, I obeyed. I supposed I'd started this. We'd just have to get it over with so he could find his release, too, and I could pretend it never happened. I'd go back to my boring, exhausting life as a single mom, and I'd do my best to forget about the only two days of safety and comfort I'd known in years.

Packages rustled. Paper crinkled. Then he pressed soft fabric against my eyes. "Hold this," he said.

I sat up, pressing my fingers against the cloth, and realized it was a long rectangle of gauze. The stretch of adhesive bandages sounded through the room, and then he had it pressed against the gauze.

Dr. Cade twisted the adhesive bandage around my head and blindfolded me.

## Twelve

# Laurel



**M**y heart did a double tempo.

I felt Lachlan's hands start down at my ankles, and slowly, aching slowly, they smoothed their way up the inside of my legs. Just as he reached the apex of my thighs, he veered away, sliding his fingers up my hips, over my ribs, and gently eased me onto my back. I settled into the soft mattress, blind to what he thought, blind to what I looked like or how this might look in broad daylight. Even my ears were somewhat muffled by the band.

His hands smoothed over my breasts, but he didn't linger there. His nails scraped lightly up to my neck, moving back and forth across my collarbone. Goose pimples skittered down my arms.

He leaned over me, and I felt his breath on my lips. "When I do this thing you think is impossible," he said, his mouth hovering just over mine. "I want to hear you scream."

I shivered.

Lachlan's mouth descended on mine, and he distracted me with a mind-numbing kiss, moving his lips against mine, molding our mouths in perfect harmony. His tongue delved into my mouth, flicking the roof of it and mimicking a hot, slow tempo that my pussy ached to feel.

As he drained every bit of passion from our lips, Lachlan's hands danced down the side of my throat, over the hill and between the valley of my breasts, just above my nipples, and then along my ribcage. But I couldn't think about it too hard because he was kissing me. Devouring me. I reached up and ran my hands along the contours of his chest over his button-down shirt.

My core ached. It ached so much, it hurt. It was more intense than anything I'd known before.

Then his fingers pinched my nipples. Lightly. Briefly.

I gasped against his mouth, but his hands continued exploring my body like he hadn't just electrified me.

Then he did it again. I didn't see it coming, so absorbed in our burning kiss that I didn't realize his fingers had left me for a split second. And then my nipples were between his thumbs and knuckles, rolled, flicked, squeezed.

I sucked in air and everything at my core clenched tight.

Lachlan moved his mouth from mine, trailing feather-light kisses down the column of my throat as his nails carved a path to my legs. His mouth had reached the canyon between my breasts, and he moved to one, fogging a hot breath over the nipple. I moaned, writhing beneath him. His tongue flicked my nipple, and then he pulled it into his mouth, sucking hard.

I cried out, arching my back, and he pressed the heel of his hand into my stomach just above my pubic bone. Pleasure shot through me from that, too. It zapped right through the secret place his finger had found before.

I was going to melt into a puddle all over the bed. Every touch from him, every new sensation was winding me so tight, I feared I would break in half.

Showing no mercy, he moved his mouth down, down, further down, nipping, then kissing. Biting, then licking. I sucked in air like I'd run a marathon, and my hands grabbed hold of the sheets like they might stop me from falling over the edge.

His mouth suddenly blew a light puff of air over the opening between my legs, and I realized what he was doing.

My legs snapped together. Or they tried to. He'd already managed to maneuver his shoulders under my legs, and his hands pried my thighs apart. "I don't think so," he said. There was a sort of dark satisfaction in his voice.

He couldn't enjoy going down on me. Could he?

I didn't get a chance to think about it. Lachlan pushed my legs apart with his hands, and then his tongue slid along the side of my clit. I gasped and then moaned. My legs started to shake. He did it again, and then, circling the outside, finally applied the perfect, silky pressure to the peak of my pleasure.

Something in me cracked with a growing hairline fracture. I ached. I pulsed. My whole being groaned like a ship before breaking apart in a merciless storm. I'd already teased myself to the brink, and he'd brought me there again, and now this? It was too much and still, not enough.

Lachlan dove two fingers inside of me, continuing his torturous, circling tease with his tongue. Around, around, pressure. Around, around, pressure. I started to move my hips in time with his tongue. His fingers pumped in and out of my wet heat slowly at first, grazing that sensitive cluster of nerves over and over again. Then he picked up the tempo, and my blind vision became a Starry Night swirl of color and pleasure.

Something was happening. Something more intense than I could have

dreamed of, and it frightened me. I started to shake my head.

I was making little noises. Gasps that ended on my staccato exhales. Lachlan pressed down on my stomach to keep me from writhing. He pumped his fingers faster, his tongue bringing me closer and closer to the edge.

“I ca—” I panted.

“Yes, you can.” Still moving his fingers in a relentless tempo, Lachlan lifted his head. “Take off your blindfold.”

“What?” It was more a breath than a word. I couldn’t think straight. Faster and faster, he was tilting me over the edge.

“Take. Off. The blindfold,” he ordered.

The sharpness in his words stirred me out of my fog, and I reached up with shaking hands to rip the bandage off my eyes. Blinding white swirled over my vision, but his hand was working me and his other had come up to torture my nipple.

“Look at me,” he said.

Panting hard, I lifted my head.

Lachlan was between my legs, his mouth just over my wide-open pussy. His fingers pumped in and out of my soaking wet heat, and he lanced me with his eyes, full of pure, commanding desire. His thumb pressed over my clit, and he hooked the fingers inside of me around the sensitive ridge that sent shockwaves of pleasure pulsing through my core. “Scream for me.”

I broke.

With a deep cry of shock, I threw back my head, closed my eyes, and felt the waves break and break and break. I shattered into a thousand pieces as my climax arched my back and pulled my knees back.

Lachlan rode the waves with his fingers, slowing his pace until they were a soothing massage, dragging the last of my pleasure from my clenching

center.

Sweat covered my body in a transparent film, and I brought my hands to my chest, covering my heart as I stared in pure astonishment at the wood beams on the ceiling. I was pretty sure my soul had fled my body and was hanging from the rafters up there.

Lachlan pulled himself over top of me, settling his erection against the cleft of my legs and sending a new, heavier wave of desire through me. He grinned like a cat.

I just stared, too stunned to say anything.

He wiped his mouth on his shoulder, still grinning. “What was that? You can’t what?”

“I didn’t think I could,” I said, still radiating awe.

“Babe,” he bent his head to whisper a kiss across my jawline. “You’re an atomic bomb chock-full of latent sexuality.” He captured my stare with his own. “You’re not some enigma. Actually,” he looked away, as if amazed himself, “you’re fucking perfect.” He searched my face. “Do you believe me?”

“I think so.”

He clicked his tongue, eyes rolling heavenward. “I guess I’ll just have to show you again.”

I gave him a sly look. “Only if you take your clothes off. I feel like I’ve been gypped.”

“Gypped?” he asked, rearing up with false accusation. “Miss Brook. How dare you. I just gave you a tongue-lashing of epic proportions, and you feel *gypped?*”

I shrugged. “I guess I’m greedy.”

He bent down and kissed my lips softly, but I felt how his hands shook at

my sides. He had to be going crazy, but he didn't let it show, otherwise. "How about you take them off for me," he suggested.

Giddiness bubbled through me. *My hands? Peel his clothes off? Can I be that lucky?*

He sat up, and I followed, running my hands up the hard planes of his stomach and chest. My hands slid under his lab coat and pushed the sleeves away from his shoulders. His eyes stayed fixed to mine, riveted on my expressions.

I panted slightly, already revving up with desire as I pushed his lab coat down his arms where it slid away and pooled on the bed. Lachlan did me a solid and loosened his tie, his hard, amber eyes promising dark things.

I looped the tie over his head and tossed it to the ground.

Then, button by button, I started to open his white shirt, exposing every firm contour of his chest, and then the clenching abdominal muscles that led to his belted slacks. I marveled. He was pure perfection. Glorious, untainted, sizzling perfection. I pushed his shirt away, too, reveling in how his skin glowed in the afternoon sun.

How was I supposed to give this man pleasure the way he had just done for me? I felt like a bumbling impostor. This wasn't supposed to be my life—I didn't get to spend hours on hours with a Grecian god.

Lachlan flicked his shirt away, and then his hand cupped my jaw. "You're thinking again."

I sighed, smoothing my hands over his skin. He was like a pastry. A firm, just-baked, buttery pastry. I wanted to bite him.

His thumb ran along my bottom lip, as if he knew what I wanted. I bit down lightly on his thumb, lifting my lashes to gauge his reaction. His eyes were cold, glittering gold. "Harder."



I sucked his thumb into my mouth, and then I bit. Harder.

He inhaled sharply, but his attention never wavered. “Good girl.” A shudder convulsed through me, straight to my core. He slid his thumb from my mouth, and then sat back on his heels. “What do you want, Laurel? Your mind knew what you wanted this afternoon when you were alone with me in your thoughts. Use me.”

Images flashed through my head. Medical instruments. His teeth on my breasts. His powerful cock slamming into me while I lay on the exam table. I stared at him, unable to utter a single word of it. It was too obscene. But then again, *he* was obscene. With his dark blond hair disheveled to the side, and his wide, angled jaw that followed a smooth line down his thick, corded neck, *he* had always been dirty, forbidden desire.

I licked my lips and rose up on my knees to rest my forearms on his shoulders. My fingers tickled the nape of his neck, and he shuddered an exhale. I hovered my lips just below his ear. “I want you to bend me over something, spank me, and tell me I’ve been a very bad patient. And then I want you to fuck me like I deserve.”

His hands settled on my waist, and he let out the first, low groan I had heard from him. “Jesus wept.”

I pulled away and gave him an austere look. “Jesus can’t save you from those thoughts, Lach.”

Whatever thread of control had been keeping him calm suddenly snapped with a tangible spark in the air. Lachlan made a wordless sound, low and full of arousal and frustration, and then he flipped me onto my hands and knees. He took my hips in his blazing hands and dragged me to the edge of the bed, so I faced the headboard. My knees hit the soft, plushy, white rug beneath it, and he pressed my upper back so my head slowly lowered to the mattress.

He slapped my ass. It couldn't have been hard because it barely stung, but the sound cracked through the cavernous bedroom. "Miss Brook," he said, and he sounded exactly like I'd hoped he would. A stern doctor. Sexually frustrated Dr. Cade. "I gave you very specific instructions. Have you obeyed them?"

"No," I squeaked. My toes curled with anticipation as heat started to build inside of me again.

"No, you haven't. Do you know what we do with disobedient patients?"

"No," I managed to squeeze out.

He moved his hands up the sides of my waist, my ribs, across my breasts with a punishing tweak, and then up over my shoulders. His hands coasted up my arms, drawing them up above my head as he leaned his big, solid body over top of me. He bit the lobe of my ear, hovering his face against mine. "We punish them."

*What was that thing he'd said my heart did? Tachycardia? I might die after all because I feel like I'm going to have a heart attack.*

He pressed his long, hard cock against my bottom, and all my muscles squeezed, demanding to have him slide inside of me. "I'm going to give you one more chance to be obedient," he whispered, so low I could barely hear him.

"Okay," I gasped.

"Lie very still. Do not move."

It was like he'd turned his hot, assertive commands from the sink earlier into a game, and I had the apprehensive, giddy sensation of ratcheting up the incline of a roller coaster. Something dangerous and thrilling was about to happen, and I couldn't fucking wait.

He left me then, and the air hit my backside and legs with a sudden chill.

I had my head turned, facing the doorway, and he went behind me. I heard him open a drawer, walk around slowly, approach me, and then walk the other way. What was he doing? My heart beat hard and steady like the bass in a techno rave. It was so loud, it drowned out everything else.

*Wait, where did he go? I don't hear him anymore.*

I picked up my head, confused.

*Smack.*

I gasped, realizing he'd been behind me for some time, and he'd slapped my ass with a stinging, punishing spank. I gawked at him over my shoulder.

He was on his knees behind me, and he'd pulled his cock from his pants, but they were still on, slung low on his hips and gaping open, since he had undone his belt. He'd already slid on a condom, and his dick was perfectly straight, hard, and gorgeously wide. His lips had pressed into a challenging smile. "Strike one."

"Oh my God," I gaped.

He cracked a grin and winked. "Back down, Miss Brook."

"Oh my God," I said again, this time smiling, and laid my head back down on the mattress.

Lachlan rubbed the sore spot he'd spanked. "I'll repeat my instructions. Don't move."

I bunched the sheets in my hands above my head.

"Arch your back for me, Miss Brook."

Wondering what he was after, I arched my back as much as I could, bringing my stomach off the mattress. His hands came under me, and with the slightest, maddening of touches, he started to play with my nipples. Two fingers pinched. Another rolled over top of the second nipple.

I panted hard, shaking with the effort to hold still in the arched position.

Lachlan's right hand moved down to the front of my legs and to my center while the left continued to flick and roll my nipple. Two fingers slid on either side of my clit, pinching it between them.

I jerked, gasping.

*Smack.*

I moaned. It was such a delicious slap—not painful, but just smarting enough to send a shockwave of desire through my body. Lachlan stopped his torturous, arousing movements and pinned me down to the bed with his hard chest. His hands formed manacles around my wrists. “Strike two,” he said in a gravelly voice.

I couldn't speak. I couldn't think. The way he worked me into a frenzy should be illegal.

He straightened again, running his hands down my back. His knee nudged the inside of my leg, forcing me to spread my knees. “Last chance,” he said.

*Or what?* I wondered with euphoric anticipation.

With my legs spread apart, Lachlan had full access, and he brought his hand around the front of my pussy again, immediately finding my throbbing clit. He pinched it between two fingers with devastatingly perfect pressure and rubbed it up and down. I made moaning, panting sounds, focusing all my attention on the twisting tension that mounted from his hands. It was all I could do to stay still and not move my hips against him.

“Very good, Laurel,” he said, leaning over me with one arm braced on the bed and the other driving me closer to the brink of orgasm.

I started to panic again. My hands gripped the sheets, and I shook my head.

*Smack.*

I gasped and jolted up. That smack had been harder than the others. But

Lachlan immediately smoothed a hand over the raw spot. “Strike three, Miss Brook.” He clicked his tongue in disapproval. “I suppose you leave me no choice.”

I sent him a questioning look over my shoulder. He leaned around me, and his lips pressed a soft, lingering kiss to mine. Against my mouth, he murmured, “I’m going to have to fuck you like you deserve.”

I moaned into his mouth, and then his cock was up against the entrance of my heat, pressing and dipping tauntingly.

Lachlan kissed me again, soft and gentle. He broke character to whisper, “But you can stop me anytime. Yes?”

“I want you,” I panted.

I felt his smile against my mouth. “You have me.”

## Thirteen

# Lachlan



I'd played erotic games before, but nothing this intoxicating. Laurel was pure perfection. Her playfulness, her timid desire to experience and learn, the *sounds* she made. My God, I'd never heard anything like her. Little panting moans, unbridled, unpracticed gasps of pleasure. There was no pretense, no overly rehearsed "sexy" show for her to put on for me when I touched her.

She felt and reacted. Every second of it was genuine, and being with her was like hitting my veins with heroine. I was high on her, and I didn't know if I could ever come down from it.

And then her *body*. Fucking hell. Her body was made to be cherished. Laurel had skin smooth as cashmere, but along her hips and the sides of her breasts, deeply etched, silver stretch marks gilded the curves of her body like diamond dust. I loved it. I wanted to lick them and feel the texture, but she was already so self-conscious, I knew I had to go slowly.

With her round, perky ass on display in front of me, and her arms stretched out in front of her, she held my gaze over her shoulder expectantly.

*Can't orgasm*, I thought with a twinge of incredulity. *Bull-fucking-shit. What an absolute load of tripe.* I couldn't believe she'd gone her entire twenty-four years believing a blatant lie, whether it had been told to her by herself or told to her by her dickwad ex. I vowed there and then to prove to her over and over that her body was fantasy made real. Every silky centimeter of her body under my fingers felt like heaven.

And God, did my cock know that. It twitched painfully, because as fun as it was to ratchet up the goddess in front of me, it had been ages since I'd been this turned on. No, I'd *never* been this turned on. It was physically painful.

And miracle of miracles, she had asked me to fuck her.

I grasped her hips, wide, yes, and plump, but mother of God, was her ass perfect. It snatched up to her waist where her generous breasts flared back out again, and I was absolutely certain a more perfect woman had never been made.

She moaned when I touched her, and it nearly undid me. *Slowly*, I thought with gritted teeth. *It's been a while for both of us. Take it slow.*

I fitted the head of my cock against her warm pussy, and my hands shook from the effort to keep from burying the full length of my erection inside of her. Laurel moaned again, stretching her arms out and resting her head against the white sheets.

Like a goddamn prayer.

Her light brown hair, highlighted with burnished hints of sunshine and caramel, slid over her shoulder blades and swirled around her face as she tucked her chin down.

I'd worked her up again, and I could feel how slick she was with need. I licked my lips, tasting her and marveling at how perfectly delectable she'd been. Maybe donuts and s'mores were the secret to cunnilingus Nirvana.

I pushed forward, and as the tip of my cock sank inside of her, Laurel's breathing picked up again.

I swallowed hard, trying to focus on her. If I focused on her, then I might keep myself from literally blowing this whole operation. I reached my fingers around to her front, wrapping her perfectly sized waist in an iron hold as I found her clit.

I pushed forward again, pinching the bud between my first and middle fingers. She groaned, and it ended in a gasp.

I could listen to her do that all day long. It hadn't taken me a lot of experimentation to discover that she liked pressure. Lots of pressure. And her clit was almost overly sensitive because she jerked if I touched it straight on. So, I found the edges of her nerves to give her pressure.

Beginning an up and down motion with my fingers, I buried myself deeper inside of her. She clenched around me, and almost like her body took over for us both, she pulled me all the way inside her pussy. I let out a guttural sound of satisfaction, and I pumped my hips against her soft ass.

Her hands grasped the sheets again. Another sign I had her close.

Still working her smoothly and evenly with my fingers, I pulled out and pushed back in. *Fuck* she felt good. So, so good. Nothing on God's green Earth felt this euphoric. Nothing would ever compare again, I was sure of it.

"Lachlan, please," she panted.

I grinned wickedly. "Please, what? Use your words, Laurel."

"Just fuck me, please."

*Well, she did ask.* I picked up the tempo, both with my thrusts and with my fingers, but I felt my control slipping. Each retreat and plunge of my dick inside of her drew gasping moans from her chest, and she pulled her fists up to her head, eyes closed tightly.



I felt my balls tighten and pressure gripped my cock in a familiar pattern. *Come on, Laurel*, I thought. I'd been driven to the edge so many times just from eating her out and then playing out her fantasies, it was the eighth wonder of the world I hadn't come yet. But I wasn't going to be the one to let her down—not when she'd never been properly lifted up in the first place.

She was close, I could hear it in her voice and feel it in the way she clenched around me as I sawed in and out of her.

Laurel shook her head. *Ah, there it is*, I thought. *A nine, if our game was any indication*. I pumped faster and applied pressure to the top of her clit. “Yes, you can,” I said sternly.

Her body trembled and then broke. Her orgasm squeezed around my dick with the most satisfying ripple. I gave in, letting my orgasm rip through me with excruciating pleasure. I held her tight, letting my release thrum and pulse in waves of undeniable bliss.

Panting, I let my forehead fall to her shoulder as my muscles went slack with relief. I kept my weight on my elbows on either side of her, but I desperately wanted to just dissolve into a puddle of goo.

The bedroom had gone silent suddenly, filled only with the sound of our labored breathing. With my forehead against her skin, I knew for a fact her fever had returned. Guilt washed over me. *She's supposed to be resting. And you put her through a full workout, you dick*, I thought acerbically.

I tightened my arms around her and kissed her temple. “You okay?” I asked. She nodded, body slack and sweating.

I cupped her jaw loosely and tilted her face up to mine. “You sure?” I had neglected to give her a safe word before swatting her ass. It was light bedroom play, but I had let my arousal take over a good portion of my brain cells.

She smiled drowsily and nipped at one of my fingers. “So good. So, so good.”

I laughed softly, kissed her nose, and gently disentangled our bodies. After getting rid of the condom, I pulled her onto my lap and held her, marveling at how *right* she felt there. “You looked like you had died, so I was just making sure.”

“I might be dead,” she admitted. She nuzzled her head under my chin, and she might as well have burrowed into my soul.

“Hm,” I hummed, closing my eyes and letting myself memorize the feel of her soft curves under my palms.

“I need to ask you a serious question,” she said with her cheek still resting against my chest.

“Mhm?” I asked, still drunk on the best sex of my life.

“Do you do that on purpose?”

“What?” I rasped, rubbing my cheek against the top of her head.

“That humming thing. Do you do that on purpose? Like some kind of mating call to all the single ladies?”

I snorted and pinched her waist. She gave a small “eep,” and tried to sit up. I didn’t let her.

“No, Laurel, I am not putting out ‘mating calls’ to the single women of Montpelier.”

“Could’ve fooled me,” she muttered.

“But, I mean, if that’s what drew you into my bed, then remind me to keep doing it,” I teased.

“Yes, thank you.” She traced little circles along my bicep with her forefinger. “You’re really beautiful, you know,” she admitted.

“And here I thought you were fucking me for my money.” She stiffened

underneath me. I angled a look down at her, bemused. “I’m joking, Laurel. I mean, for one thing, I don’t care if you’re a gold digger. Dig away. It’s fantastic and I’m clearly getting the better end of the deal here. But I know you’re not. So, relax.”

Her posture softened. She went back to tracing designs on my skin that gave me goosebumps. “So, you don’t think I purposefully gave myself a rare and nearly debilitating case of strep just to woo you?”

“I’m not sure you’re that organized,” I teased. “Or devious.”

She sat up, fighting my hold on her. “I am all kinds of devious, Lachlan. You have no idea.”

“Oh yeah?” I drawled.

“I filled a cart with groceries once and then just left it. I didn’t even put the items back.”

“The devilry,” I murmured. My thoughts were straying from her teasing conversation, though. Her hair was mussed from lovemaking, her cheeks were flushed, and her lips had a swollen, kissable quality that sent a shock of desire right to my groin.

“And your toilet paper rolls? I noticed you put them all paper over. I’m going to go turn them all upside-down, so they’re paper under.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” I said, my eyes traveling over her features, committing every angle to memory.

“Watch me,” she challenged, her blue eyes flaring as she threw my own words from the day before back in my face.

“There will be punishments,” I promised her, my voice low and already husky with a new wave of lust. She licked her lips, staring up at me hopefully. I laughed softly, shaking my head. “I’m never going to get anything done with you around.” I swatted her ass and helped us both to a

standing position. “Go ahead and use my bathroom and I’ll go upstairs and get cleaned up.”

She gave me another salute like she had when she’d bashed her head open, and then skittered away from me, stark naked and nearly skipping.

Oh man, I was a goner. This woman had me in an emotional chokehold and I’d probably let myself be strangled to death before I ever tapped out.

I grabbed a fresh set of clothing—some black, stretchy, cotton loungewear thing Michaela had gotten me for Christmas one year—and headed up the stairs to my second bathroom. The one Laurel had whacked her forehead on and covered in literal ounces of fresh blood earlier this morning. I’d never seen anyone like her. She’d be lucky if she didn’t get herself into the Darwin Awards with her death someday.

I took a fast shower, rinsing off the scent of our lovemaking, but mostly, I still felt itchy all over from losing my patient earlier. Getting lost in Laurel’s body had helped, but the guilt still lingered. I toweled off my hair, pulled the clothing over my body, and inspected my reflection in the foggy mirror. I could do with a shave, but I was more interested in getting back down to just-fucked, cute ass downstairs, so I looped my damp towel behind my neck and padded down the stairs in bare feet.

When I entered the bedroom, I found Laurel dressed in my salmon joggers and a white Henley, and she had prescription bottles in her hands, held close to her eyes while she squinted at the names.

She needed glasses. I was almost positive about that. But, also, what the hell was she doing now? I came up behind her, and she was muttering the names of the antibiotics and antipyretics under her breath.

I leaned over her shoulder. “Whatcha looking for?”

She gasped and just about jumped out of my sweatpants. “Shit, oh God,

you scared me.”

I gave her a dubious but clearly amused look. “Did you not take the pills I left you?”

“I did,” she said quickly, standing straight and putting a hand to her heart. “God, you’re like a ninja. Don’t do that.”

“But I see such interesting things when I sneak up on you,” I said with a crooked grin.

Pink stained her cheeks. “Yeah, like I said,” she muttered, looking off to the side.

“What do you need, cutie?” I asked, coming to stand toe-to-toe with her and wrapping my arms around her waist. It felt so good to have her near me. *Addict, meet addiction.*

She played with the strings on the waistband of my pants, and I nearly got hard again just from having her fingers in the general vicinity of my crotch. “Nothing. I was just curious about what you had over here.”

“Liar.”

She gave me a reproofing glare.

“If I were to take an *educated* guess,” I said, ignoring her look, “I’d go with acetaminophen for that enormous goose egg on your forehead. Or acetaminophen for the fever you’re hoping I didn’t notice while I was merrily fucking you on the edge of my bed there.”

She sucked in her lips, clearly trying not to laugh. With, a *pop* she opened her mouth and said, “How very observant of you, Dr. Cade.”

I gave a shrug of false modesty.

“Yes, I have a humdinger of a headache, and yes, I was hoping to down some Tylenol to keep you from being an overbearing, boring adult who

would, if I had to make an *educated* guess, make me sit there and do nothing at all fun for the rest of the night.”

Bullseye. “Very observant of you, Miss Brook.”

She mirrored my shrug.

“How’s your throat?” I asked, reluctantly pulling away from her. “Can you get down a pill?”

She swallowed speculatively. “Yeah, I’m good.”

The fact that she had to test it only intensified my guilt over taking her roughly on the edge of my mattress. *Idiot*. I should have let her heal for another three days at least before even attempting something like that. I blew out a breath. “Okay, here’s the deal. You do two boring things, and then you can decide what we do the rest of the night.”

I didn’t tell her that one of the adult things involved medicine that would most definitely knock her the hell out. She got a wicked gleam in her eyes, which was exactly what I was worried about. “Anything?”

I folded my arms. “Sure. Anything.” *If you can stay awake after the nighttime acetaminophen I’m going to insist you take.*

She gave me a toothy grin. “What if I want to watch romcoms and eat powdered donuts all night?”

What an absolute tease. I bent down, hitching my shoulder against her stomach, and then folded her over my back as I carried her to the bed. “Obstinate, blue-eyed monster, I said *anything*, and I meant *anything*, so if I have to go to a gas station and buy you powdered donuts, then that’s what I’ll do.” I dumped her on the bed and pointed. “Now stay.”

She grinned like a kid with a hundred blind bags to unwrap. “Okay, but what are the adult things?”

“Things you can’t argue with.” I strode out of the room and to the kitchen

where our soup had gone cold, but that was easily remedied. While I heated up the chicken noodle soup and placed buttery rolls on plates, Laurel's phone buzzed on the counter.

I glanced at it, hoping against the odds that Dipshit Jason wasn't going to ruin our night, but knowing in all reality that she probably had some texts to catch up with. Balancing a hot bowl of soup on a plate laden with rolls, I swiped her phone off the counter and brought her dinner. I tossed the phone on the bed next to her.

"Okay," I said, "adult thing number one is dinner. Which was supposed to be lunch, and I'm sorry about that."

"It's okay," she said honestly. "I figured you got caught up in saving someone's life." My mouth tightened as I handed her the plate and bowl. She didn't miss that. Her gaze went soft. "Oh no."

I sat on the bed opposite her and turned her bowl so the spoon handle faced her right hand. "Yeah, it wasn't the best day 'at the office,' you could say."

Her forehead creased with worry. "Tell me. What happened?"

"You eat," I said, pointing to the chicken soup, "and I'll talk. How about that?"

"Deal," she replied with a wan smile. She ladled a thick, handmade noodle to her mouth and made a sound of appreciation as she took a bite.

"It's not much of a story," I said with a shrug. "That patient I went to consult on ended up needing surgery, but her odds were never great." I paused, thinking back to her mangled skull, the skin peeling away from layers of muscle tissue, and shards of bone sticking out from her face. "Wear your seatbelt," I added.

Laurel's features pinched with compassion, and she reached across the

bed to lay a cold hand on mine. “Lachlan, I’m so sorry. That can’t be easy for you.”

“It does get easier over time,” I replied, covering her hand with my warm one and giving it a squeeze. “But it does suck.”

She took another sip of broth before asking, “Would you change it? Being a physician?”

“Nope,” I said honestly, starting to trace idle circles over her silky skin with my thumb. “The good I can do outweighs the potential failures I’ll face. As long as the scale tips in that favor, I’m not going anywhere.”

“I don’t think I could do it,” she said quietly, looking down at our hands. “It would break my heart. How did you decide to be a... I don’t even know what you’re called. An ER doctor?”

*Literally everything she does is painfully cute*, I thought as I watched her squint to the side in confusion. “I’m actually a neurosurgeon,” I admitted.

Her azure eyes locked on mine with surprise. “Say what?”

“Yeah, my fellowship was at U of U with an emphasis on research. But I missed my family. My brother, his wife, and their kids live here, and I felt lonely in the city. So, I took a job here.”

“Wait,” Laurel said, narrowing her eyes my way and pulling her hand away to point at me. “You’re some hotshot neurosurgeon from one of the best hospitals in the West... and you deliberately gave that up to work in a small hospital emergency room just because your brother lives here?”

“I mean, when you say it that way, it sounds kind of dumb.”

“I could say it in a British accent, but it’s still going to sound dumb,” she said, raising her dark eyebrows.

I snorted. “Is family not important to you, Laurel?”

“It is...” she hedged, fidgeting uncomfortably.



“Oh boy,” I picked off one of her rolls and took a bite. “Let’s swap family drama.”

Reluctantly, she smiled. “My mom just kind of sucks. She cares now, in her own way, but I was pretty much on my own growing up. How about you?”

I swallowed and bobbed my head back and forth as I thought. “Similar story. I grew up here, but around the age of ten, my parents split, and I ended up with my dad in New York. He’s a broker there.” I nudged her hand, prompting her to take another bite of soup. “My dad was never around and didn’t seem to care what I did with myself. So, I guess at some point, I decided I’d just dive into something that didn’t leave a lot of room for thought.”

“Medical school would do that,” she said before putting another spoonful of soup in her mouth.

“It did, but that didn’t mean I didn’t have to do the hard work to overcome how I felt,” I said with a pointed eyebrow raise for her benefit.

She made a dismissive sound. “I did the therapist thing.”

I blinked slowly, pursing my lips.

Laurel avoided my gaze, stirring her spoon around her soup bowl idly. “I know what you’re saying. I get it. But I’m the bad kind of distracted, you know? Like, I can barely breathe every day, and even if I did make the time to *feel things*,” she made air quotes with her fingers derisively, “I don’t have time to deal with the fallout. It’s like I’m running on water if that makes sense.”

I nodded. “And if you stop, you’ll drown.”

“Right.” Her eyelashes flickered as she glanced up at me briefly.

“Not if someone catches you, Laurel,” I said softly.

She swallowed visibly. “No one has time to save a drowning single mom. It’s not *anyone else’s* problem, either,” she added pointedly.

“I can make it my problem,” I said. “I’m a good swimmer.” She clicked her tongue, looking away like what I’d said was absurd. I hooked a finger and turned her chin toward me. “Laurel. You don’t have to do this alone.”

Tears lined the bottom of her eyelids suddenly, and her brows contracted subtly. “Don’t.”

“Don’t, what?” I challenged. Frustration welled up inside of me. Why was she being so stubborn about this? “Is it me?” I asked, an unthinkable realization dawning on me. “Did I read you wrong? I thought you felt an attraction, and I mean, literally twenty minutes ago we were—”

“Stop, no,” she held up her hands, dropping her spoon. It clanged loudly on her plate. Her expression was equal parts mortification and frustration. “No, no, I like you. I like you a lot. It’s just... it’s hard to explain.”

“Try,” I ordered, folding my arms.

She groaned, looking down and picking at a roll, circling the crumbs between her fingers to make a tiny bread ball. “I can’t. I want to, but I just... there are things in the way, Lach.”

“Like what?” I pushed on obstinately. I had expected her to agree with me. I thought we’d been on the same page, so what the hell was this?

“Like stuff,” she said just as angrily.

I studied her expression, taking in the tears that she valiantly tried to blink back and the frustrated line her lips were making. “You’re scared,” I said suddenly. “You’re scared that whatever nuke dropped on your life is going to happen again, so you’re pushing me away.”

She bit the inside of her lip.

“Laurel—”

Her phone buzzed on the bed next to us, and she glanced at it. With what I could only assume was relief for the distraction, she snatched up the phone and answered immediately. “Hello?” As she listened to the other voice, panic settled over her features. “She does? Okay, I’ll be right there. No, no, I’m feeling better.” She paused, listening. “Mom, I’m fine. Just have her ready to go, okay? Okay. I’ll see you in a bit.”

Saved by the kid.

## Fourteen

# Laurel



Calla had a fever. I really should have expected that, given our close proximity and the contagiousness of strep throat, but of course, I'd been too distracted by my selfish desires to think about my own daughter. Guilt raged through me like a wildfire. If I didn't get to her and make sure she was okay, the flames would burn me up from the inside and leave me with nothing.

I set my bowl and plate aside, and I felt Lachlan's eyes on me as I stood on unsteady feet. "Calla is sick. She probably has strep."

"Fever?" he asked, automatically going into doctor mode. Dr. Cade was too nice for his own good. He'd been about to make an enormous mistake just then, offering to "be there" for me. Thank God for the distraction. This was only ever meant to be a temporary thing—a haven in the storm of my life. But all good things had to come to an end, and this oasis in the woods couldn't shelter me forever.

I looked around for my shoes. "Yeah, she has a fever. It isn't bad yet, but my mom wanted me to know."

“Okay,” he said easily, and stood, going to his dresser where he picked up a key fob and his watch from the natural wood dish.

I wasn't sure what his overly calm demeanor was about, but I, for one, was frantic. And then my phone buzzed again with a text. I looked down and immediately wished I hadn't.

*Jason: It's been two days since I talked to Calla. Is there a time that would be convenient?*

*Jason: I'm not sure where you are or what's going on, but I've left several messages.*

*Jason: The car payment hasn't been made this month. I don't want to do this, but I feel like you've suddenly decided that our obligations don't matter. If that's the case, I don't feel comfortable leaving the car in your hands. I'll need you to turn the keys over to the nearest dealership so I can sell the lease.*

My pulse hammered behind my eyes with insistent, painful pressure. *He knows*, I thought despairingly. *He can feel his hold on me slipping, and now he's retaliating. If he ends up taking me to court...*

I had let go for just two days, and I was already on the brink of another court case. What had I been thinking? I didn't have the luxury of just leaving things behind.

*Neutral zone*, I thought ironically with a stab of annoyance at my naiveté. *When will I learn?*

I went to the bathroom and shut the door firmly, locking it with shaking hands. I needed to find my clothes and get back to town. If Calla had a fever, then she probably got my strep throat, which meant I needed to get her antibiotics as soon as I could. The car?

I slammed on the tap water harder than necessary. *Screw the car. I'll get*

*a bike.*

I washed my hands and face, trying to slap cold reality back into my system. My clothes were gone, though, which meant Lachlan had probably put them in a different hamper somewhere. Maybe he wouldn't mind if I borrowed this outfit for a bit.

I turned off the water and faced my reflection. Crazed, dark blue eyes stared back. I felt the creeping edges of a panic attack drawing in. Deliberately, I closed my eyes and took a calming breath. *Okay. This isn't that bad. Make a list.*

1. ) Ask Lachlan for one more favor—maybe he can call in some antibiotics for Calla.
2. ) Pick up Calla and get her home.
3. ) Call Jason and explain the situation. Get him to chill the fuck out.

I nodded silently to myself, and then took one more bracing breath for the hardest part. I had to end my fantasy escape with Lachlan.

With my hair twisted into a knot at the top of my head and my jittery nerves somewhat under control, I breezed out of the bathroom armored in my business-like, busy mom persona. I gave Lachlan's confused, worried features a brisk smile. "Okay, sorry. I know it's sudden, but I can't leave Calla at my mom's with a fever." I ducked around him, reaching for my tennis shoes which had been placed by the doorway. "Could I ask you for a big favor?"

"Uh huh," he said, following my movements and standing with his hands on his hips. He'd put on a white t-shirt and dark wash jeans while I'd been in the bathroom. He already had black tennis shoes on, and the way his shirt stretched across his arms and chest made my mouth dry. A bit of yellow

peeked out of the inside lining of the shirt around the collar and sleeves, making me think that if I nuzzled in close, maybe he would smell like lemons. *Laurel, focus, you weirdo. We're leaving. No sniffing.*

“Is there any way you can call in some antibiotics for Calla? I might be able to get her in to see a doctor here in town, but we're new, and I haven't picked her primary care physician yet.”

“Laurel,” he said, his tone turning annoyed. “Of course I'm going to help you.”

“I just need antibiotics,” I said, shoving my foot into my frayed, gray sneaker. “And then I promise I won't bother you anymore.”

He didn't say anything, watching me with a guarded expression while I laced up my sneakers. I barged onward with my plan. “Um, also, I'm stealing your clothes. For a bit,” I gave him a sheepish grin. “But I'll return them. I promise.”

“You can keep them,” he said, still watching me with a funny look on his face.

“I'll make sure you get them back.” I stood, looking around the room, my feverish panic cranking up again. “What did I bring with me?”

“Laurel,” he warned.

“I think I had my coat and scarf, right?” I had my phone in the big pocket of the joggers, and did a little half-turn, looking for my coat.

“Laurel,” Lachlan said again. He had a look on his face like he was about to grab me and start shaking me.

I straightened, schooling my features with a determination to ignore him. I knew what he was thinking—he had *just* said I should rely on other people. But that had been in the neutral zone.

This was reality. And in reality, I couldn't afford to make mistakes like

that. Like him. I gave him a wide-eyed, overly innocent look, and my hands pulled down on the hem of his shirt. “What?”

“Don’t do that. You know what.”

“Lachlan, I’m fine. It’s fine. I’m just in a rush. Calla needs me.”

He still had his hands on his hips, and he looked like the patron saint of sexy frustration. “You’re shutting me out.”

“I’m not,” I insisted, letting my feet carry me to the door. “I’m just in a hurry.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not taking you anywhere until you knock it off.”

I deflated at the doorway, expelling a breath of frustration. I turned a glower on him, folding my arms. “What do you want me to knock off, Lachlan? My child is sick. I’m in a rush. You’re really going to refuse to drive me to her?”

He pulled his key fob from his pocket, taking slow steps my way. “I’m happy to take you to her. I’m happy to give her an exam and call her in a prescription. I’m also happy to listen to the *actual* reason you’ve turned into a frantic rabbit on steroids.”

My arms tightened under my breasts. I considered denying it. I considered keeping the mask over my face, but that didn’t work on Lachlan. So, I’d have to find some other way of keeping him at arms-length. “Fine,” I relented, posture still stiff. “Yes, Jason is really peeved, and I’m worried it will lead to consequences. But I can handle it. I just need to get back home so I can focus on the *mountains* of adult things that need my attention.” I gave him a little lighthearted shrug. “More than just two, unfortunately.”

He reached me, and with his fob slung on his pointer finger, he rested his hands on my upper arms. “Tell me how I can help. I’ll back off if it helps. Or



I can be here in whatever way makes things easier for you. Just don't shut me out."

I felt my throat convulse. *So, so tempting*, I thought with a pang of longing. But any of this outside the little bubble of the neutral zone would only end in heartache. "Thank you."

Lachlan gave me a dubious eye squint but released me. "Your coat is hanging by the garage. I'll meet you in the car in a minute."

"Okay," I gave him a smile, but I felt it tremble.

I hurried through the living room and hallway, studiously ignoring the little glass patio to my left, and found my coat on a hook just before the door. The garage had already been opened and the SUV turned on. When I slid into the passenger seat, the warmer had been turned on and the heater blasted through the cold with soothing heat. Once again, Lachlan had already thought of everything.

He joined me a minute later with the black duffel bag I'd seen earlier and the Styrofoam bowl of chicken noodle soup in his other hand. He wordlessly handed me the soup—which he'd warmed up again—and dumped his duffel bag in the back seat.

I clutched the bowl tightly as he backed out of the garage. If I spilled this stuff on his nice, black leather seats, I'd honestly just die. The man had probably cleaned more in the last two days than he did in a month.

Lachlan glanced at me as he carefully turned the car in the driveway to head down the gravel road. "I swear to God, Laurel, if you don't eat the damn soup—"

"I'm eating it!" I growled, shooting him a frown. I took a pointed bite and chewed quietly while the heaters hummed through the silence. "I like food you know," I grumbled. "Just not when I'm... sick."

“Nervous?” he corrected.

“Fine, I’m nervous.”

“You don’t need to be,” he said. The evening light dappled over his skin as we drove through the slanted shadows of tree cover. “It’s okay to ask for help sometimes.”

I chewed a gummy noodle and swallowed it. “I know, but... we were strangers like thirty-two hours ago. It’s not your problem. None of this was to begin with.”

“But I chose to make it my problem,” he said, his eyes glancing from the road to me and then back again. “I’m choosing to, Laurel. Hell, I probably chose to the first time I met you. I was *literally* fighting to keep my thoughts off you when you crashed into a shelf of Doodle-Os at the grocery store.”

“Noodle-Os,” I said faintly, my head reeling. “Wait, what do you mean you were trying not to think about me?”

“I mean, I was completely, embarrassingly, besotted with you within the first three seconds of meeting you.”

I stared at him, mouth open.

He spared me another glance as we made our way slowly down the mountain road. “What? You don’t believe me?”

“No, I don’t believe you. We barely spoke.”

“I know,” he said, as if already beleaguered with himself.

“I was wearing a mask.”

“Yep,” he agreed grimly.

“You called me *Mrs.* Brook!”

“I knew you were single, but I was hoping you’d correct me. Usually that’s a pretty good signal a woman is interested.”

I put a hand on the top of my head, trying to make sense of his words.

“I’m confused.”

“So was I,” he admitted. “And then, there you were, eyes dilated and skin all clammy, nearly losing consciousness in a grocery store. If there ever was a sign from the universe that I should follow my instincts, that was it.”

“You’re lying,” I said, still incredulous.

“Why would I lie?” Lachlan asked, hands tilting off the steering wheel in a questioning gesture. “You think I forced you to my house because I’m like... the world’s most benevolent doctor?”

“Kind of,” I mumbled.

He laughed, short and staccato. “No. You needed help, and you were tripping all over yourself every time I touched you, so I did a crazy thing and made a bold move.” He angled a pointed look my way. “And I was *right*, mind you. But now you’re putting up shields because you’re afraid I’ll hurt you.”

I stirred my soup nervously. “Did you know I was into you that first day with Calla?”

“Without a shadow of a doubt.”

“Oh my God,” I covered my eyes with a hand. “I thought I was sneaky.”

“Nothing about you is sneaky.”

I gave him an annoyed look, but I felt a smile hovering on my lips. “Okay, so what are you saying, then?”

“I’m asking you, begging you, not to build the Great Wall of China around yourself and to let me be a part of your life. In whatever way that is. For now,” he amended.

I blinked, watching the trees rush by and the end of the road approach. “I’m going to be honest, Lach. I think you deserve a lot better than that.”

“Rude,” he glowered sideways as he took a left turn out of the driveway.

“Pretty sure I get to choose who I want in my life.”

I groaned, rubbing my face again. “You don’t get it. At all.”

“Don’t get what?”

“You’re going to realize it eventually,” I admitted, letting my hand fall to my lap. “You’re going to understand how crappy it is being with me—and in Calla’s life—and you’re going to back out. I don’t want to... hope. I don’t want to hope, Lach. It’s better to just part ways now and spare us both the drama.”

Lachlan frowned. “Laurel, you’re giving yourself way too much credit. You aren’t some criminal wanted by the mafia or something. You’re a woman with a normal life. That’s not that weird and you *existing* isn’t a reason I would back out on anything we started.”

I clicked my tongue, staring out the window. He really didn’t get it. I’d had men proclaim that I could trust them before, but it never got past the first date when they realized what they were in for.

“But fine. I’ll let it go for now. Can we at least agree that you can trust me today?”

Fair enough. I nodded.

“Good. Now, what’s going on with Dickwad?”

I snorted and pulled out my phone, taking a breath as I re-read the messages. “Uhm, he’s mad that I’ve ignored him for two days. I missed a car payment—which is true—and he wants to turn the car in. Something else about obligations. Et cetera.”

“Okay, well, don’t drive his car anymore. If he gets another ‘helpful’ thought in his pea-sized brain, he could have you arrested for driving it. The charges wouldn’t hold, but you don’t need to go through that.”

I sighed, idly swiping the text messages up and back down again. “Yeah,

but... that's my car."

"You can have this one."

I gave him a horrified look.

"You can *borrow* this one, I mean," he amended with a grin. "I won't have you arrested for it, and we can work on getting you another one."

I blew out a breath. "That's *really* generous of you, but I can't accept that."

"Stop. I have other cars."

"Where?"

"There's a shop in the back. I'm not actually the most handy guy, but the property had one when I bought it. I mostly keep non-winter-friendly vehicles in it."

Vehicles. Plural. Small town ER doctors really made that much? I chose the wrong degree.

"My dad is a stockbroker," Lachlan filled in, as if he could hear my thoughts. "Remember? My money never just sits in a bank account."

I nodded sagely. "Rich people stuff."

He snorted a laugh.

I gave him the address to my mom's apartment across town, and then I texted her to let her know I was on my way. I hoped against all hope that I wouldn't have to introduce them, but that was dashed against the log cabin style wall of the apartment complex when Lachlan got out of the car with me. I felt the sudden need to explain my mom to him, to explain that she was overbearing and kind of insufferable, but she generally meant well.

But then I thought back to Lachlan's patient personality and the fact that he saw lots of people from all walks of life every day. I probably didn't need to explain a thing.

We walked up a flight of stairs to the top floor apartment, and then I knocked under the gaudy tulle wreath exploding with green sparkles, four leaf clovers, and glittering rainbow decals with pots of gold at the end. My mom swept open the door, her face set with a reprimand, and then she looked to my right. Her green eyes went rounder than the gold coins jiggling off the wreath by her head. “Hello,” she said with breathless surprise.

I barely managed to keep my eyes from rolling. “Hey, mom. This is Dr. Cade.”

Lachlan held out a professional hand. “Mrs. Brook. So nice to meet you.”

She took his hand in her orange-manicured one and limply laid her fingers over his. “Dr. Cade, a pleasure. I’m Hannah.”

*Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, my mom is ogling my... what is he? My fling? She’s ogling my doctor. My doctor.*

My mom stepped aside to usher us into her heavily perfumed home. It smelled like she operated a potpourri factory, but really, she just had a QVC addiction. Calla lay on the overstuffed, olive-green sofa, and I went straight to her. My heart gave a painful thump, and I bundled her into my arms even as she shouted my name and threw her arms around my neck.

“Mom! I had a sleepover with Grandma!”

“You did?” I asked, my throat tight. “Gosh, that must have been the best. Did she let you play with her makeup?”

“Yeah, and we got ice cream because my throat hurts.”

I put a hand to her forehead. Her fever wasn’t too bad—maybe a touch warm. She had bright eyes and looked happy enough. My mom had styled her hair into two perfect little space buns, and she had a new unicorn dress over neat, white tights capped with shiny black shoes.

I gave my mom a genuinely grateful smile. “Mom, she looks adorable.”

“Doesn’t she?” my mom gushed. “We had such a good time. I checked her fever, and it’s at one hundred, but with Tylenol, I think it’s down even more.”

“Oh, good,” I gave Calla another squeeze, but she was already hopping off the couch and running to get a toy her grandma had bought her.

My mom was looking between Dr. Cade and me. “It’s been wonderful to take care of Calla. She’s so happy here. You should bring her more often.”

“Yeah,” I shrugged my coat off, not meeting my mother’s sharp gaze.

“Are you feeling better?” she pressed.

How was I supposed to explain this situation? People didn’t just have sleepovers with their doctors. “Yeah, I got antibiotics like you suggested.”

Lachlan stood there with his hands tucked in his jean pockets, thumbs out, and gave me a teasing wink.

My mom turned her attention back to Lachlan. “I didn’t know Laurel had made friends already. It’s so unlike her. You should have seen her in high school. I think she was allergic to friendship.”

Lachlan got an argumentative look on his face. He opened his mouth to answer just as I opened my mouth to prevent him from saying whatever embarrassing thing he was about to conjure, but Calla beat us both to it.

“Mom, look at this!” Calla ran back into the living room, and I caught her by the arms, barely dodging an attack from the fluffiest monstrosity of a pink creature I’d ever seen. It immediately started to dance and make mind-numbing sounds. “It’s a purse pet!”

“Gee,” I laughed nervously. “Look at that.”

Lachlan snorted.

“I couldn’t say no,” Mom said with a sniff. “Laurel, half her toys are broken, you know.”

I gave my mom a withering glare. “I mean, she’s five. That tends to happen.”

Calla bounced on the sofa next to me. “Do I have to go home?”

“Well, yeah. Grandma said you’re sick, and I brought a friend to help,” I said, gesturing to Lachlan.

Calla gave him a curious head tilt.

“Hey Calla,” Lachlan said, coming to sit on the couch next to me. “Your mom told me you’re not feeling the best.”

Her brown eyes went wide. “I know you. You’re the doctor.”

“Yep,” he said, and held out his hand for her to shake with her little one. “Dr. Cade. How is your cut?”

Calla frowned, and her eyes looked up, like she could actually see the cut. “I forgot about it.”

Lachlan covered a laugh with his hand. “Well, purse pets tend to do that,” Lachlan said. “They’re kind of awesome.”

Calla looked at him with worship in her eyes. “They super are.”

“Well, hey, can I take a look at your throat and ears and see if you need some medicine?” Lachlan asked.

“Sure,” she smiled. It vanished quickly. “Do I need a shot?”

“Not at Grandma’s house,” Lachlan said in mock horror. Calla giggled. My heart melted like hot wax.

Lachlan had her sit on the coffee table in front of us, and with my mom hovering in the doorway of her kitchen, watching us with a suspicious squint to her eyes, he used his otoscope to look at her throat, eyes, and then ears. Calla chattered about her magical visit with Grandma while he listened to her heart and somehow managed to figure out what was going on with her lungs while she kept up a continuous stream of anecdotes. He took a few notes in



the same black notebook he'd used for me, and then, he ran a thermometer over her forehead.

She watched it beep with curious eyes. "Does it say I'm sick?"

Lachlan peered at the thermometer like it was a crystal ball. "Hmmm, it says... you have strep." He gave her an apologetic face. "But just a tiny bit. The good news is your medicine will taste pretty good. What flavor do you like?"

Calla and I answered at the same time. "Bubblegum."

He gave me a shrewd look. "That's yours, too, isn't it?"

"I'm twelve," I said solemnly.

Lachlan shook his head as he pulled his phone out of his pocket. "I'll just step outside really quick and order some cephalexin for her." He unfolded his long body from the couch and spoke with someone on the phone with a professional, "Hey, Dr. Cade here," and then he was out the door.

Calla made her toy dance on her lap, and I made eye contact with my mom. She gave me a wide-eyed "WTF" look.

"Uh, so, I ran into Dr. Cade in the grocery store yesterday. I was in pretty rough shape, so he helped me out."

"Where, though?" Mom demanded, approaching with curiosity so sharp, I could taste it in the air. She sat on the adjacent sofa and waited expectantly.

"It was... his house," I admitted with a grimace.

Her thin lips made an "O." Then she looked positively gleeful. "You seduced a *doctor*?"

"I didn't seduce him, Mom," I groaned. "He was really sweet. Seriously." *Technically, I'd say he seduced me. God only knows why.*

She gave me a sly purse of her lips. "Oh, sure."

"Ugh, Mom," I rubbed my eyes with both hands.

“Well, whatever you’re doing, keep doing it. I wouldn’t mind seeing him every Thanksgiving.”

“Jesus,” I muttered.

Lachlan came back in, pocketing his phone, and gestured with his head toward the door. “Alright, it should be ready soon.”

“Thanks for your help, Mom,” I said, ushering Calla to stand.

Hannah looked from Lachlan to me, and she flashed a toothy grin. “Thank God for doctors.”

## Fifteen

# Lachlan



**D**omestic bliss was not on my radar. But then again, escorting Laurel and Calla through the local grocery store felt bizarrely great. Like I'd been missing out. For one thing, Calla had insisted on riding in my cart, and I felt like I'd been given the keys to the kingdom. Laurel's bemused and baffled look only made it better. Like I was winning at something.

We went through the produce section first, and I filled my cart with the necessities I had abandoned the other day after rescuing Laurel. Laurel grabbed a bag of clementines and then trailed after me, watching with interest as I added kimchi, a few handfuls of vegetables, fruit, and a bag of sweet potatoes. I glanced at the way her eyes were dancing over my cart like she was trying to decipher a dead language. I doubled the items to make sure living things made their way into her house.

As we went down the bread aisle, Laurel automatically reached for a loaf of bleached, white bread. I narrowed my eyes. Laurel paused, sensing my look, and locked eyes with me. With her gaze still on mine, Laurel tentatively

shifted her hand across the shelf toward the wheat bread. I sucked in my lips, trying to keep from smiling and raised my brows with a “yep,” kind of look.

With a sigh of disgust, Laurel swiped up a loaf of multi-grain bread and tossed it in her cart. “Bully,” she muttered.

Damn, she was cute.

“We’re not going to infect people, are we?” Laurel asked with a nervous shifty-eyed look around.

“Hey, Calla,” I said to the five-year-old sitting cross-legged in my cart.

“Yeah?” she asked.

“Don’t lick anyone.”

She giggled and held up her pointer finger. “I will not lick people!”

I gave her a fist bump. “Nailed it.”

Laurel snorted. “Funny. Very funny. What is this? Are you two going to gang up on me the whole shopping trip?”

If I had my way, Calla and I would gang up on her a lot longer than one shopping trip. Not that I knew anything about dating a single mom, but it didn’t feel overly complicated. Yet.

Laurel threw a gigantic bag of marshmallows into her cart.

I eyed it suspiciously. “What are you doing with those?”

“I’m going to eat them,” she said, as if it were obvious. “With peanut butter. Usually, I dip them right in the jar and eat until I feel like I’m going to throw up.”

“There’s something wrong with you,” I intoned.

She snatched up a turnip. “Oh yeah? Well, what the hell is this? It looks like a rock.”

“That’s food,” I said slowly, like I was introducing her to a new species. I took it from her before she got an intrusive thought to throw it somewhere.

“You eat it, and it makes you feel better.”

“Gross.”

I clicked my tongue, but my smile betrayed me. Laurel could eat marshmallows and peanut butter all day if she wanted. Especially if she let me lick some of the peanut butter off her lips.

By the time we had made our way through the cereal aisle—where Laurel filled her cart with a disturbing volume of boxes—I picked up on the sweat gathering along Laurel’s temples and how her cheeks had flushed with fever again. She didn’t believe me when I told her that otitis media and the level of infection she’d had were serious, but she needed to rest. We’d given Calla a dose of antibiotics with a graham cracker first thing when we had arrived at the grocery store, and she seemed entirely unaffected, thankfully.

Laurel, on the other hand, was looking worse for the wear. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell her to wait in the car while I checked out, but as we approached the checkout lanes, I spotted a familiar head of curly, blond hair at one of the endcaps.

Remington looked up from examining a box of fruit leather and then waved my way. His dark brown eyes skated over Laurel and Calla before going enormous.

*Well, shit.*

“Yo, Lachlan!” he called with another wave.

I raised a hand in greeting, and Laurel looked up from her cart. I leaned over to her and whispered quickly, “My brother. Ignore literally everything he says.”

She got a diabolical gleam in her feverish blue eyes. “Your *brother*?” She looked Remington up and down as he approached. “Hotness runs in the family, I see.”

I scowled down at her. “Easy, there.”

She shrugged with innocent, round eyes. “What?”

“Hey, what’s up?” Remington had a shopping basket in one hand with random snacks, and I noted that he hadn’t brought the boys with him. Probably picking up last-minute things for their trip.

“Not much.” I paused for one tenth of a second before I figured I might as well lean into it. I snaked an arm around Laurel’s waist and pulled her firmly to my side. “This is Laurel and her daughter Calla.”

Remington looked like he’d discovered a secret stash of donuts in my pantry—elated with a wallop of smugness. “Laurel,” he said slowly, as if tasting her name on his tongue. “I’m Remington. The more attractive younger brother, obviously.”

Laurel laughed. My eyes hooded with annoyance.

“And Calla,” Remington said, waving. “I have a kiddo about your age, I think.”

“I’m four,” Calla said.

“Five,” Laurel and I corrected in unison. Remington’s gaze slid to me with maniacal glee.

*Fuck.* Every relative and friend on social media was going to hear about this within an hour. It was a good thing I fully intended on hoarding Laurel to myself, even if she didn’t trust me just yet.

“Nice to meet you both,” Remington said, and I didn’t doubt for one second that he meant it.

“Calla has a touch of strep,” I explained. “So, we should probably get her home and chat later.”

“Later,” Remington agreed with a nod, and his eyes did a ping-pong game between Laurel and me. “Like... dinner? After spring break maybe?”

We're free. You three free?"

"Oh, eh," Laurel hemmed.

I could have saved her and made an excuse. I could have been chivalrous and allowed her to hide from a commitment to the bossy guy who had inserted himself in her life.

But hell no.

Instead, I looked down at her expectantly and said, "Yeah, I'm free. Week after next? I work days."

Laurel sputtered. "Oh. Ah, yeah, I work... days."

"Lachlan mentioned you worked at the school," Remington said.

Laurel went tomato red. "Did he?"

I gave her waist a playful pinch. "Monday?"

Resigned, Laurel agreed. "I'm free Monday."

"Michaela is going to be jazzed," Remington grinned, flashing a set of perfectly white teeth. "She got a cast iron pan for cornbread, and I guess the molds look like actual corn cobs, and that has her in some kind of state."

Laurel nodded like she understood fully. I'd eat my shoe if she knew how to make cornbread. "I'll bring a salad," I offered.

I could see the panic on Laurel's face as she wondered what this dinner was, what was normal, and how the hell she'd gotten roped into a social interaction with me.

Remington wasn't an idiot, so he moved on before she could work herself into a worried state over it. "Perfect. We'll see you all Monday at six?"

"We'll see you," I agreed.

"Oh, wait, now that I have you," Remington added, his face sobering some, "do you have a second?"

"Sure." I gestured for Laurel to go ahead in the checkout lane and stepped

aside with Remington. It wasn't like him to be serious that suddenly. I wondered if he was checking in on my patient from earlier that day.

“Hey, man, I have to ask. Did you tell anyone about my... hobby?” Remington asked, his voice low. He was referring to the cold case sleuthing he did in his free time.

We were standing in front of a bin of sports drinks that had been marked down, and I picked one up to scan the nutrition label. “No,” I said honestly. “Why?”

Remington scratched his chin. “Huh. I got an email tonight for my weatherman account. You know the one I mean?”

I put the sugary thing back in the bin, wrinkling my brow. “Yeah, the one you use for the forums, right?”

“Right. I guess someone knows who I am. Or they claim to. It was bound to happen with all the higher profile cases I've been chasing down, but I figured I'd ask if it was someone you know.”

I frowned, thinking. “That is weird. Are you worried?”

“Not really. Everything I do is encrypted. They're probably just blowing smoke out of their ass.”

“Hm,” I said, my mind turning over possibilities. “Well, I'll keep an eye on your house while you're away.”

“Appreciate it, man,” he said, clapping a hand to my shoulder. “She's cute, dude.”

I gave him a sideways smile. “Yeah. She's cute.” *She's fucking gorgeous, actually.*

“See you Monday.”

“Travel safe,” I said, giving him another wave.

When I returned to the checkout lane, Laurel was leaning heavily against



the counter, and her lips had parted slightly as she struggled to catch her breath. Errands over. I shooed her away from the checkout lane and told her to get Calla in the car and I'd bring our groceries. She looked like she wanted to argue, but she didn't have a lot left in the tank.

Guilt poked holes in my brain while I bought the groceries and loaded them back in the cart. A lot of the blame for her returning symptoms lay with me and my impatience. I *could* have pretended I hadn't seen her enjoying herself in my sunroom, let her finish, and then she'd have drifted off into blissful, restorative sleep. Instead, I had fucked her into next weekend.

I found Calla talking her mom's ear off in the car, telling her about her sleepover with her grandmother and the fun things she'd promised Calla they would do together.

I slid into my seat and looked over at Laurel who had her forehead leaned against her hand. "Hey, you hanging in there?"

"Mm," she agreed noncommittally.

I put the car in reverse, and then into first. "How about food? Calla, are you hungry?"

"Can we get burgers and fries?" she asked hopefully.

I made a sound like I'd been stabbed. "Calla, not you, too. Don't listen to your mom. That stuff is poison."

Calla gasped. "Fries are amazing."

Laurel groaned like we were both too loud. I reached over and squeezed her knee gently. "How about you? Hungry?"

Her stomach growled loudly. She looked down at it with betrayal. "I guess."

"What do you want?" I asked.

She glanced over her shoulder. "Marshmallows." I gave her a look of

silent suffering. She sighed, and her eyes danced to the ceiling of my car. “Something healthy... Uhm... cheese?”

I gave her an incredulous stare before returning my eyes to the parking lot. “*Cheese?* Like, what, a whole block of cheese?”

“Yeah,” Laurel said uncertainly.

“What are you?”

“A raccoon, I think,” she answered soberly.

After considering the very real possibility that Laurel would eat nothing but marshmallows and cereal once I left her, I got them both hamburgers and fries. And then it took everything in me not to hang around and worry about what the hell Laurel was going to do with a hyper five-year-old while she looked like her eyes were going to slam shut any second. But she assured me that she could handle things, even not feeling well, and it was nearly Calla’s bedtime, anyway.

I left them with medicine, instructions for taking it, and mentally catalogued some of Laurel’s worsening symptoms. Antibiotics didn’t always take, and with a severe case like hers, it was possible for them to taper off in efficacy after a couple of days. I reminded her of that, but I wasn’t entirely convinced she believed me.

Laurel followed me out of her front door after I’d dropped off the groceries for her, and she closed it behind her, leaning heavily against the black metal door with both hands still on the knob at her lower back. “Thank you again,” she rasped with a tired smile.

I tucked a stray loop of caramel hair behind her ear. “You can call me anytime. Seriously.”

Laurel literally looked like she was mentally building a wall brick by brick behind her jean-blue eyes. “Yeah.”

I tugged her earlobe. “Laurel, come on. I just strong-armed you into dinner with my family. If you don’t like me, you should tell me now.”

Concern flitted over her delicate features. “I like you,” she assured me. I raised my eyebrows meaningfully. “Look at how much I’ve upended your life in two days,” she pointed out. “You think it’s going to get any less hectic?”

I looked around like she’d spotted an alternate reality I’d missed. “Sorry, do I look harassed or something?”

“No,” she admitted grudgingly. Her voice had gone low and raspy, and I had to force my brain to not remember the way she’d moaned in my bed only hours earlier.

“My life is boring, Laurel,” I admitted. “None of this has been a burden. If it was, do you think I’d chase you around like I have been?”

“No,” she admitted again, looking to the side.

I slid a hand around the back of her neck and closed the distance between us, loving the feel of her skin beneath my fingers. “Do you want me to fuck off?”

“No,” she said quickly, her eyes flying to mine.

I quirked up a smile. “Okay. Then, I’ll see you soon.”

Laurel’s shoulders relaxed, like she’d released tension she’d been holding onto. “I’ll text you,” she promised.

I kissed her forehead, wanting more but knowing I’d already taken more than I should have that day. “Texting is good,” I agreed.

My phone rang. It was Clemens again, and I answered as I turned away from Laurel, giving her one last wave. “Hey, what’s up?”

“The family is here from Montana,” he said, and he sounded even more tired than he had been earlier in his shift. “Can you come in and talk to

them?”

I checked my watch. It was nearly eight, which was the normal time for a night shift, anyway. “Yeah. Can you send Mack to pick me up? I’ll be at Second and Willow.”

“Car trouble?”

I glanced at my gleaming, brand-new SUV in Laurel’s parking lot. Smiling to myself, I said, “Nah. Would you believe me if I said it was actually good luck?”

“No,” Clemens responded gruffly. “I’ll send Mack. You sure you don’t mind handling the family?”

“I can handle it.” I hung up, and with another smile, headed for the intersecting point of the two roads to wait for Mack. I couldn’t help but feel amusement over Laurel’s worries about introducing “chaos” to my life. What I dealt with on a daily basis—the pain, the adrenaline, the failures that resulted in the worst outcomes—*that* was chaos. A blue-eyed raccoon with dad jokes and a shitty ex-husband didn’t scare me.

I could handle it.

## Sixteen

# Laurel



I decided that being sick without Lachlan was too boring to endure. I stayed up too late daydreaming about him. When I woke, I felt worse than I had the morning before, and dragged myself to the kitchen to drink water and take the pills Doctor Dreamy had left me.

Calla woke up in bright spirits, and her frustration with my exhaustion turned out to be the perfect two ingredients for a day from Hell. Calla turned whiny and demanding, and my headache just about split my brain in half. I did my best to entertain her while slowly going mad from inactivity myself.

Also, I couldn't stop thinking about Lachlan. It was seriously obscene to sit there with my cute kiddo, reading a book about a unicorn finding her identity while half my mind was on the things that Lachlan's tongue could do.

*I'm going to Hell for this. Actually, I'm already burning.*

I let my boss know I'd be in tomorrow.

I ate leftovers for lunch.

I fought sleep while Calla watched a movie.

Around two, my phone chirped with a text.

*Lachlan: Just woke up. You doing OK?*

I answered immediately.

*Laurel: Yeah! We're doing fine over here. Did you end up working again last night?*

*Lachlan: Duty calls and all that. How's your fever? Have you been alternating the two antipyretics?*

My eyes did a guilty side-bounce. I forgot about that part. I'd taken my antibiotic that morning, but since Calla didn't have a fever, I'd forgotten to check mine.

*Laurel: Of course.*

Lachlan's text bounced with three dots for a minute.

*Lachlan: I think I might be a superhero. I can tell you're lying from all the way over here.*

I snorted.

*Laurel: Okay, I forgot. I'll go do it now, though.*

*Lachlan: Check your temp first.*

I pulled the cheap digital thermometer out of the coffee table drawer and stuck it under my tongue. After I pushed the button, I texted him.

*Laurel: It takes 2 min.*

*Lachlan: Didn't they outlaw mercury thermometers in the 70s?*

*Laurel: Don't come for my thermometer. It got me through Calla's infancy.*

*Lachlan: Poor Calla. Can I bring you guys dinner?*

No, you're too perfect and tempting. I'll fall in love for real if you bring me delicious food.

*Laurel: We're OK.*

*Lachlan: I'm bringing quinoa and turnips.*

I laughed out loud before texting back.

*Laurel: Gross. I can make dinner.*

I paused, thinking. Then, before my courage deserted me, I added, “*But you can join us.*”

*Lachlan: 6:30 okay? I start work at 8.*

*Laurel: Sounds good to me.*

*Lachlan: Temp?*

My thermometer beeped and I checked it. I cringed. Seriously? A hundred and two? With a disgusted sigh, I texted him back.

*Laurel: I'll go take the stuff.*

*Lachlan: I'm changing your antibiotics. Be there in a couple hours.*

I felt my face glow like one of the magic unicorns on Calla's show. What possessed this man to give a single flying fart about me was beyond me, but having someone care—genuinely care—about my well-being was making me drunk on giddy juice.

And then I realized I'd said I'd make dinner. *Shit.* Also he was coming over and I looked homeless. *Double shit.*

“Hey Calla, are you okay if mommy goes to shower really quick?”

“Uh-huh,” Calla said, her starry eyes on the swish of magic on the screen.

“Okay, fast shower,” I said. I hopped off the couch, but then I skidded to a halt at the island. Which pill was I supposed to start with for a fever? I decided on Ibuprofen, swallowed them with a swig of water from my water bottle, and then dove into the shower.

An hour later, I was clean, shaved, blow dried, and fresh-faced with a swish of mascara for good measure. Except, my hair had decided it wanted to be frizzy again, so I braided it and dithered over what to wear. I decided to go

with an over-sized, off-the-shoulder graphic tee that showed off a little hint of the black lace bralette underneath. I always wore leggings. No getting around that. I pulled on a pair of super fluffy, comfortable socks because I wanted to, and then I slid into the kitchen.

Dinner.

I looked around the kitchen, wondering what Lachlan would eat without poking fun at my eating habits again. This was the most free time I'd had in months, and usually, we were so busy, I was lucky if I could toast a couple chicken patties for chicken burgers. I did try to add canned vegetables with it, but chips were kind of vegetables, right?

Maybe I did need to examine my diet.

No time for that now, though. I decided I could probably manage to make baked potatoes and chili. Lachlan had bought a pretty good assortment of fresh vegetables, and while I preheated the oven for the baked potatoes, I scrolled through recipes on my phone. Most of them needed four hours at least. Or a pressure cooker. I had one pot and a frying pan the size of a dinner plate.

Pursing my lips, I looked at the list of ingredients. I had most of them.

*Meh, good enough.*

While I diced and sliced, Calla came to join me in the kitchen, hopping up on a bar stool to watch me with chattering interest. I explained what I was doing and why, and she helped me peel the garlic.

I burned the meat a little. And the carrots were definitely hard. And I'd spilled too much chili powder into it. But by the time the knock sounded on the front door, I had baked potatoes, chili, and steamed broccoli set on the table.

And I was completely out of breath and flustered.



I smoothed the straying curls away from my face, wiped at a chili stain on my blue shirt, and sucked in a breath through my nose. When I opened the door, I almost fell over sideways.

Lachlan stood there dressed in a white button-down shirt tucked into black slacks. He'd folded his sleeves up to his elbows, and he had a brown paper bag of groceries in the curve of one arm. He looked me up and down with a slowly widening crook of his mouth. "Hey there."

"Hey," I said, trying to moderate my breath so I didn't sound like I'd been running.

Behind me, Calla shouted, "Mom made you real dinner!"

Heat climbed up my neck and I stepped aside. "I mean, barely. No big deal."

Lachlan poked his head through the door, and then his feet followed. "Smells good. You didn't do anything crazy, did you?"

"No," I waved a hand. *I almost died. It was horrible. I'm never cooking again.*

As I shut the door, he leaned over behind me and ghosted a kiss along my jaw. "Good, because if you overdid it, I'm tying you to the bed."

The heat in my neck flamed to my hairline. "Oh my God."

He chuckled, kissed my cheek, and then turned to Calla. "I found something for you."

She squealed with delight, her curly, dark blond hair bouncing as she hopped down from the barstool. "What is it?"

He pulled a character-topped juice from the grocery bag. It was the same character from her favorite show. She split the air with her delighted shriek, and he laughed, bending on one knee to help her open it.

I watched them with folded arms and a smile, walking slowly through the

living room to join them. Had I fallen for an android? This guy couldn't be real.

*Wait, fallen? No, you didn't, Laurel. You did not just say that. Backtrack that fuckin train.*

Lachlan surveyed the food on the table as he stood. "Hey, you added gross food."

"Guess I kind of like you," I admitted, coming to stand next to him.

He slid a hand along the side of my face, and his fingers tugged playfully on a curl near my ear. "I *really* like you, cutie." I lit up like a Christmas tree.

Calla watched us, and then her eyes got huge. "Ohhhhhh."

I jumped, taking a step back. "Hey, do you want to drink your juice with your dinner?"

Easily distracted, she skipped to the little folding table we had in the corner of the combined kitchen/dining room area and took her seat on a mismatched dining room chair. I had one wrought iron chair, one light-colored, 90s, wood chair, and a folding, metal chair. I liked to think of it as eclectic chic.

Lachlan sat on the folding chair in front of a super classy, teal plastic plate. After the first dozen broken dishes with Calla, I'd abandoned the fragile ones. "Chili, huh?" he asked.

"Well, you bought ground turkey, and I literally have no idea what else to do with that."

He huffed a laugh. "Looks awesome."

I shrugged, smiling.

Lachlan dished up my plate while I cut Calla's potato and broccoli, and then ladled chili into his bowl. "I wish I could stay longer, but night shifts are kind of merciless."

“Ah, sorry, that sounds rough,” I said, sitting in front of my plate. “Is it a long shift?”

“It’s twelve hours. I’m the only unmarried, childless guy, so I take a good share of night shifts.” He took a bite of chili.

“Are you a night owl, or do you ha—”

Lachlan suddenly coughed, his mouth closed tightly, and he swallowed. His face went beet red, and his eyes started to water.

“Oh my God, are you okay?” I gasped. “Is it the chili?” I started to take a bite to see what was wrong with it, but his hand lashed out and slammed mine to the table. Chili from my spoon went flying.

Lachlan coughed hard, wheezing, and his other fist clenched hard on the table as he screwed his eyes shut.

I put my free hand to my mouth. “Did I kill you? What’s happening?”

“Is it spicy?” Calla demanded loudly, her eyes turning to me with an accusatory squint. Calla did not do spicy.

“I-I didn’t think it would be,” I said lamely.

Lachlan still had my hand in a death grip, and he seemed to be having some kind of laughing, coughing fit. He took a drink of water from his cup, but it didn’t seem to make a difference.

“Oh my God. I’m so sorry,” I said uselessly. “I’m so, so sorry. I didn’t think there was that much chili powder.”

He laughed harder, still coughing, and stood from his chair to stumble into the kitchen with tear-blinded eyes. “Don’t eat that,” he croaked.

My hands were on my mouth, and Calla rounded on me with a loud, “Mom!”

Lachlan found paper towels and wiped his eyes and blew his nose. “Mother of God,” he laughed, still choking.

I stood up and hovered in front of him, my hands still on my mouth. “Did I poison you?” I asked, my voice muffled. “Can you breathe? Do you need some milk?”

He forced a teary eye open over the paper towel he had over his face. “What did you use?”

“Chili powder!” I said. “It called for two teaspoons, and I did spill a little too much in there, but it shouldn’t be that bad.” As I babbled, I went rooting through the cabinet for the chili powder. I pulled it down and read the label. “Santel’s Spice Company...” I gasped. Then I let my head fall to the counter.

I heard the laugh in his voice as he rasped, “What is it?”

“It’s ghost pepper powder.” He laughed, full tilt, head back and ending on a tortured cough. “I’m the worst,” I moaned with my head in my arms.

“What’s a ghost pepper?” Calla wanted to know. I picked my head up and took in her wrinkled nose and dubious tilt away from the food.

“Just don’t eat it,” I sighed, standing straight and going to Lachlan again. I stood on my tiptoes and put my hands on either side of his head, framing his thick blond hair. “Lachlan, I’m so sorry. I’ve never made chili before. I bought that powder for a dare, and it’s the same brand as the regular chili powder, which seems like really bad thought process on their part, because the only thing helping them stand apart is *words* and really, who reads words on things when they’re trying to sauté and boil and not burn the onions—”

Lachlan pinched my cheek. “Stop,” he croaked, still smiling. “You’re killing me faster.”

I pinched his cheek back. “I’m trying to apologize!”

Lachlan pulled away, suddenly, and coughed into his arm. “They’re not going to let me go to work. They’ll think I have COVID.”

“Okay, it can’t be that bad.”

Lachlan squinted over his arm, “It’s bad.”

“Please,” I muttered, more out of the hope that he was exaggerating, and I hadn’t burned his taste buds off permanently.

Lachlan got a wicked gleam in his red-streaked eyes. “Hey Calla, do you want pizza?”

“Yeah!” she cheered, hopping off her chair.

“Go get your socks and shoes on,” he said, not breaking eye contact with my confused expression.

“Yay!” Calla sang and darted out of the kitchen and to her room.

Lachlan lunged for me.

I screeched, trying to pull away, but he was faster, and he scooped an arm around my waist. We spun, and suddenly my back leaned against the sink, and he had my chin in a vice grip. Before I could protest, he sealed his mouth to mine and flicked out his tongue.

Heat seared my mouth. My lips immediately started to tingle, and the fires of Hell seemed to lick at my lips as he devoured my mouth in a crushing, invasive kiss. My mouth was on fire. I felt it creeping down to my sore throat, and Lachlan’s eyes fluttered open, as if waiting for my reaction.

So, I did the opposite.

I leaned into him, letting the tingle sear across my lips, and I flicked my tongue out to lap up the roaring inferno of pepper oils that had attacked his mouth. I didn’t care if his ghost pepper lips were turning mine to ash. I didn’t care if the scorching sensation was making its way to my strep throat and causing crackles of pain in its wake. I wanted him. All of him.

I twined my arms around the back of his neck, and on my tiptoes again, I pressed myself against the firm heat of his erection that had already started to bulge against his slacks.

Lachlan sucked in an aroused breath, almost pained, and his fingers dove into my hair. I pulsed my hips against him. He groaned.

“Mom, where’s my pretty shoes?” Calla asked from her room.

We jumped apart like frogs on an electric fence. I put a hand to my mouth, my eyes watering. “What’s that, sweetie?” I choked.

Calla wandered out of her room with a pair of sneakers in her hands. “Where’s my pretty shoes Grandma bought me?”

My eyes jumped to Lachlan’s. His gaze devoured me.

“Uh, I’ll help you find them,” I said, but my attention didn’t leave his expression. Because his eyes were promising unholy retribution. And I couldn’t wait.

## Seventeen

# Lachlan



I rubbed my eyes and glanced at the clock. Six AM. Groaning, I stretched back in my chair, reaching my arms over my head with a patient file in one hand. I had two hours of my shift left, and then Clemens would be in. I was beat to Hell. The last three days had gone by in a blur—I'd worked forty-five hours in three days, which wasn't abnormal, but it did make me want to hibernate for a week.

A knock sounded on my door and “Ariel”—I grinned to myself at Laurel’s nickname for Angela—poked her red hair around my doorframe. “Patient in three is asking for pain management.”

“I’m sure they are,” I replied dryly. I had their chart in my hand, and it detailed four previous opioid overdoses other than the one they were currently suffering from. “Give her point one of Clonidine and see where that gets us.”

She patted the doorframe, “You got it.”

Thank God our one-night stand hadn't affected our working relationship. The town was small enough as it was—it had been beyond stupid to

jeopardize a working relationship that couldn't be replaced easily. Although, arguably, in a town the size of Montpelier, any relationship was a risk if it went south.

I wasn't going to let that happen with Laurel, though. I wasn't in the habit of second guessing my instincts. My instincts with Laurel were pretty simple: Yes. Yes to all of it.

Speaking of which. I pulled my phone out of my pocket and shot off a text to Remington. He was still in California, but if I didn't ask him while it was on my brain, I'd probably forget by the time I stumbled home to catch a few hours of sleep.

Surprisingly, even though it was five in the morning his time, he texted back immediately.

*Lachlan: Goat yoga a thing here?*

*Remington: You got it bad, dude. She's into that shit? Yeah, call McKaydee Ranch. They only do it Saturdays, though.*

*Lachlan: Why are you awake?*

*Remington: We got food poisoning from a taco truck.*

I cringed. Yikes. Sounded like their vacation was going swimmingly.

*Lachlan: Sorry, man. So no taco salad next mon?*

*Remington: Fuck tacos. Oh, I got another email. It's a weird one bc it mentions you. I'm forwarding.*

I frowned. So, this person did know Remington's identity if they were able to mention me directly. That didn't sound good. My email app dinged, so I opened it, and I skimmed it before my eyebrows shot up to my hairline. "Fucker," I hissed under my breath.

*Mr. Cade,*



*In addition to the numerous case files found in your possession—illegally—we wanted to take a moment to discuss the interesting passion your brother has.*

*Specifically, we refer to his recent, field-changing work with connectomics and the geometrically aware neural framework computations he and his partner have managed to create. It's been made aware to certain people that his mSPD-NN was not included in his preprint because the necessary calculations derived from an MRI 3T have not been properly gathered yet. We can therefore assume they are hesitant to share this crucial formula with the medical community before it has been completed.*

*It would be a shame if this information, which our associates are now in possession of, made its way into another preprint. Especially if those interested parties had access to technology to complete the research before he could.*

*I'll be in touch.*

*I texted Remington back immediately.*

*Lachlan: I know who it is.*

*Remington: Whatd you do? Amputated the leg off the wrong guy?*

*Lachlan: I don't amputate legs, moron. When you get back, I need your tech brain to hammer this shithead to the wall.*

*Remington: I guess I'll get the details from you later. But either way, I'll bring the nails.*

Sighing again, I tossed my phone onto my desk and leaned back in my chair to stare at the ceiling. Goat yoga and revenge hacking. Just a normal day in the life of a small-town doctor.

\* \* \*

*Lachlan: Hey cutie. Sorry it's been crazy. Strep is going around.*

*Laurel: You're okay! At least at the hospital your mouth will be safe from my chili.*

*Lachlan: My mouth says it wants your chili.*

*Laurel: Careful what you ask for.*

*Lachlan: It's a risk I'm willing to take. Are you free tomorrow? Can you get a sitter for Calla?*

*Laurel: I'll ask my mom.*

I blinked at the screen in the early morning light and squinted against the glare. Laurel hadn't texted me back after that last one from the day before, but either way, I was determined to see her today. There was no rational reason for missing someone I'd only met a week before, but there it was. I was starving for Laurel. If I didn't get to eat her, I'd probably go crazy.

Fortunately, she texted me back as I was brushing my teeth.

*Laurel: Sorry, I meant to tell you yes. I got distracted.*

I smiled to myself as I texted her back.

*Lachlan: That doesn't sound like you at all.*

*Laurel: :p*

*Lachlan: I'll pick you up around noon. Dress for physical activity. ;)*

*Laurel: That is either very exciting or very not.*

I left her wondering because I liked nervous Laurel. Nervous Laurel did things with her mouth that fascinated me.

I took my time working out because I'd rushed every session this week for Laurel reasons and work reasons, and then as I showered, I plotted like an evil mastermind. I had to find a way to handle our angry hacker problem.

It was Jason, there was no doubt about that. I'd gotten an email last night about my research, too. The little prick was unearthing all kinds of things he thought Remington and I wouldn't want broadcasted to the world. But after a quick chat with my brother about our options, we had formulated a decent plan. The real question was, should I tell Laurel?

I dressed in a lightweight, athletic hoodie and joggers before padding out to my kitchen and opening my laptop. Remington had already taken some time out of his barfy vacation to send me the preliminary details for our cyber trap, and I perused them while I threw things in a blender for my breakfast. They looked good. Really good. Even a tech dick in Norway wouldn't tell the difference between this and something real, I was pretty sure.

And, I realized, I would have to let Laurel in on it. There was no way around it. If I didn't tell her the truth, then she'd never trust me going forward. It might make her feel guilty because she was way too nice, but that was something she needed to get over. We aren't nice to assholes—even if the asshole is the father of your kid and supposedly holds the strings to your happiness in his greasy, fat palms.

Yes, I'd looked him up. He definitely had greasy, fat palms.

Laurel texted me while I was prepping for our dinner.

*Laurel: How active? Are we talking light stroll or hot guy fitness here?*

*Lachlan: Make sure you can bend over.*

*Laurel: Not nice. You're setting me up for disappointment.*

I snorted. There was no chance of my disappointing Laurel tonight. In fact, I fully planned on getting her hooked on me at least half as much as I was hooked on her.

With dinner prepped and yoga mats in hand, I threw everything in the back seat of my pickup truck and headed back down the mountain into town. I texted Laurel at the end of the driveway to let her know I was on my way.

When I pulled up to her apartment complex, she was already outside in the frigid March weather, her arms crossed over a thin hoodie that matched the neon yellow and black athleticwear outfit she'd dressed her curvy body in. Her hips flared out and back into her waist in a way that made me feel primal inside. I wanted to run my hands up and down that hourglass shape of hers.

Among other things. Shit, this was going to be torture. Good torture, but still. Pure torture.

Her ponytail swished as she tilted her head to look inside the window when I parked in front of her. I got out and shoved my hands in the pockets of my joggers to keep from grabbing her. "Hey, cutie."

She looked me up and down, and I didn't miss the way her eyes glazed over for a second as she stared at me. "Whoa, your shirt looks like something from the Avengers."

I glanced down at the honeycomb-patterned silver fabric. It kind of did. "You have a problem with geeks?"

"No, but you didn't do that on purpose. So that's kind of funny."

My fingers itched to pinch her rosy cheeks. "Hilarious. You ready?"

"Ready for what? You're being disturbingly cryptic about this."

I flashed her a grin. “Come on, you can’t guess?” I led her around the other side to the passenger-side door and opened it for her. “Think about our conversations.”

She hopped up and plopped her perfect ass on the leather seat. “Uh... you’re going to let me watch you lift stuff while I sip an iced caramel macchiato?”

I made a mental note that she liked iced caramel macchiatos. “Not even close.” I slid into my seat while she thought. After I buckled my seatbelt, I put the truck in drive and coasted out of the small parking lot.

“You’re not going to make us hike, are you? I’m probably the only one who doesn’t put ‘loves hiking’ on her dating profile,” she said.

I scowled slightly. “Where do you have an online dating profile?”

“I don’t,” she admitted. “But if I did, I wouldn’t put anything about hiking on it.”

I snorted. “Okay, well, give me a little credit. I might have only known you for a week, but I know enough not to take you hiking on our first date.”

She got a funny look on her face like she had just realized we had only known each other for a week.

“I guess you’ll just have to suffer in silence until we get there,” I sighed.

“I don’t suffer in silence. I babble awkwardly to fill it until my mouth hurts.”

The idea of Laurel’s mouth full of anything—or specific things—caused me to smooth my hand over my own lips. “Babe, I like everything about your mouth.” She went ghost pepper red.

When we turned onto the dirt road under the large sign that read “McKaydee Ranch,” Laurel’s delectable mouth made an oval, and she rolled

down her window to poke her head around my sideview mirror. “Are those... goats?” she asked incredulously.

I smiled in response.

“You actually found goat yoga?” she asked in disbelief.

“I don’t make promises I don’t intend to keep,” I reminded her.

As I hoped, that seemed to hit her with a bit of sobering truth. Good. The sooner she learned it, the smoother my evil plan would go.

Our teacher was a tiny Korean-American yogi hippie who seemed thrilled to have a full class that included Laurel and me along with three other couples. With the sun warm on our heads, she led us through sayasanas to begin, and Laurel immediately launched into a fit of giggles when a baby goat hopped on her during downward dog.

I grinned at her from under my arms, enjoying the view of her round, pert ass in spandex and the way her laugh trickled over my skin like a feather duster. It didn’t get much better than that. Her eyes crinkled adorably at the edges as she scrunched up her face and lowered her hips to the ground to upward dog, doing her best to keep the bleating animal from falling off her bum.

I mimicked her movements, and another goat, larger than Laurel’s, walked up my legs like a ramp. I looked over my shoulder at it. “I’m not as nice as she is,” I warned it.

Laurel, still laughing, said, “Oh, yeah right. You’re clearly the animal-loving type. I’m only surprised you don’t already have a dog.”

I went back into downward dog, grunting as the goat wobbled on my spine, apparently unconcerned with being tipped forward. “I’m not home often enough to have a dog.”

“See?” she grinned, pushing her butt back into the air. “You’re worried

about the dog. You're all rainbows and glitter.”

We both straightened, forcing the goats off our backs, and I gave her a look that I hoped reflected every dark, sinister daydream I had about her. “How much you want to bet on that, Miss Brook?”

Her breath hitched. I exhaled a laugh. Sure, I was the good guy. To a point.

The yoga session was only half an hour, but I was pleasantly surprised at how much Laurel had seemed to enjoy it. When the instructor thanked us for joining her and invited us to come back, Laurel did a commendable job of looking like she “definitely” wanted to do that. I let out a “pfft,” and draped her over my shoulder to take her back to the truck.

“Dinner at my place sound good?” I asked as I plopped her off my shoulder and onto the seat.

She gusted out a breath, her frizzy hair curling around her temples in little wisps. She put her hands on my shoulders as I leaned into her, my fingers ghosting down her hips. Her up-tilted eyes fluttered slightly, glazing over with undisguised desire.

I leaned closer, drawn to her like the tides to the moon. My nose brushed against the side of hers. “Yes? No?”

“Hm? Oh,” she whispered, her lips leaning toward mine. “Yeah.”

I fought against a smile. I fitted my bottom lip between the seam of hers, and as she inhaled with a little gasp, my blood went hot like I'd been left in the sun to boil. My hands skimmed up her body to her neck where I cupped the base of her head and slanted my mouth over hers.

Laurel moaned, and her breasts pressed against my chest as she leaned into me. Jesus, God. I didn't think kissing could taste this good. Like sugar and cinnamon—like she was every sweet thing she loved to eat.

“Lach?” she whispered, her eyes still closed and her lips moving against mine.

“Hm?”

“Drive fast.”



## Eighteen

### Laurel



**W**e barely made it through the garage door before Lachlan had his hands on my body again. I wrapped my arms around his shoulders, pulling myself against him and onto my tiptoes, and he used my momentum to grasp my waist and hoist me up against his body. His hands smoothed down my ass, gripping tightly, and then he hitched my legs up around his waist. I locked my ankles and sank into the silkiest, most desperate kiss of all time. I wanted him so much it sizzled me from the inside out.

Lachlan kissed me like a man starved. His lips moved over mine, soft and then hard, pushing and then pulling back in a teasing chase. His tongue dove between my lips and started a rhythm that promised the sweetest release. My muscles, already sore from yoga, clenched around him in needy anticipation.

Lachlan moved us further into the house, kissing me with driving passion that made my head swim. I didn't want it to end. I could kiss him for hours. Days. And how did he taste good? Who tasted good after goat yoga? He tasted like chocolate mint.

The house had fallen dark under an overcast sky, and as he carried me into the kitchen, I was dimly aware that we were cloaked in a pale, gray light from the shaded forest above the skylight windows. Lachlan lowered me to the ground, and although my lips followed his, he pulled back and smoothed this thumb under my swollen lower lip. “Go to the atrium. I’ll meet you there in two minutes.” His voice, low and brimming with husky dominance pulsed through me like an electric charge. “Laurel?”

“Huh?” I panted.

“Naked.”

“Okay,” I breathed with a smile.

My feet carried me backwards, reluctant to leave him, and then I skipped down the stairs, through the tall, open living room, and to the left where the glass-encased indoor porch had been built. The white comforter was still draped over the couch in a careless slump, and I leveraged my shoes off with toes on heels as I unzipped my jacket. Hastily, I yanked my tank off my torso, and then shimmied out of my yoga pants with nervous energy vibrating from my heart all the way to my fingers and toes. I stood there in my sports bra, cute, lacy underwear, and socks.

Did he mean, like... all way naked?

I looked down at my underwear. It was my cutest pair—black lace boy shorts exposing my cheeks in a flattering way, crossed with stretchy, “X” strings up my hips. Seemed like a waste to just shuck them off, so I took off my neon yellow sports bra and then clambered on the couch and wrapped the blanket around me. Outside, the forest wavered with shadows as the branches danced on a building breeze that promised rain.

Lachlan came down the steps in a pair of black boxer briefs, and my mouth lost every ounce of moisture left in it. The dusky evening light cast

delicious shadows on every rippling dip and peak of his contoured body, and half his face turned to the shadows of the darkened house. In his hand, he had several items, but I didn't see what they were before he tossed them all on the side table.

He walked around to the large, tufted ottoman, and with one shove of his foot, smashed it against the couch.

Play area. Nice.

His light eyes found mine with a sharp hook. "Okay, I drove fast," he said with a curve of his lips. "Now what?"

I huddled under the blankets, drinking him in with a blank brain. "Uhm. I have no idea."

"No idea?" he asked, walking around the couch to stand at the arm behind me. His hands started to massage my shoulders, and I felt my eyes flutter closed with satisfied calm. He bent down to feather a kiss under my earlobe. Goose bumps exploded over my arms. "Think, cutie."

I hitched in a breath. "I want... your fantasy."

I felt his head cock slightly. "Oh?"

I leaned back against the arm of the couch, exposing my breasts as I let the blanket slip away from my body. Upside-down, I gazed at every perfect angle of his face. "We did mine last time. What's yours?"

He grinned sideways. "You sure you want to know?"

I swallowed against my dry throat. "Yeah."

Lachlan's hands wandered away from my shoulders and skimmed down my collarbone to my breasts. His fingers lightly brushed my nipples, making my stomach contract with a sharp breath. "Alright. Take off that blanket, spread your legs, and do exactly what I caught you doing Monday afternoon."

My eyes traveled from his mouth to his eyes. My rational brain said he was serious, but... really?

He raised his eyebrows, waiting.

*I wonder if there's a way to fake this to make it look sexier than it actually is*, I thought. I didn't feel like the way I pleased myself was particularly appealing. It didn't look like the limited selection of porn I'd ventured to peek at, anyway.

Lachlan kissed my forehead. "Stop thinking," he murmured.

I drew in a breath. He was right. If he wanted to see it, then I would let him see me. All of me. I swished the comforter aside, draped over the back of the couch, and with my eyes on Lachlan's as he still bent over me, I slid down the couch and let my knees drift apart.

His gaze jumped down the length of my body. He straightened. "I'm pretty sure I said 'naked' when I told you to lay your flawless body on my couch."

I looked at the lacy underwear as my hand drifted down my body toward the waistband. "You can't always have what you want, Dr. Cade."

He made a growling sound and bent to kiss my neck with a punishing nip. "Just try to stop me, Miss Brook."

My heart went crazy. As my fingers dipped into my underwear, I started the familiar rhythm I used when I masturbated in my dark, quiet room at home. My eyes immediately fell shut, lost in the instant blossom of rapture it sent through every nerve ending in my body.

I heard Lachlan walk back around the couch, and I knew he was watching me. It should have made me nervous, but it did the opposite.

I felt wild with desire.

My legs tensed, along with every muscle in my body, and as my fingers

pushed and rocked, skimming the sides of the delicate pinpoint of pleasure between my thighs, I felt my hips start to move in time with my fingers. I imagined Lachlan's tongue over my clit. I imagined his cock buried deep inside of me, and I suddenly ached with an empty need even my fingers couldn't assuage.

With Lachlan watching from somewhere in the room, I felt my body start to shake with pent up need. *Shit*, I thought with mounting arousal, *how is this so hot? I should hate this. It should be embarrassing, but I love the idea that he's watching this.*

Just as I started to climb the mountain, heading straight for the crest of release, Lachlan wrenched my hand from my panties and pinned it above my head. I gasped, opening my eyes. It had grown even darker, and his gaze burned into mine, reflecting the silvery light from the windows. He brought my other hand up to join the first, and with one hand, held my wrists against the arm of the couch and above my head. Rain pattered against the windows overhead.

His right hand held a pair of medical scissors. "I did warn you," he smiled devilishly.

"No!" My legs suddenly came up between us and I planted my feet against his hips to keep him from cutting off my best pair of underwear. "This is my favorite pair!"

*Snip.*

He bypassed my frantic attempts to maneuver away from him easily. "I'll buy you more, Miss Brook. But if you say things like 'you can't have everything you want,' well," he swerved his powerful leg and trapped me easily, stretching me out flat on my back beneath his gaze.

*Snip. Snip. Snip.*

“I always get what I want.”

I glowered.

“Problem, Miss Brook?” he asked. He grasped the tattered fabric and ripped it away from my body, sending a rush of cool air over my exposed skin.

“Is your fantasy to leave me with only ugly underwear?” I squirmed under him, and his knee came between my legs, nudging my heat. My squirming changed instantly, throbbing with need.

Lachlan dipped his head down to drop a kiss on the sensitive skin on the side of my neck, and suddenly, the idea that he had me trapped helplessly beneath his strong body made me hot and excited. Being under the control of Lachlan’s fingers meant only one thing—pleasure.

He captured my lips in an achingly gentle kiss. “My fantasy is to replace those darling fingers with my dick and fuck you until you scream my name.”

I exhaled hard, staring at him with my arms stretched above my head. “You don’t mean like... without my fingers at all? Or yours?”

His brows bounced up almost imperceptibly.

I puffed out a laugh. “That’s a myth.”

Lachlan considered me with liquid gold eyes. “Oh, Miss Brook. You should not have said that.”

My heart trilled with excitement.

“Do you trust me, Laurel?”

I ran my bottom lip through my teeth, considering his gentle, confident gaze. “Yes. I trust you.”

“Then spread your legs for me.”

I separated my knees, feeling the cold air hit sensitive flesh, and I gasped with pleasure as his fingers found my sensitive nerves. My eyes fluttered

closed as he started to work my clit with the clever pressure he had figured out the first time he'd proven me wrong. And God, I hoped he never stopped proving it.

His mouth bent to blow cold air over my nipple, and with my hands still pinned above my bucking body, he flicked his tongue over the hard peak of one tender breast. I let out a breathy, *kuh*, sound, and my back arched under the sweetest torture of his fingers and warm tongue. He worked me slowly and steadily, circling my clit and then pressing hard, building me higher and higher to the apex of my arousal.

A sharp nip from his teeth on my nipple shocked me straight to the top. I heard my moans grow higher in pitch, and without any reservations, let myself tip straight toward release.

And then he stopped.

I exhaled hard, my body shaking, and my eyes flew to his face. I had been *right there*. The pulsing between my legs was downright painful. I gave him an accusatory look.

Lachlan shook his head, planting an apologetic kiss under my jaw. "Not yet." I made an inarticulate groaning sound.

He released my wrists, trailing his hand in a burning path down the inside of my arms and dusting light touches down one side of my ribs.

I clenched my legs together in agony. Maybe if I squeezed hard enough...

"Oh, no you don't," he said, and his other hand pried my legs apart.

I felt like a rickety car going too fast, shaking and rattling and on the verge of falling apart. Lachlan took hold of my hips, and as he shifted his body off the couch, he dragged me across the ottoman, right to the edge. My head rested on the couch cushions while my legs dangled off the side of the ottoman. He knelt on the ground in front of me and pushed my legs apart.

Mary, mother of God. He's going to go down on me again. The satisfied kitten inside of me purred with delight.

Lachlan hitched my legs up over his rippling shoulders, and then with his strong hands spreading my pussy wide open, he bent his mouth to deliver one firm, strong lick along the side of my clit.

I groaned, and my fists grabbed silky, white fabric beneath me.

Relentlessly, he flicked and sucked, dipping his tongue inside of me before dragging all the way up to circle the sensitive nub at the peak of my heat. I writhed, but his hands held me firm while his tongue pressed with perfect pressure over my clit.

I climbed again, faster this time. How long had it been? Thirty seconds? I was so close. I gasped, fighting for air as his tongue drove me closer to the breaking point. He brought a hand up and gave my other nipple a gentle pinch.

I let out a loud exhale of wordless pleasure, and screwed my eyes shut, shaking my head as I drew closer to the release of tension. So close, so close...

Every muscle in my body tensed at the top.

Cold air hit my body.

I gasped, lifting my head above my heaving breasts to look at Lachlan.

He had sat back on his heels and gave me a dark smirk.

"No," I gusted. I let my head fall back. "Lachlan, why?"

"Patience," he intoned, low and full of promise.

"Ugh," I grabbed my hair at the roots. My legs trembled with need. It was painful. Empty. Aching.

"Do you want to cum, Laurel?"

"Please," I begged.



“Do you want my dick buried deep inside of you? Will you cum for me then?”

I started to sit up, to attack him, but Lachlan pinned me down with a firm hand on my belly. I groaned. “Yes, anything.” My body still hovered right on the brink of release. Any pressure would set me off. I felt like an unstable landmine.

Lachlan slid a hand up and down the side of my pussy, never touching what I wanted him to touch. “I need you to promise me, Laurel. Promise me that you won’t cum until I tell you to.”

“I won’t,” I promised—begged.

“Sit up.”

I did, pitching forward fluidly so I perched on the edge of the ottoman with my legs still spread and Lachlan kneeling on the ground in front of me. He stood, the bulge of his erection fighting against the strain of his tight, black briefs. “Touch yourself, but don’t you dare cum, Laurel,” he said with a warning look.

Huffing, shaking, I reached trembling fingers to my pussy to dip my fingers into my own juices and then rub along the edges of my clit. My toes pointed against the cold, hardwood floor. My muscles screamed for release.

I vaguely sensed Lachlan kneel on the couch behind me while my fingers toyed my nerves right back to the edge of orgasm.

“Turn around, Laurel.”

I pressed my legs together and rolled to my knees on the ottoman. Lachlan lay on the couch, his head on the arm and his cock pulled through the slit of his briefs. He had a condom on, and he rubbed the length of his erection with slow, steady strokes. “You’re in control,” he said, his eyes burning into me with their intensity.

I crawled across the ottoman on all fours until I reached him. Hungrily, I watched the long, wide pulse of his cock. I would do anything to sink myself onto him.

His hands reached out, and he grasped my hips as I hooked a leg over him. Slowly, he lowered me onto his hard erection.

I threw my head back in euphoria as I pulled him into me all the way to the hilt.

“Let go,” he said, his voice hard.

I started to let out little gasps as I rose and fell on top of him, feeling every scrape of his head against the inner nub of pleasure that drove me wild. I picked up the pace, and my fingers wandered to my clit with desperate need.

“Hands above your head,” he ordered. I groaned in frustration. “You said you trust me,” he reminded me.

I looked at him, saw the pure, rising heat in his gaze, and realized he was just as close as I was. And I did trust him. I lifted my hands above my head, grasping each wrist with my hands, and rode him with a steady rhythm.

My toes started to point. I closed my eyes again, imagining that climb, and with a dim spark of shock, realized I was just as close as I had been with his hands and mouth.

“That’s it,” he encouraged.

I gasped and moaned, feeling pressure so intense, it terrified me. It built and built, like someone slowly pressing a button that would detonate every nerve of pressure at my center.

He grabbed my hips again, and with a punishing push, slammed hard against me, putting pressure on my clit with his pelvis. “Cum for me, Laurel.”

Lachlan had the magic words. My body obeyed and exploded with

pulsing, clenching shrapnel of pure ecstasy. I bucked forward, and my hands fell to brace themselves against the firm muscle of his chest.

He grunted, holding my hips in a tight grip, and I felt the tremble of his release beneath me. I let my head fall to his chest, panting. Sweat slid down the valley of my back. His arms came up around me, and with soothing motions, he massaged the muscles up and down my back. “God, you’re perfect,” he panted.

Yoga had nothing on sex with Lachlan. I felt like I’d run an obstacle course. “You’re not real,” I rasped. “There’s no way you’re real. Maybe I’m crazy and imagining all this.”

He let out one soft laugh. “I tried to imagine what it would be like to watch you touch yourself, but reality was so much better.”

I felt the first hint of embarrassment creep up my cheeks and I turned my nose to nestle against his neck. “I wasn’t sure you’d find that... attractive.”

He pinched my cheek hard. “Everything about you is sexy as hell, Laurel. Everything.”

I grinned. “Even when I crack my head open on your counter?”

“Okay, maybe we could avoid a repeat of that one.” He shifted me so I came off of him and then I stretched out along his body, tucked between him and the plush couch.

I sighed, contented, and melted into his arms. I was a limp noodle of pleasure.

He played with my hair idly, smoothing it away from my face and scraping his nails along my scalp like the world’s best hairdresser massage. “You really are stunning, Laurel. Everything about you makes me want to just... steal you away. Keep you here. Keep you all to myself and wrap you in bubble wrap so you don’t get hurt anymore.”

“Mnh,” I said, my eyes falling shut as the cloudy afternoon fell into hazy gray mist outside the windows around us.

He squeezed me tight to him. “No, you don’t. We’re going to eat dinner. I thought you said you like food.”

“I like you,” I muttered sleepily.

He chuckled. “Ah, Miss Brook. You’re unraveling me.”

I was the one who had been unraveled. The tightly coiled, knotted mess of my body and heart had suddenly been looped over Lachlan’s hands, and it was like he held every thread of my happiness. It was the most wonderful, terrifying feeling.

## Nineteen

# Laurel



**I**t shouldn't have surprised me that Lachlan had prepped an amazing dinner ahead of time, or that he was a fantastic cook. He was racking up a tab I'd never be able to pay back. It should have scared me more, but as we sat on his bed eating lemon chicken and quinoa (yes, it was delicious), and he forced me to eat salad (also amazing), I couldn't find it in my heart to care. The anxious part eased away, and we discovered a shared love of mocking zombies in apocalyptic movies.

Lachlan had also bought me a nightgown, apparently, which he dangled in front of me as I sat wrapped in a sheet with our empty plates in front of me. I eyed the blue, silky strip of cloth with wide eyes. "You bought me lingerie?"

Lachlan cocked his head, considering the nightgown. "Babe, if I buy you lingerie, there will not be this much fabric."

I snorted. "Okay, but you anticipated a sleepover."

"So did you," he pointed out as he wrapped the soft nightgown around my shoulders like a scarf. "Which is why you aren't trying to go home to get

Calla to bed right now.”

He had me there. With a dignified lift of my chin, I took the nightgown, but stood from the sheets totally naked. Lachlan sucked in a breath through his nose. Grinning, I bounced off the bed and sashayed to the bathroom with my phone, intending to check on Calla and wash up a bit before putting on the pretty, lacy gown.

I texted my mom to make sure Calla had gotten to bed alright, and then I looked up and saw the toothbrush I’d used the last time I’d been there. It was upright in a black ceramic dish right next to Lachlan’s. Looking at our toothbrushes, so benign and mundane, his electric and fancy-looking, and mine soft and purple... my brain short-circuited. It did the thing I’d been trying to avoid since the moment I’d seen him in the ER.

I imagined. I wondered what it would be like if *this* with him could be real and not just a temporary fling. I added a pink pony toothbrush to the picture, and my heart did somersaults.

As I slipped the nightgown over my body, marveling at how soft and slightly stretchy the fabric felt on my skin, my phone made a telltale fart sound. I glanced at the screen. I’d been ignoring Jason’s texts for a week, now. I let him Facetime Calla as they both requested, but I didn’t bother talking to him on a personal level. And it had been so freeing.

I swiped up on the screen and tossed his message aside, whatever it was. Then a text from my mom came through, and she assured me that I could enjoy my night with my doctor. With a winky face. Gag. I mean, she was right, but *gag*.

I had barely opened the bathroom door before Lachlan had snatched me to the hard planes of his torso. He fitted my ass against his erection and his fingers did a clever dance across the silk fabric over my nipples. I groaned,

letting my head fall forward. I hung my weight on his strong forearm. “Lach, I literally just put clothes on.”

“I don’t know why,” he murmured. He swept my hair off my neck and dropped a kiss on my exposed neck. “I shouldn’t have bothered. New dress code.”

“Hm?” I asked, already half-dazed by his hands and mouth.

“No clothing. Ever.”

I laughed. “Sounds practical.”

Lachlan picked me up under his arm like a bag of mulch. I squeaked in protest, but he ignored me, carrying me straight back to the bed. “I’m not practical. I’m selfish. Are you taking it off, or am I?”

I chuckled as he tossed me onto the bed. He really didn’t have to ask twice.

\* \* \*

*Moonlight slanted through the small basement apartment window above the kitchen sink. I leaned against the counter, letting the edge of it dig into the small of my back, hoping it would wake me from my nightmare.*

*Jason stood across from me, his hands in his jeans’ pockets, his dark eyes glinting with a hard edge. “Well? What did you decide? How badly do you want to fix this? Because I’m telling you, I can’t live with a dead fish anymore. You don’t care about me. You haven’t for a long time. And you*

want Calla to live with both her parents, so you tell me. What are you going to do about it?"

I gripped the edge of the counter. "Jason, please," I whispered. My heart had been in bleeding tatters for a month. For a month, I had been imagining him in her arms, him finding his pleasure with someone else. With someone more capable than me. Someone prettier than I was. He had come home to give us a chance, but I didn't understand what he wanted.

"Please what?" he snapped. He staggered a little. Drunk. Jason didn't get drunk, but I'd heard him over the phone several times that month. He seemed to be healing his wounds, whatever they were, by numbing them.

I didn't have that luxury. Calla was barely two. She needed me. I rubbed the spot over my heart, trying to soothe the stabbing pain that had been there since his confession that he'd been unfaithful. "What do you want from me, Jason? I do love you. I love you so much. I've always loved you. I'm sorry you don't feel—" I swallowed. "I know since Calla was born, I haven't been as sexual, but I do love you. I've given you everything I have."

He snorted, one hand leaving his pocket to rub his nose. "Fuck that. It's bullshit. You aren't attracted to me anymore. Admit it."

My heart hurt so bad I thought it would burst. "Of course I am," I whispered.

"Then prove it." His dark eyes went shadow black. "Show me how much it means to you, Laur."

"H-how?"

"Take off your clothes," Jason said, taking a seat in the worn kitchen chair. "You always make me turn the light off, right? You don't want to look at me. So, prove it. Show me that you care. Show me you've changed."

I swallowed hard. Choked on tears. "Jason. That's... that's not how



*things work.”*

*“For you,” he yelled so loud, I jumped. “It’s always about what you want, Laur. What if I want to look at my wife? You say you love me. You say you trust me. Fucking prove it.”*

*“Okay,” I said quickly, holding out a hand. The other grasped the hem of my T-shirt. “Okay. I-I really do love you, Jason. I promise. I’m sorry you’ve felt that way.”*

*Jason leaned back in his chair, waiting.*

*I undressed. Layer by layer, his eyes devoured me. It didn’t feel the same way it had when we’d been in college. The strip teases and the fun we’d had together. This was different. But he was still my husband. I could make it feel the same. I just had to try harder.*

*Finally, I stood in front of him, naked, in our kitchen. And Jason laughed. Bent over, breathless, erratically, he laughed.*

*I gasped for air.*

*Choked.*

*“Laurel,” a voice broke through my waking dream. But I knew I wouldn’t come out of it. Not for anything.*

*I could feel my lungs constricting against the pain of his cruelty. He just laughed, shaking his head, and then finally, catching my gaze with his unfeeling eyes, he rubbed himself over his pants.*

*Gasping sobs tore through me.*

*“Laurel! Breathe. Breathe, sweetheart.”*

*“You look fucking pathetic, Laur. What kind of bitch does that? Look at my dick. I’m not even hard.” He laughed again, standing and pushing his chair away from him. “Fucking pointless.”*

*I couldn’t draw air. Black dotted my vision.*

“Laurel!” a familiar voice snapped through the air. “Breathe, dammit!”

*Then I was on the ground. Alone. My sobs tore through me like claws through flesh. I was falling apart. Ripping into ribbons of bleeding sorrow. I had failed. He had left me again, this time angrily, disgusted with me, fed up with everything about me. I had no worth to him, so what good could I be to anyone?*

“Laurel, please wake up,” Lachlan’s voice darted through the dream with a plea.

The sound of my crying started as a muffled background noise, and slowly, surely, I felt my mind crawl out of the memory with tired limbs.

“Deep breaths,” Lachlan said, but the end of the word broke gruffly. His arms were around me and he held me tight against his chest. “That’s it, sweetie. Just breathe. It’s over. I’m here.”

Light streaked across my vision, and then my awareness returned. The side lamp in Lachlan’s bedroom had been turned on. I sat in the middle of his bed, wrapped in his arms with my cheeks covered in dampness.

*No*, I thought with dawning horror. *My alarms. I didn’t charge my phone. They never went off.* I leaned into the sobs again, embarrassed, horrified that I’d fallen into the memory. My wounds tore open with fresh blood I wished would dry up with the rest of my heart. I didn’t want to feel. I was so tired. So exhausted from it all.

Lachlan rubbed my back and rocked me slightly. “Laurel, calm down.” He took a deep, slow breath to encourage me. “Come on. Breathe with me.”

At the very least, I could pull myself together after falling apart. This wasn’t fun or sexy or anything someone would want in a fling. It was broken and strange. I pulled in a shaky breath, not daring to look him in the face.

“Tell me what happened,” Lachlan said.

*How can I? How can I tell you that I knew my husband was fucking another woman and I debased myself in a desperate attempt to make him stay with me?*

“You’re shaking. Hey, come on. You can do this. Calm. Neutral zone.”

I forced a breath through my lungs. Then another. And another. As more awareness slammed into me with each beat of my heart, my crying stopped, and I reached up a hand to wipe away my tears. My body stiffened against Lachlan’s. I wanted to run far away. Preferably without having to look him in the face again.

But his hands were still massaging me, squeezing up and down my arms, rubbing my neck. “Laurel,” he said, and I felt his voice in his chest. “Are you okay?”

I sniffed, wiping my nose on the back of my wrist and pulling away from him. “Yeah. Just a nightmare.” I stared down at the sheets. How was I supposed to explain this? I didn’t understand it myself.

“That wasn’t a nightmare,” he retorted angrily.

I raised my eyes swiftly, worried I had done something to offend him. A sheen of wet shone on the edges of his eyes, and he wiped it away with his shoulder. His expression was full of tortured emotion. “None of that was okay. Tell me what just happened.”

I brought a hand to my mouth. I had really upset him. “I’m so sorry, Lachlan. I usually set my alarms—it’s just a thing my brain does.”

He didn’t buy it. “I know how PTSD works. Don’t sugarcoat it.”

Shock slammed into me. “I don’t have anything like that, Lach. It’s just a bad dream I get.”

“About a real memory?”

My body went stone still. “I mean... Yeah.”

It looked like he was fighting to keep the intensity of his anger from showing through his expression. “In this ‘dream,’ who’s hurting you?”

I swallowed hard, holding his gaze. I wasn’t sure what to say. I had hurt myself, technically.

“I’m going to kill him,” he said, suddenly getting off the bed and throwing the blankets aside. “Where’s that asshole’s number?”

“Oh, fuck, Lachlan, no!” I catapulted myself up to wrap my arms around his waist. My knees balanced on the edge of the bed, my arms wrapped around his hard waist, and he stood rigidly, like he was about to go kill something with his bare hands. “Don’t,” I breathed against his tan, warm skin. “It’s okay. I’m okay.”

“You’re not okay.” He twisted, and his hands gripped my arms, like he was going to pry my hold off him. But then he lifted me, and I stood on the edge of the bed, just barely bringing my head higher than his. He framed my face with his long fingers. “You are not fucking okay, Laurel. That was genuinely terrifying, and I wasn’t even the one living the memory.”

I leaned my forehead against his. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” he said, disgusted. “It’s his.”

I exhaled through my nose. “I know that, logically. But I brought a lot of suffering on myself, too.”

He brought me back into a hug, and I leaned the side of my face on top of his shoulder. “I don’t know what he did to you, but I’m going to make it right.”

I squeezed him. “You can’t change something that already happened.”

I felt him sigh. Then he asked, “What do you mean you set alarms?”

I pulled away again, resting my forearms on his shoulders, and studied his scowl in the semi-darkness of the bedroom. “I set alarms for every two hours

to keep from falling into a deep sleep. It's the only way to keep the dreams at bay."

He looked at me like I was stark, raving mad. "You're telling me that you keep yourself from REM sleep every night?"

"Yeah. Calla got a stomach flu soon after they started, and I noticed when she woke me up every two hours or so, I didn't get any dreams. So, I just kept doing that."

"For how long?" He sounded aghast. Horrified.

"I don't know... like three years?"

Lachlan's hard expression didn't soften. "No wonder your body fell apart like it did."

I shrugged. "It's better than going through that every night."

He shook my face with a gentle vibration. "You can fix that, Laurel. It's called PTSD, and there are people who can help you."

I scoffed. "Lachlan, he didn't beat me. I didn't enter a war zone. It's not PTSD."

"Trauma has no hierarchy," he said seriously. "Look at me." I did, reluctantly. "Your pain is not less significant because others have endured worse. Your pain is valid, and real, and, frankly, terrifying. And your trauma deserves to be treated."

"It's not trauma," I insisted quietly. "It was a stupid mistake, and I feel gross about it. But it's not trauma."

"I'm the doctor," he said with a sober look. "And I say it is. And when you tell me what happened—because you're going to tell me—you will hear yourself say it, and you will know that I'm right."

"I can't tell you," I said, starting to pull away.

"Yes, you can," he countered firmly. His hands glided up my arms,

behind his neck, and to my hands. He brought them around to tuck them between us, and then he kissed the palm of one of my hands. “I know it’s scary. But I’m going to make us some tea, and then we’re going to sit in the middle of that bed,” he said with a bounce of his eyes behind me, “and you’re going to tell me everything.”

I drew in a shaky breath. If I did, then that was it. He would never see me as the cute, fun Laurel he thought I was. The risk was enormous. It wasn’t that I didn’t trust Lachlan to be kind or compassionate with my answers. Actually, it was the fear that he would be. Because after I’d bared my soul to him and he’d comforted me, he’d never see me as a whole woman. He’d never be playful and order me around. Or, God forbid, he would pity me, and that was so much worse.

*You’re kind of broken.*

Lachlan got up to make us tea, and with shaking hands, I plugged my phone in. Stupid, stupid mistake. But hey, I could add it to the growing list. As soon as the screen lit up, I saw the three messages from Jason. Suddenly, the night terror felt like an omen. Reluctantly, I tapped his messages.

*Jason: This is pathetic, Laur. Ignoring me and running off with some guy for days at a time. You’re a mother. You’re abandoning your own kid so you can fuck a stranger.*

*Jason: I didn’t want to do this, but Calla deserves better. You need to get away from this guy and his weird family. You know I have ways of digging up info. They’re both into illegal shit and if you don’t step away right fucking now, I’m going to release that info to the public.*

*Jason: I’m releasing it tomorrow unless you say otherwise. Check your email.*

All the work I’d done to calm my breathing unraveled like a tattered

sweater. I gulped down air, tapped on my email app, and brought up the email he'd sent me yesterday. I didn't understand all the specific jargon, but it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that Lachlan's brother solved cold cases on the side and had obtained files from closed investigations by illegal means. And Lachlan? The information Jason sent me about him didn't look illegal to me, but it had something to do with his research.

Anger burned through me like a flamethrower to dry grass. It raged and grew, licking at my pain with searing heat. How fucking dare he? Controlling me was one thing. Making me feel like the lesser parent? Very Jason. But blackmail?

Fuck no.

I ran through all my options in my head, rapid fire. For one thing, Lachlan had just seen the level of crazy I had to offer, and while he might pity me now, eventually, it was going to be a burden on him. I was embarrassed, yes, but more than that, I was suddenly intensely worried about his career. Jason might be full of it, but it wouldn't take much to taint Lachlan's name with some well-placed emails and online gossiping.

It was pretty clear what I needed to do. I tapped out a message through a rideshare app, praying it would go through, and then when the driver responded affirmatively, I clicked off the screen.

When Lachlan came back in carrying tea, I had adrenaline pumping through my veins. At least it had replaced the helplessness, and I could sit there in the middle of the bed calmly. My hands didn't shake when he handed me the mug with chamomile tea.

"Okay," he said, ending the word with a sigh. "Drink that first."

I nodded, taking a hesitant sip. It was super sweet, which I knew he had done just for me. I took a few scalding gulps before setting the mug down on

the bedside table. Drawing in my courage, I said calmly, “Lach, I have to go.”

He rolled his eyes. “Not this again. Come on, Laurel. You can’t keep pushing me away when things get real, here.”

“They aren’t real,” I pointed out. “They’re fun. You’re fun. We’re great... but it’s not real.”

Lachlan scowled. “I see what you’re doing, and it’s not going to work.”

*Work with me, Lachlan,* I thought pleadingly. *This is going to mess up your life way more than you realize.* “I’m going to get dressed, and I’ve called a driver to come get me.” I glanced at my phone. “They should be here in about five minutes.” I stood, ignoring the way he stood with me like a shadow about to sew himself onto my foot. “So, I’ll be out in like three minutes, and it would mean a lot to me if you didn’t push me on this.”

I could see the conflicted war happening behind his eyes. He wanted to help me. But he also didn’t want to hurt me more. Good. I was banking on that. I went to the bathroom, stripped off the blue nightgown, and jammed my tight yoga pants, sports bra, and tank top over my shaking limbs. I left the bathroom as I was zipping up my hoodie, and then I slipped my phone into the front pocket.

Lachlan stood there shirtless in a pair of pajama pants, his sculpted arms folded and his expression brimming with silent fury. This was worse than a one-night stand where I tiptoed out in the morning. I’d broken down and been emotional with him, and rather than trusting him with my softest, most damaged pieces, I had sent him a different message: I don’t trust you. I don’t want you. I don’t want this.

It was unfair and cruel, and I knew that. But putting him in the line of fire was worse. This wasn’t his fight. It was mine, and for once, I was determined



to end it. I doubted anyone like Lachlan would come along again—no, I knew it. No one would hold a candle to him. But if, someday, I was ready to trust again, then at least my battles would have been fought and my demons contained. And I would have done it with my own strength without hurting anyone else in the process.

I wished I'd done it sooner. I wished I'd done it before falling into Lachlan's arms. It was unfair, but maybe all of this had been the spur to my side I needed. Being with Lachlan and seeing the target sighted on the back of his head had woken me up. I had to deal with Jason. And I wasn't going to let Lachlan's family get hurt in the process.

Lachlan had said he'd had a prescription for me, but he couldn't have known how true that was. He was epinephrine to my frozen heart. I was alive, now, and I wasn't going to squander what he'd given me.

## Twenty

# Lachlan



I let her go. Of course, I did. Anything less than that and I would have been the worst kind of human being. But I did it wanting to shake Laurel's five-foot-three frame until it rattled like a beat-up pickup truck. I tried to tell her with my glower every step of the way from my room to the front door what I thought about her calling a rideshare. *I know what you're doing. You're running. You're hiding. And it won't work forever.*

But that was the tricky part, and the part she leveraged against me. Laurel had been deeply hurt by something, and that trauma went so far down, she let it affect her mental health, her emotional wellbeing, and even her physical wellness. And that kind of hurt had to be respected and treated with patience. Laurel thought she was being clever by using it against me, but, as I had pointed out to her before, there was nothing sneaky about her.

She was going to try and hide, now. She was going to pretend nothing good had happened between us, so she didn't have to take a leap of faith and trust someone with her wounds. But there was no way I was going to let that

happen. I hadn't let her waste away from an infection in the grocery store, and I wasn't going to let her emotional infection eat her to nothing, either.

I watched her walk down the wood plank steps, her hand trailing on the black iron railing as a misty sunrise struggled to light her path through the forest cover. She hadn't even looked back at me. Head down, fingers fiddling with the zipper of her hoodie, she had thanked the driver for being available so early, and then she'd gone.

And then I had to punch something.

My gym was in the lowest level of the house with a wall of windows that had been dug out of the hillside, overlooking the serene wildlife like the other floors did. Only, it was darker down there, and I could beat the shit out of a punching bag until sweat pooled at my feet and I hissed through my teeth at the bruising pain in my knuckles with every jab and hook.

I couldn't decide if it had been fucking stupid of me to wait to show her about the threat from Dickface or if I should have done it sooner and maybe assuaged her fears about him. But then, maybe it would have made her nightmares worse.

Could it even get worse? I couldn't imagine a nightmare getting worse than what I had seen. She'd been completely out of it, gasping for breath, shaking, sobbing—short of giving her an actual heart attack, I didn't think I could have made that any more potent with an email.

I slammed my fist into the sand and leather. "I'm going to kill that fucker."

"Kill whom?" a familiar voice asked.

Panting, I didn't even bother to turn around, but I grabbed the chain on the punching bag and rested my head against the cool surface before looking over my shoulder. "Where the hell did you come from, Brady?"

Amos Brady finished coming down the concrete steps, his hands in the pockets of his brown leather and gray wool jacket. He looked like a modern version of Sherlock Holmes or something. Dark hair, dark eyes, freakishly tall and always brooding around like he had gothic secrets tucked away under the collar of his polo. And he rarely, if ever, cracked a smile.

He glanced around the gym with interest. “Nice setup.”

Brady was, if possible, more dedicated to working out than I was—if power lifting, hiking, and competitive swimming could count as “working out.” More like obsessive hobbies. Still out of breath, I unhooked the straps from my gloves. “Thank you? But seriously, how did you get in my house?”

“You left the door open.”

I had, actually. I hadn’t wanted to close it in case Laurel changed her mind. Stupid. I tossed my gloves into a bucket at my feet. “And the reason for the intrusion is...?”

“I don’t know. I had a reason, but now I’m thinking I might have stopped you from committing a homicide.”

“You gonna help me bury the body?” I asked with a humorless smirk.

“That depends on how effectively you covered your tracks,” Brady mused. He sat down on the edge of one of my flat benches, still looking around, but this time, like he might see a body. “I won’t even ask if they deserved it. If you’re feeling stabby, then they really crossed some lines.”

“Damn right they did,” I growled. Sniffing, I snatched up a towel and wiped away the sweat from my face. “I’m not going to kill anyone. I am going to mess them up, but I don’t need to go to jail to do that. What’s going on, Brady?”

“Got an email,” he said, and his eyes squinted, watching for my reaction. “And since it contained encrypted information from my personal devices, I

thought an in-person chat would be more prudent.”

“Jesus Christ, that *fucking* gutter rat,” I growled.

“Language,” Brady muttered.

“Sorry.” I swiped a hand down my face. “Wait, so you drove two hours because you’re paranoid that our phones are tapped?”

He shrugged. “The drive is nice.” I quirked an eyebrow. “Alright,” he admitted, “work is rough. We just had to hire another patient coordinator. I needed some air.”

“If you were fifty percent less of an a-hole,” I pointed out, “then you wouldn’t have to replace them all the time.”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it,” he rumbled. “Anyway, why am I getting threatened by a rodent?”

“I met a girl,” I said apologetically.

Brady clicked his tongue, eyes going to the ceiling. “Of course.”

“Her ex is certifiable. He’s some tech crack pot who lives in Norway, and he wants to scare her off from me, so he’s digging into every nook and cranny he can find, digitally,” I continued. “Remington and I have a plan, but it’s not an immediate solution. The fuc—” I paused, breathing in through my nose. “The *jerk* could still release all the data he’s threatening to release.” I watched Brady for his reaction.

This was our life’s work, more or less. We were on the verge of a massive breakthrough that would make enormous strides for Alzheimer’s patients, patients with depression, possibly even patients suffering from cerebral palsy. The whole thing would be ruined if the data was thrown out there haphazardly.

Amos leaned his elbows on his knees “He sounds like a piece of work.”

“He is,” I agreed.

“Is Remington smarter?”

“Infinitely,” I said with honest confidence.

Brady shrugged. “Then I guess we don’t have to worry.”

“Yeah,” I agreed warily. Brady, quite frankly, scared the shit out of me sometimes. He was a good person with solid morals, but his humor had a razor-sharp edge, and his temper was the quiet kind. The kind that fucked you over before you’d even realized it had happened. Sans lube.

“What do you need from me?” he asked, straightening.

I thought about that as I slung the towel around my neck and held onto both ends. “The girl, Laurel, she’s in some pretty tight places, legally. If she could get herself out of that mess, then I could really let him have it without worrying about what he’d do in retaliation.”

“Done,” Amos said, standing.

“You think Azura will do it?” I asked. I knew Brady’s sister was a hotshot lawyer in Denver, but she had a list of priority cases longer than my driveway.

“If you get me the particulars—paper, preferably—then I’ll have her handle it. He’s in Norway?”

I nodded.

Amos snorted. “Azura will flip him over, spank him, and throw him down a set of stairs before he knows what hit him. Metaphorically.”

I couldn’t imagine teeny-tiny Azura flipping anyone over. But I could imagine her shark brain ripping someone to shreds in a *metaphorical* sense, for sure. I gestured with my head toward the stairs. “I’ll have Remington find the divorce decree. He’s got all the firewalls and shi-stuff.”

“Whatever works,” Brady said, his face a study of long-suffering, aged wisdom. He was three months younger than me, for the record.

I paused at the bottom of the stairs. “I should probably get Laurel’s consent to dig our fingers into her divorce.”

“Did this ex dig his fingers into your personal life first?” Brady asked, hands sliding back into his pockets.

“Sure did,” I agreed grimly.

“Cade, consent is for sex. If someone you love is in trouble, and you have the power to get them out of it, then don’t give them the option to override it with their guilt,” Amos said seriously.

I wasn’t sure I agreed with him, there. Laurel would see it as a breach of trust if I tampered with her messy divorce decree on my own. But she’d also never let me help if I asked. Sighing, I trudged up the stairs. “Sorry, man. Your sister needs to find a way to help that doesn’t go over Laurel’s head.”

Brady *tsked* again. “Fine. She can handle it. Anything else?”

“Yeah, one more thing.”

“What?” he growled.

“Be my bait.”

## Twenty One

# Laurel



**S**omehow, I made it through the weekend without texting Lachlan. He probably hated me. I accepted that. No one would take that kind of offense lightly. He had held his arms out to me, offering comfort, and I had outright rejected him. I was sure I had really wounded him, and my only consolation was that I could breathe easier knowing that the more distance I put between us, the less likely Jason was to care about Lachlan's personal life.

Jesus, the maniac had gone after Lachlan's brother. Remington had a wife and kids, and he had devoted his talents to helping victims of cold case murders. I tried to bridge the gap between the funny, gentle Jason I'd known in my teens with the selfish monster he'd become, and it only fueled my anger. I didn't care what villain's journey he had gone on or what redemption he might still be capable of. I wanted walls, and I wanted them to be adamantium strong.

The first step was to put on my big girl panties and go to court again. This time, the right way. I spent the entire weekend filling out pro bono



applications across most of the neighboring states, and I sent off so many copies of my shitty divorce decree, I was pretty convinced it would become public knowledge. I did my research, I found out what my rights were, and I spent hours revising the decree to reflect a fair outcome. Okay, if I was honest, I tried to screw him over a little. If I got a decent lawyer, I could probably afford to do that.

I knew he needed to be in Calla's life no matter how much I detested him. He was a good father to her in the sense that he loved her. He was kind and patient with her. He doted on her. She needed that in order to grow up as even-keeled as she could, so I wouldn't do anything to shut him out of her life. But I would be damned if he got a say in anything that started with "L" and ended with "aurel."

By Tuesday, I felt good about my options. Wallowing Laurel was dead. Avenging Laurel was suited up and ready for battle. I woke up and got Calla and me dressed in swimsuits, and as she excitedly pranced around the living room, I packed lunches for us both. It wasn't much, but I could take her to the indoor swimming pool, and then hope the weather held up long enough for a picnic at the park.

First, I had to do something I'd been dreading since Saturday night. I texted Lachlan.

*Laurel: Hey, I filled your car with gas and the keys are in the potted plant just outside my door. Come grab it whenever.*

I typed and deleted "sorry" three times. *No, bitch*, I thought to myself. *You're done apologizing. Boundaries. Walls. Thick walls. Safe walls that keep you sane. Build them and lock the doors, woman.* But I didn't have to be rude, so I added a perfunctory "Thanks" at the end.

Calla attempted to do handstands on the couch while she waited. "Do

they have floaties? Do they have goggles? I need goggles.”

I snorted, slipping my phone in the back pocket of my jean shorts which I had pulled over my momkini bottoms. “I don’t know, bug. I’ve never been to this pool. I guess we’ll find out together.”

“Okay,” she said, drawing out the “y” sound, and flopping off the couch like a ragdoll.

I finished packing our sandwiches, chips, and—in silent salute to Lachlan—carrot sticks along with water bottles, and then I shoved the lunch bag into my large beach tote that I’d stacked with towels and a change of clothing for each of us. It wasn’t an afternoon on the Atlantic Boardwalk by any means, but it was something.

And honestly, it was just the afternoon I’d needed. Calla swam, and I taught her how to keep her body afloat. She jumped off the edge of the crowded pool into my arms, and we practiced holding our breath under water. I was, without a doubt, the luckiest mom alive. Calla had never wavered in her adoration of me, despite my missteps, despite my failings. She lived in the moment, and I found it infectious.

When we were dry and dressed in sundresses, we walked to the park. Upside of no vehicle? I was getting a lot of exercise, lately. As I watched Calla play on the playground equipment, my phone rang. Without even glancing at the caller ID, a smile still on my face, I answered, “Hello?”

“Hello, is this Miss Laurel Brook?”

Ice slithered through my veins. The woman on the other end of the line sounded professional. Direct. Lawyer-y. “Yes,” I answered uncertainly.

“Miss Brook, my name is Azura Brady with Falcon, Brady, and Brady. Do you have a moment?”

My heart did a double tempo. “Sure.”

“Miss Brook, I received an email from an associate of mine stating that you might be looking for pro bono services in a custody dispute. Is that correct?”

Some of the frost in my blood thawed a bit. “Oh, wow. That was fast. Yes, that’s correct. I need my custody agreement amended.”

“I had a look over it, and I feel confident I can help you. Is there a time you’d like to meet formally? I can set up a time that fits with your schedule.”

I frowned, suddenly suspicious. That was fast. Too fast. “Did you—your contact didn’t happen to be Dr. Cade did it?”

“Apologies, Miss Brook, but I’m afraid I wasn’t contacted by a Dr. Cade. Was I supposed to be?” I heard the sound of a clicking mouse in the background. “I didn’t see him listed as a person of interest in the case.”

“He’s not,” I rushed to say. “It’s just, this was way faster than I expected, so I guess I thought someone I know had... contacted you,” I finished lamely. Okay, that did actually sound a little crazy.

“I assure you, Miss Brook, your pro bono case is entirely my decision to take on. Does tomorrow work for you?”

“Yes,” I said breathlessly, and hope soared in my chest. “Tomorrow is great. Could we do one?”

“Perfect. I’ll email you a link for video chat. I look forward to going over the particulars.”

“Wow, thank you,” I replied.

“Absolutely. Have a good day, Laurel.”

She hung up, and I pulled the phone away from my ear, staring at it in wonder. No way. Could I really be that lucky? I looked up Azura Brady on Google and nearly fell off the bench in shock. She was one of the top attorneys in Denver. She’d won high profile cases with apparent ease, and her

latest accomplishment had been in a celebrity divorce dispute where she had, apparently, wiped the floor clean for her client. The media was obsessed with her.

I couldn't believe my luck.

*It's Cade, a sneaky voice in my brain whispered. You know it's Cade, somehow.*

Squinting one eye suspiciously, I texted him again even though he hadn't responded to my text about his Mercedes.

*Laurel: Did you hire a lawyer for me or something?*

*Lachlan: Keep the car. Nope, didn't hire a lawyer. Do you want me to? I will if you need one.*

*Laurel: No. To both. But thank you anyway.*

*Lachlan: OK. Let me know if you need anything.*

I blew out a disgusted breath. Not at him, but at my traitorous heart that sang happy songs with every word he texted me. I had rejected him thoroughly and unkindly, and he still wanted to help. Ridiculous.

And wonderful.

Suddenly, the sun on my shoulders shadowed, and I looked up to find a large man looming over me, already too close for comfort. I gasped, sliding back a few inches, and Jason plunked himself onto the metal picnic table bench next to me.

Children screamed happily. The wind rustled through budding maples. The smell of freshly cut grass and spring blossoms tickled my nose. But none of those things really registered as my vision zeroed in on the familiar, slightly mocking features of my nightmares.

Jason wore a pair of high-end sunglasses, which he tipped up onto his prematurely graying hair. He'd grown a goatee, which was blacker than his

eyes, and leaning casually against the picnic table, his wide body too close to mine, he looked over with a smug uptilt of his lips. “Hey, Laur.”

I grappled for calm. Mostly, I lost. With my voice shaky, I asked, “What are you doing here?”

Jason gestured with a hand toward the playground. “It’s spring break? I get every other one with Calla. This is my year.”

Panic bubbled around the edges of my forced calm like an overboiling pot of pasta sneaking out around its lid. “I—you didn’t say you were taking her this year.”

“I don’t have to,” he reminded me. He was wearing a slick, gunmetal gray, button-down shirt, and black slacks, with black and white sneakers like some kind of Elon Musk acolyte. “I had business in New York, and I figured, what the hell. Why not swing by.”

“That’s on the other side of the country,” I glowered. He shrugged. My mind did a clumsy tumbling act trying to right itself. “So... where are you taking her?”

“She doesn’t have a passport, obviously.” He said this accusatorily. It was my only saving grace—both parents had to agree to that, and I hadn’t budged on it until absolutely necessary for her summer visitations. “So, I thought maybe a trip to Yellowstone.” He turned, giving me a slow perusal that made me fidget uncomfortably. “And you don’t seem inclined to answer my texts lately, so I figured I’d just come grab her.”

“She’s not packed,” I said with a ghost of a breath.

“I have bags for her. Wanda has been shopping for her since we got married. She’s been begging me to bring her home.”

*Too fucking bad*, I thought caustically.

“Before Calla spots me, I figured we should chat.” He leaned forward on

his knees, cracking his knuckles and then adjusting the gold wristwatch on his broad wrists. Jason was a big guy. Huge hands, enormous feet, wide shoulders. He only seemed to get bigger with age. “I’m concerned, Laur.”

I bunched my hands into tight fists on my lap. “I don’t care, honestly. If you’re taking Calla, then take her. She needs to be back on Sunday.”

“Ah,” he made a clicking sound with the side of his mouth and leaned back again, this time stretching his arm out behind me. “See, no. That doesn’t work for me. You hold all the power here, Laur,” he said, his hand raising off the table behind me and brushing against my spine. “You have our daughter, and you call the shots day to day. And now you’re flat out ignoring me? For some guy?”

I swallowed hard, hating that his presence caused my stomach to lurch with nausea. I didn’t want him to affect me, but he did. Badly. “My personal life doesn’t jeopardize Calla’s safety,” I said simply.

“I say it does,” he responded with a hard edge. “And you’re either going to play nice, or you’re going to force my hand.” Jason brought his hand up to grip the back of my neck. “You tell me.”

I gritted my teeth so hard I tasted one of my fillings. “Get off me.”

He leaned closer. “You send me proof—real proof—that this guy and his *law-breaking*, sleazy family are out of Calla’s life, and I’ll back off. If you don’t, then I’m going to fucking destroy everything about what you’ve built here.” He squeezed my neck so tightly, I was sure he would leave bruises. “Understood?”

Jason had never, not one time, laid his hands on me. Clearly, he’d fallen so far from who he’d once been, I didn’t dare underestimate what he would do. I turned and gave him my iciest glare. “Are you done?”

Jason snorted, and liquid from his nose landed on his bristly goatee.

“Fuck, what is this? You grew a pair?” He looked me up and down again, his eyes lingering on me in a way that made me want to scrub off my own skin. “I’ll be back on Sunday. Should be fun.”

When he stood, a mask folded over his whole body like a ghost costume with two holes for eyes. “Calla! Baby!”

Calla looked up from the sandhill she’d been building, and with a shriek of joy, tore across the playground to Jason’s waiting arms.

I shook with fury. Fear nibbled at my resolve, and I felt that slow build before the nightmares. As I watched Jason scoop up our daughter, memories flooded me in a dizzying whirl. Most people had a fight or flight, didn’t they? So why couldn’t I move? Why had my mind gone blank?

Emotions drained out of me like the end of an hourglass.

## Twenty Two

# Lachlan



**T**he screen from Remington’s back door slammed shut behind me, and I maneuvered into the doorway. I stepped over a pair of roller skates with my laptop and a takeout container balanced in one hand and a six-pack of beer in the other. It was eerily quiet in their house, which I usually expected to be overflowing with little dude sounds and a healthy amount of yelling from Michaela.

But it was nine at night, and after getting in the night before, Remington and Michaela had unpacked and nursed their proverbial wounds after their disastrous vacation. Michaela still had debilitating nausea, and the boys hadn’t fared much better.

“In here,” Remington called quietly from his kitchen. I arched my back, silently dodging an overflowing coat rack in their mudroom before shuffling into their modest-sized kitchen. They’d updated it pretty well, but it showed all the wear and tear of three boys under the age of seven. The white cabinets had grimy marks along the bottom, one of the Venetian tiles had cracked



under their farm-style table, and several square inches were covered in “artistic flair” from wandering crayons and markers.

Remington sat at their marble island, his shoulders hunched, and a pair of glasses perched on his nose. The blue glare of his laptop suffused the darkened kitchen with an eerie glow, and as he looked up, he took on the appearance of a specter. The ghost of worn-out dads.

I held the six-pack a little higher.

Remington sighed gratefully. “Thank you, God. Give me that. Michaela made us give up alcohol for Lent.”

I pulled a face, sliding the beers across the counter toward him. “I didn’t know she was Catholic.”

“She’s not,” he said, pulling one out and cracking it open. He took a deep swig and sighed deeply. “She’s just trying to lose a few pounds and found a logical excuse to make me suffer with her.”

I snorted. “I mean, you knocked her up three times in six years. I hope you told her that’s unnecessary.”

Remington drank deeply again, burped, and then threw back his head in satisfaction. “God that’s good. Obviously, I told her that. She’s fucking perfection. You know how women are.”

*No, I thought, and I mashed my teeth together. No, I don’t. I have no idea what I’m doing with Laurel. All I know is I miss her like hell and giving her space is giving me an ulcer.*

“What food is that?” Remington asked warily, looking over his glasses at me. He was younger than I was, and admittedly, had run away with all the model genes in the family, but he looked like a stressed-out father if I’d ever seen one.

“Fries,” I said. “You like greasy shit when you’re working.”

“Yes,” he groaned happily, and threw open the carton before shoving five fries in his mouth. Moaning happily around them, he cracked his neck. Still chewing, he said, “Okay, I got the info from Brady last night. I think I’ve got this figured out, but we need him to really lose his shit and actually try to steal it.”

I came to stand next to him, leaning over to peer at his screen. None of it made any sense to me, but I recognized the file Brady had sent me. Remington called it “baiting.” Apparently, once Jason decided to steal the report, it would unleash holy hell on his system and not only shut down whatever he had going on, but it would create some kind of digital blueprint that Remington would receive. It would prove that Jason had been the one who had stolen the information he claimed to have, encrypted or not. And, depending on how much napalm we wanted to use, it could reach its fingers into things like his credit score, his bank account, his emails...

“I’m sure I can find a way to piss him off sufficiently,” I murmured. “Walk me through the process again.”

“You sure you want to do this? Once we do it, there’s no going back. I’ll need to shut him the fuck down so he doesn’t have the ability to retaliate.”

I hadn’t heard from Laurel other than the text she’d sent about my car. And her astute suspicions about Azura. Brady’s words echoed through my mind. *Consent is for sex*. In this case, he might be right. I grabbed a fry and popped it into my mouth. “Do it. Show me.”

Remington chuckled darkly. “Fuck, yeah. Karma here we come.”

\* \* \*

A crack of thunder startled me out of a deep sleep. My heart pounded loudly in my chest, filling the silence of my bedroom, just before rain cascaded against the windows. Another loud peal of thunder, followed by a flash of lightning, split the night. Letting out a long breath, I flopped back onto my pillows and ran my hands through my hair. I'd been worked to the bone again, and I'd let that ER walk all over me. Better to be overworked than overthinking everything, though.

It was Friday, and I finally had a few days off to round out the week. And I was dreading it. I had already spent two hours in the gym before going to bed, and I'd still had too much time to think. I hadn't heard from Laurel in nearly a week, and I was about to go kidnap her again. She didn't have strep, but she was hurt, and if I had to bring her back to my bed to do it, well... so be it.

But then my reason won out every time, and I schooled myself into a picture of patience. She needed time. She needed some distance to sort through how she felt, and being a domineering ass wasn't going to help her feel less trapped by her situation.

Thunder cracked again, and I looked over at the clock on my bedside table. It was out. Frowning, I picked up my phone, and even though it had had a thirty percent charge when I'd plugged it in last night, it was dead now. The power must have been out for a while, then.

With a groan, I hefted myself out of bed. Coffee and candles it was, then. It didn't matter what time it was—I was up. I dragged myself to the bathroom where I brushed my teeth in the dark and swiped on some deodorant before scrounging through my dresser for a pair of trainer pants and a T-shirt.

The analog clock in my kitchen showed four AM. Great. I plugged my phone into a travel charger I had in my bag on the granite island, and while I waited for it to juice up, I rummaged around my pantry for a protein bar. I peered at what I had chosen in the darkness. Chocolate mint. At least it wouldn't clash with my toothpaste.

My phone lit up on the counter and immediately dinged with several notifications. With the power out, I had no doubt that Clemens would want me to drag my tired ass back to his ER. For once, I was torn. I needed sleep. But I also needed to forget a dramatically tilted pair of dark blue eyes, and work was the best way to do that.

Then, I sucked in a breath, staring at my phone. *Laurel's phone*. With the power out, her alarms wouldn't go off.

I tossed the protein bar onto the counter, grabbed my phone attached to its charger, and skidded into my room to grab my key fob before jamming my feet into my sneakers and nearly running to my car. Rain pounded on the garage roof in tempo with my pulse. *I hope I'm wrong*, I thought as I started the pickup and punched the garage door button. *I hope her phone stayed charged and she's okay. I hope I show up and she tells me off.*

Okay, maybe I didn't exactly hope that last part, but if her telling me off meant that she had been sleeping soundly before I pounded on her door, then so be it. I pushed the line between safe driving in the rain and booking it down the two-lane highway and into town where her apartment had been built right off the main street.

I parked the truck next to my SUV, and ignoring the torrential downpour and darkened streetlamps, I jogged through the biting rain to her apartment. It was one of those apartment complexes with a stairwell between two ends of the building with apartments on either side of each landing.

Breathing hard, I paused outside her front door. The stairwell above my head provided some cover from the icy storm, but behind me, the water cascaded off the concrete like a manic fountain.

Was this stupid? Was I going to piss her off—or worse, push her away even further?

But then the image of Laurel curled in a ball and gasping for air, sobbing and alone in the dark permeated my thoughts. *Fuck that.*

I tried her door handle, and it opened easily, unlocked. “Laurel,” I growled under my breath. I made a mental note to get her a digital keypad lock the next time I went to the hardware store. She might be less likely to forget about locking it. The door opened with a quiet squeak, and I poked my head in, still breathing heavily through my nose.

Humid and silent, her living room had the air of a cozy cabin before the scary axe murderer scene in a horror flick. Only, I was the intruder. I closed the door behind me, trying to let my eyes adjust to the dimness, and my ear tilted to the side, listening for the evidence of Laurel’s nightmares.

A soft snore rolled through the heavy silence.

Smothering a laugh, I pulled my phone from my pocket and tapped the screen to illuminate the space dimly. Laurel lay on her couch with her head on the worn arm and one leg cocked up on the back of the faded pleather. One arm had been draped over her bare stomach between her hiked-up, enormous, white T-shirt and a pair of oversized sweats that she had rolled down her hips to keep them up. Around her, file folders, scattered papers, and stacks of tidy notebooks littered the living room. She had a laptop closed on the coffee table and what looked like a collective gallon of sugary, canned iced coffee drinks littered everywhere.

I released a breath, tilting my head back to suck in air gratefully. She was

okay. For whatever reason, her nightmare hadn't gripped her yet, and I sent up a silent prayer of thanks for that. It would have ripped my heart in half to see her like that again, all alone.

Laurel's soft snore stopped suddenly, and she shifted, breathed in deeply, and then let out a little sound that plucked at my heartstrings. *I should leave. I should lock the door, back out, and let her sleep. But...*

I took a tentative step forward, scanning her living room for her phone. If I just assured myself that her insane ritual of keeping herself from going into REM sleep was still doable, then I could leave her and at least feel confident that she wouldn't dissolve into her nightmares. But I didn't see her phone anywhere.

Laurel let out another sound, and it sounded distinctly worried. She huffed, curling onto her side and bringing her hands up to her chest. There was no way I could just leave her like that. She didn't even have a blanket, dammit. And what was she doing, here? Did she suddenly take up novel writing or something?

Honestly, she probably could write a novel about everything she'd been through. People would read that shit.

I crouched down next to her, between the coffee table and the couch, and tried to be stealthy as I shuffled papers around, looking for her phone. If she woke up, I was going to scare the daylights out of her.

Laurel moaned again, more distressed, and her breathing started to pick up. That was enough evidence for me. I sat on the couch so her curled up shins were against my hip, and I rubbed her arm. "Laurel. Hey, wake up, sweetie."

She puffed out a distressed breath, and it caught like she might cry.

I abandoned the gentle approach, which hadn't worked last time, either.

Instead, I snaked an arm under her torso and lifted her onto my lap. She was freezing, her skin taut and cold. As I gathered her in my arms, I roughly jostled her. “Laurel, wake up.”

She woke with a loud intake of breath. Her lungs worked under my arms, and I could feel, rather than see, her confusion. “What? Where?”

“You’re still home,” I assured her. “You’re safe.”

“Lach?” I had expected her voice to be confused, scared, maybe even accusatory. But unless I was absolutely insane, I could have sworn I heard a touch of relief in the way she gusted out my name.

“Yeah, sorry,” I said, my voice husky from not using it yet today. “I may have... snuck into your house. I saw the power was out and I was worried about your alarms.”

Laurel looked around, sitting up slightly. “You snuck in? How?”

“You don’t lock your door,” I said dryly.

“Oh.”

I rubbed her back, helping her to sit up, but not wanting to let go of her yet. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” she sighed, and I heard the weariness in her tone. “Yeah, I’m okay.” She paused, looking down and plucking at my T-shirt. “Thank you.”

Well, she hadn’t shoved me away, yet. Progress was progress. I took a chance and adjusted my hold, nestling her head into the crook of my shoulder. She melted, and I about exploded with happiness. “You still waking yourself up every two hours?”

She hesitated, as if afraid to answer. But then her exhaustion must have won out because she confessed, “Yes.” And then, her tone rigid, she added, “Not that it’s helping.”

I tightened my arms around her. “What do you mean?”

I heard her swallow. She gripped my shirt. “Jason has Calla. For spring break.”

Dread swirled around in my stomach and knocked against my ribs. “Since when?”

“Tuesday.”

“So, you’ve been in here, alone, all week?” I clarified.

“Yeah.”

“And your nightmares are worse?” She shrugged. Anger played tug-of-war with my fear for her. “Laurel.” It was all I could manage to get out.

She turned her face into my chest, and whether it was the haze of sleep or the magic of time apart, I didn’t know, but she gripped me tighter. Her muffled voice came out like, “Imshdu.”

I craned my head, leaning away from her and forcing her away from my chest. “What?”

“I missed you,” she admitted in a small voice.

Like an invisible hand had wrapped around my heart and worked its way up to my throat, I felt the air constricted in my lungs. “Babe. I’ve been here the whole time.”

She sniffled, wiping her eye on her shoulder. And then, as if coming out of a lucid dream, she sat up straight with a gasp. Her luminous eyes, violet in the darkness, latched onto my gaze with intensity. “Lach, I’ve got him.”

I frowned. “Who?”

She scrambled away from my lap, and I almost did a cartoon-worthy air grab to get her back. “Jason,” she ground out, and the ferocity in her tone was like a fiery shot to my veins. “I’ve got that motherfucker.” She grabbed a stack of papers off the coffee table and then hurried to sit next to me again. “I



caught him with this.” She held the folder between us, her expression almost fevered and her mouth tilted up in triumph.

Whatever she’d done, I didn’t care about the particulars. I was damn proud of whatever frenzied plan she had come up with on her own. She wasn’t going to let him walk all over her anymore, and regardless of anything else that happened, I could live with that. Just knowing that she had gone on the offense imbued me with relief and pride in equal measures. “What did you find?”

“Well, don’t freak out, first of all. It’s a little alarming, but I’ve got it handled.”

I nodded, soaking in her enthusiasm.

“Jason told me he was going to upend your research,” she paused, watching me. I didn’t bother to look surprised. I wanted her to trust me, and lying for dramatic effect wasn’t really my style. She plowed on anyway. “Okay, not the reaction I expected. Anyway, he *said* he had access to your data, but then I realized, there’s no way he does.”

A smile curved my lips. “How do you know that?”

“I’ve read preprints before, for my undergrad. I know a lot of that information is already public, and I also know that the information that *isn’t* public has got to be embedded in whatever software programs you and your partner have been using to run data.”

I was pretty sure I looked like a lovesick puppy dog. She was so damn clever. “Uh huh,” I encouraged.

“But for him to even *know* that, it means that he had to ask for access to your preprint.”

I grinned outright. “Uh huh,” I said again.

“You are disturbingly happy about this,” she said with a squint of her

eyes.

“Keep going,” I said simply.

“Okay, so if he asked for access to your preprint, because he would have to ask for the full thing if he wasn’t already in your network, then he either had to impersonate a doctor or use an alias under the guise of someone conducting related research.” Laurel handed me the file folder. “He impersonated a doctor.”

I knew most of this, of course. It was how we had determined that the best bait would be data from our program that we uploaded to a cloud server under the guise of “moving” it somewhere safe. But for her to have figured that out when she had never conducted research of her own, didn’t know what program we used, and had no experience in the science sector whatsoever, was simply stunning. My fingers itched to squish her.

And the thing we hadn’t bothered to dig into was how he had gotten a hold of our preprint. Laurel had done that, somehow. And the reality was so much better than I had anticipated. I didn’t think he’d be dumb enough to impersonate a doctor.

Which was identity theft.

Which was a federal crime.

Laurel squeezed the folder between her hands. “Why aren’t you saying anything? Did I terrify you? Are you mad? I didn’t snoop into any of your perso—”

I cut her off by swooping down and fitting my lips to hers. I cupped her jaw, and little shocks of pleasure from the softness of her skin against the rough pads on my fingers went straight to my groin. I slanted starving kisses over her mouth, only dimly aware that she had dropped the folder and was

leaning into me, her own breathing picking up in tempo as she met me kiss for kiss with hungry passion.

I hooked an arm behind her and lifted her off the couch cushion. I pulled her to me and fitted her on my lap with her legs straddling me and her warm center fitted snugly against my cock. Laurel moaned into my mouth while her hands tangled in my hair and her hips rocked against mine.

Fucking hell. This woman was magic. She was a love spell drunk on pheromones. She smelled like sleep and comfy Laurel mingled with coffee and sugar, and at this rate, I was going to develop a sweet tooth of my own. Our tongues danced, and I captured her lower lip in a punishing bite. She exhaled sharply, but then curved her arms behind my neck to bring herself closer to me.

I slid my hands under the hem of her shirt, causing her stomach to contract harshly. Her shirt came off as my hands caressed a path up her stomach, over her bare breasts and then the shirt was over her head and tossed to the side. She sat bare from the waist up, her eyes half-lidded with desire and panting softly.

My mouth literally watered.

She leaned forward with a lethal combination of sweet and sultry, and with the same tentative fingers that had undressed me the first time we'd made love, she shimmied my shirt off my torso so our skin lay flush against each other.

And then we were starving again. This wasn't the same slow game I had played with her before. It wasn't the teasing push and pull I had used to help her enjoy herself as much as I did. This was ravaging need that had wrapped itself around both of us so tightly, there was no chance of pausing to think about it.

The rest of our clothes were off in seconds, and then with reckless abandon, she straddled me again, pushing my chest so I reclined on her couch. She lowered herself over me with an uninhibited groan that echoed the bliss I felt as her tight pussy clenched around my cock.

I hoped against hope that Laurel had the presence of mind to take some contraceptive precautions on her end. If not... well... Shit, I couldn't even think it through as a coherent thought.

She moved up and down on my length, gasping and moaning as her fingers worked her clit and her perfect ass slapped against my thighs with every stroke she lavished on my cock.

It wasn't enough. I needed more. I needed all of her.

I sat up pressing her tightly to me, and then cupping the globes of her buttocks under my hands, I lifted us both and turned, pinning her beneath me on the couch. I had one knee braced on the couch beside her, and my other foot on the ground, and I filled her with needy strokes that pulled low, staccato moans from the base of her throat.

Laurel tensed, her free hand grabbing the couch cushion beneath her, and I knew she was there. With punishing strokes, I pushed her over the edge, and she gasped, her legs shaking and her pussy pulsing around me in rhythmic release.

I gritted my teeth as I felt my climax start from my balls and clench its way through the length of my arousal in waves of euphoric relief. I pulled out of her, snatching my shirt and hoping that I'd timed it well, but that was secondary to the mind-melting ecstasy of cumming all over Laurel Fucking Brook while she came down from her own orgasm.

Suddenly, the power came back on. The lights blinked on with glaring, harsh intensity, and they illuminated Laurel's flushed cheeks and surprised

features.

Then she laughed, and I felt my heart tumble straight into her hands.

## Twenty Three

# Laurel



I stared at Lachlan from the confines of my blanket burrito, and I wondered if maybe I was a witch. I'd been missing him so badly, I'd daydreamed about him all week. Once I'd discovered a way to shove Jason's empty threats up his smelly asshole, the only thing I'd wanted to do was run to Lachlan and tell him that I might not be the harassment I thought I was. But I had hurt him. I had rejected him, and he'd kept his distance. Rightfully so.

Ugh, but *still* I had wished for him. As I'd fallen asleep, I'd imagined him coming through my front door and telling me none of this bullshit mattered and that he wanted to keep some part of what we'd shared in the last two weeks.

And then... he had. Well, he fucked me first. Thank God. But then, he'd wrapped me in a fluffy blanket from my bed, insisting that I'd frozen myself half to death sleeping without blankets, and then he'd commandeered my kitchen to make us breakfast.

I stared at him with owlsh eyes as he poured coffee in two mugs and tossed toasted slices of bread onto mismatched plastic plates.

Oh yeah. I had the gift. I wondered what else I could conjure. A dental plan, maybe?

Lachlan brought our plates over first, setting them down on my cluttered coffee table. Then he brought me a hot cup of coffee—the only steady thing I’d been able to consume all week—and handed it to me. My hands poked out of the blanket just enough to cup the handle.

He sat down on the coffee table, his knees bracketing mine. Gold-brown eyes regarded me with a touch of amusement under his tilted eyebrows. “So. You’ve been spending this whole week figuring out a way to gut your gutless ex-husband?”

I sipped the coffee, and my eyes fluttered with satisfaction. Perfectly sweet with just the right amount of creamer and piping hot. Everything he did was a dream. “Actually,” I said slowly, gathering my thoughts. “It was less about him and more about... you.”

Lachlan tipped his head to the side in silent question.

I traced a finger around the rim of my mug. “When Jason told me he was going to ruin your life if I didn’t walk away from you, I was pissed, actually. I mean, I went between hopeless and pissed, but mostly, I was furious. And I realized, it wasn’t fair to you.”

He watched me silently. He’d done that a lot since he’d done the whole breaking and entering bit this morning. I didn’t mind gazing at his David-the-sculpture-worthy features, and his eyes were warm like hot apple cider in a way that reminded me of a cozy fall afternoon. But he had a way of being unnerving, too. It was like he saw the parts of me I wished didn’t exist in the first place.

I forged onward anyway. “It was my fault your brother was even in the line of fire. My fault because I hadn’t found a way to stand up to him, yet.

And I realized I could. I really could if I wanted to. But I needed to find the right way to make him back off.” I scrunched my face, not sure I wanted to admit the rest.

Lachlan pinched my cheeks together with one hand. “Hey, burrito. I literally see when you duck down behind that mental wall of yours.”

I smiled against his fingers. “Yeah?”

He adjusted his hold to my chin. “Yeah.”

Gathering my courage, I admitted, “I wanted to be... good for you? Ready? I don’t know. I wanted to be free. If I was free, then even if I had ruined,” I gestured futilely between us, “this. Whatever this was, then, at the very least, I could be clear for something more. Someday. Or, hell, clear for my own sake. I deserve it, too.”

“You do,” he agreed solemnly.

“I’m sorry I put your career in jeopardy,” I said, looking down at my coffee again. “I couldn’t tell you or you’d try to fix it. You deserve better than that.”

He made a growling noise, like he’d died on level ninety-nine out of one hundred of a video game. I blinked up at him in surprise. “You’re mad?”

“Yes, I’m mad,” he gritted out. But his features contradicted that because he was drinking me in with an expression that held only softness. “You *should* tell me things, Laurel. If you really want this to be fair, then you should be honest, too.”

I shrugged, scrunching my nose to one side. “Yeah, but I fixed it. He won’t bother you once I show him what I found.”

He laughed, low and ending on a growl of frustration. “I could just,” he mimicked wringing out a rag. Or my neck. “If you’d told me that he had threatened you, then we could have helped each other.”



I felt my brow crease.

“I already knew, burrito brains. He threatened me days before he even let you in on it.”

My mouth popped open. “No.”

“Yes. And as brilliant as that find is,” he said, gesturing to the file on his left, “Remington and I have a plan, too. Either way, he’s pretty fucked, but if we’d worked *together*,” he emphasized. “Well, who knows? At the very least, we wouldn’t have suffered in silence all week.”

I fought a smile. “You suffered?”

“The Seven Circles of Hell have nothing on ‘Lachlan trying to ignore Laurel for a week,’” he admitted grimly. “I was trying to give you space.”

“I did need space,” I admitted. “I got a pro bono lawyer, and she was really helpful in piecing all of this together. And she thinks we can amend the custody agreement without any fuss because he’s in a different country.”

“Good,” Lachlan said easily, and sipped his black coffee.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “You don’t seem surprised that I found a lawyer.”

“You’re very capable.” He slurped his coffee again, loudly. I cinched my eyes together until his image blurred. Lachlan sighed. “Okay, fine, Brady is the last name of my research partner.”

“I knew it!” I hissed, standing with indignation. “I *knew* you were behind that.”

“I didn’t *pay* for a lawyer, though,” he said innocently.

“Lachlan Cade,” I accused.

“So, I called in a few favors,” he muttered, looking away and taking another sip of coffee. Then his eyes lifted to me, standing there with my lips pursed, and he reached up a well-toned arm to pluck my coffee from my

hand. He set both mugs down on the beat-up, wooden coffee table, and then without warning, he tackled me to the couch.

I screeched, wiggling under his arms. “Lachlan!”

“Shut up. We figured out what you’ve been up to all week, but now it’s time to pay the piper.”

“What does that expression even mean?” I grumbled.

Lachlan squished the air from my lungs. “Shush. Anyway, it’s time for you to woman up. You’re going to tell me about your night terrors. And I’m going to—stop,” he added as I started to protest. “I’m going to listen, and you’re going to get out every word so you can hear for yourself why it’s traumatic. And then, because I’m your doctor, too, we’re going to come up with a POC.”

“What’s a POC?” I asked with dread slithering through me.

“Plan of Care,” he said, planting a kiss on my cheek. “Out with it. Tell me what you see when you dream this thing.”

I told him, haltingly at first, and then a little more confidently as I explained how it had been weeks since I’d seen Jason at all when the memory had happened. I explained how he’d shown up in our old apartment and had seemed like he wanted to make things work. I explained how he’d given me a “chance” to prove that I wanted him badly enough.

I buried my face in the blankets as I told him that I’d relented and undressed just so he could sit there and laugh at me. Lachlan had to tilt his ear close to my jaw as I told the last part from the safety of the fabric.

When I’d finished, only the sound of the rain on my windows and the slow, steady rhythm of his breathing broke the silence. Finally, he lifted himself upright, taking me with him, and he peeled away the blanket. I turned

to face him, but my eyes stayed glued to his bare chest and the beautiful dipping planes of his torso.

With what sounded like some difficulty, Lachlan asked, “And now that you’ve told me that, how do you feel?”

“Embarrassed,” I admitted. Our legs were bent on the couch in mirrored poses, and I stared at the breathable fabric of his joggers. “It’s really... it’s gross. The fact that I had so little respect for myself as a woman that I would do that is really shameful. I hate thinking about it. But my brain makes me remember it over and over again.”

He drew in a long breath through his nose. I glanced up at him, and nearly flinched at the furious expression that had pulled his handsome features taut. A muscle in his jaw ticked, but with gentle hands, he took both of mine in his. “I don’t want to overwhelm you, but you need to understand what that was. And I wouldn’t use the term lightly, but when one person intentionally exerts power over another person in order to hurt them—”

I held up my hand, my eyes going wide. “Stop. Lachlan, it is not that serious.”

“Yes, it is,” he insisted, and his strong fingers encased mine. “Abuse is when one person exerts power and pain over another person *knowing* it will harm them. Do you disagree with that definition?”

I clenched my teeth hard.

“And if you don’t disagree, then do you agree that what I described is exactly what he did to you?” Lachlan pushed on.

I drew air into my lungs, disbelief clouding my thoughts. “Maybe.”

“Not maybe. It’s literally the definition,” he insisted.

I rolled my lips between my teeth, looking down again.

“Your mind and your heart feel that gray area just as strongly as if it were

a black and white issue,” he said softly. “And you don’t want to admit it or face it, so you force it down. But it’s going to keep screaming to be heard. It’s going to make you see it until you acknowledge it.”

I put a hand over my forehead. “It was my fault, though.”

“Stop,” he yanked my hand down and still holding it, used both our hands to force my chin up so I looked straight into his earnest gaze. “You know that’s bullshit. He manipulated and used you, and whatever his issues, that’s unforgivable.”

It was hard to disagree. When everything was laid out bare for me to really examine, especially with Lachlan’s perspective, it seemed a lot more black and white than gray.

“Putting aside the fact that I could happily give that prick a lobotomy with a dull screwdriver,” Lachlan muttered through his teeth, “let’s focus on your POC. You ready for it?”

I nodded, letting my thumb drift over the ridges of his knuckles. “Lay it on me.”

“Trust me,” he said simply.

I felt my eyebrows twitch up a fraction. “Trust you. That’s the plan?”

“That’s the plan,” Lachlan repeated. “Let me hold you together while you heal. Trust me with your emotional wounds the same way you trusted me with your body.” His eyes skimmed over me appreciatively. “You trusted me when I had to put Steri-Strips on your forehead. And that really was your fault.”

I let loose a rueful chuckle. “Uh, yeah. True.”

“So, trust me with all your wounds, Laurel. Especially the ones that cut you the deepest. And if all else fails,” he continued, leaning forward so his

breath fanned over my cheekbone, “I’ll kiss every inch of you until it stops hurting.”

I swallowed a knot of emotion and let my eyes dance over the planes of his face. “You promise?”

“Yes. And I’ll remind you every day.”

A smile ghosted over my lips as his mouth pressed against mine with coaxing, gentle pressure. That kind of medicine was better than bubblegum flavor any day.

\* \* \*

I tapped the watermelon-printed salad bowl with nervous fingers as we waited on the arched doorstep of Remington’s charming, colonial-style house. I looked left, then right. Lachlan pinched my ass through the sunflower print of my short jumper.

I started, and then gave him a glare.

“Stop worrying,” he murmured.

“I’m not worrying. You’re worrying,” I said nervously.

Remington opened the front door, beaming with perfectly straight teeth. His curly, dark blond hair fell over his forehead in an attractive swoop and his brown eyes crinkled in welcome. If Lachlan was Captain America, then his brother was Clark Kent. “Laurel,” he said, holding out a hand. “We’re so glad you came!”

I shook his hand, and the cool smoothness of his grip had an immediate calming effect on my nerves. “Thank you for inviting me.”

“Are you kidding me?” Remington asked, standing aside so we could cross the threshold. “Michaela is frothing at the mouth to meet you.”

“Hi bro, nice to see you, too” Lachlan pointed out sarcastically.

Remington’s wife, Michaela, popped out of seemingly nowhere with her green eyes fastened on me. “No one cares about your feelings, Lachlan. Laurel! I’ve heard so much about you,” she gushed. “Come in. What is that? Did Lachlan make some kind of ancient grain salad?”

I snickered and Lachlan clicked his tongue softly.

Michaela had long, frizzy hair that curled and waved in a chaotic tumble down her shoulders, but she swirled it up with a claw clip as she led me through their house. It was a mix of updated fixtures and outdated elements, like the floral-papered dining room, and it seemed perfect. “We’re all out back,” Michaela explained as she led me through the dining room to the double glass doors which were already open and guarded by a screen door. “Otherwise, I think the boys would run us over.”

As if summoned, two boys darted around the corner. The older one was brandishing a horrifying collection of gardening hand tools, and Michaela smoothly intercepted his attack by plucking them from the brown-haired boy’s hands.

I watched in amazement and took mental notes. She didn’t seem phased by their boisterous complaints one bit, and she gestured for me to go through the screen door. I did, balancing Lachlan’s bean salad in the crook of my arm. I gave a little gasp when I stepped into their yard. They’d strung bulb lights from a pergola to a covered patio to the left, and then the green lawn sloped down at least half an acre with a white fence around all of it. A wooden

playset had been built under a cottonwood tree, and near it, a small boy bounced fearlessly high on a covered trampoline.

Family nirvana.

Lachlan pressed the length of his body against my back, and he leaned down to whisper, “Did we short circuit a wire?”

I skipped forward, my cheeks heating as Remington snorted from behind Lachlan. “No, I’m good,” I said, clearing my throat. I went over to the glass table on the patio, and after setting the bowl down with the rest of the food, I took a moment to admire their view. They had a perfect view of the mountains with miles of bright green trees stretching out like an ocean before the monoliths. Still white-capped and blue in early spring, they captured all the colors of thawing rebirth.

Lachlan came to stand behind me and wrapped his long arms around me, fully enveloping me in his warmth. “You look pretty serene for someone who has to piss off a douche in a second.”

I smiled and leaned my cheek against his hard bicep. “Should we bet on how long it takes him to snag the bait?”

“A week,” Remington said as he went to the grill and lifted the lid. “He’ll dither about it. It’s illegal as fuck, so he’ll need to stew on it.”

“Hm,” Lachlan hummed, and the sound went straight to my panties. I wouldn’t ever get used to the effect his voice had on my body. “I think he’ll do it as soon as he’s back in Norway. Maybe a day or two.”

Challenge accepted. “Like three hours,” I said. Both men guffawed. Undaunted, I shrugged. “He’ll find somewhere with Wi-Fi and find the easiest way to retaliate with immediate effect.”

“Well see,” Remington and Lachlan said in unison.

That was, of course, assuming Jason took the bait at all. He could still

release the information he had on Remington, even if he had bluffed about Lachlan's research. Which was why it was my job to get him angry enough to want to press all the red buttons and blow himself up in the process.

It was just as Remington had finished dishing up hot dogs to his kids that we heard the crunch of tires on worn asphalt outside the Cade house. I went to greet them, eager to have Calla in my arms again, but Lachlan held my elbow and then slid his arm around my torso. He fitted my hip to his leg and said, "Make him come to you. Home field advantage."

"Sports analogies mean nothing to me," I said, rolling my eyes up to him.

"We have the high ground," he tried again with a grin.

I snorted and took a sip of wine. Sure, whatever that meant. "I need you to take Calla to the trampoline while I talk to him," I said as I heard Michaela greet them at the door.

"Ooh. Ruthless," he grinned.

"Make her laugh," I added.

"Roger that."

Calla was the first one to bound through the doorway, and I was amused to find that her hair was an absolute mess, sticking out around her ears and haphazardly thrown into a ponytail. But she had on a cute romper, and she catapulted herself into my arms, immediately launching into a detailed story of her magical trip to Yellowstone.

I wanted to hear about it, but I had a job to do. I kissed her all over, squishing her tight, and then said, "Hey baby, do you remember Dr. Cade? Lachlan?"

"You're here! Yay!" Calla said happily. I couldn't have written a better script for her if I tried.

"I am," he replied with a charming smile, and he held out a hand to her.



“Would you like to meet some kids your age? My nephews are the best friends. I would know. They’re my BFFs.”

“*You* have BFFs?” Calla asked incredulously.

As Lachlan led her away, I stood and faced Jason, who was already glaring over my shoulder at Lachlan and Calla. It was a low blow to make him feel insecure about his role as a father, but this wasn’t a normal divorce. He’d threatened me and the people I cared about, and he’d done it illegally.

Jason was wearing a black turtleneck that probably contributed to the sweat under his nose and along his gray hairline. His pants looked designer, but they didn’t do him any favors with their high-waisted design, overly pressed creases, and slick material. He wore the same pair of black and white sneakers he’d been wearing on Tuesday, and he’d switched out his gold watch for a smartwatch.

I took a sip of my wine before saying, “So. Ultimatums.”

He looked around, like someone might hear us. “You clearly didn’t take my advice. At all. That asshole slapping a steak on your plate is a criminal, Laur.”

I pulled an exaggerated thinking face. “Am I supposed to... care? You left me alone with our kid, Jason.” I took a step closer, lowering my voice as if I didn’t want to be overheard, either. “What did you expect me to do? I need someone to provide a life for us. Lachlan is a doctor. He has money coming out of his nose.” I paused, thinking again. “And he’s a good fuck.”

Jason’s lip curled. “So, you know they’re criminals, and you don’t care. Not even for Calla’s sake.”

I shrugged one shoulder, sipping my wine. “Whatever monster I am, you can take credit for, Jason. Besides, Remington covered his tracks and Lachlan

backed up his research to a secure location, so we aren't scared of whatever bullshit you claim you're going to release."

Jason got a glint in his dark eyes. "So, you don't care if I poke around your fuck buddy's cloud a bit?"

I gulped a little louder, doing my best to toe the line between affected nonchalance with a hint of nerves. "You're bluffing."

Jason's eyes pinched into slits. Behind us, Lachlan had gotten Calla on the trampoline and he had her laughing loudly as he bounced her around like an egg in a frying pan. Jason wet his lips, wiped them with a hand, and looked to his right, clearly holding back from something. "You know," he said, finally. "I was doing this for you, Laur. I was doing it to protect you from your own bad judgment. Now I'm thinking you're going to get what you deserve."

"I deserve a decent-sized dick," I drawled. "And, hey, I found one. Go home, Jason. Stop playing at hacker boy and go back to scrubbing hard drives or whatever it is you do in Norway."

Jason inhaled slowly, his lips curling inward, and then, to my shock, he took an angry step toward me. His hand lashed out to grab my upper arm, and he yanked me hard against him. With fury stiling his words, he whispered harshly, "You want to play games with me? Fine. Let's play games. You'll lose everything, and when you come crawling back to me, you'll just have to take what I'm willing to give to you." He looked me up and down. "And I guess you're a slut now, so expect to be treated like one."

A large, warm shape appeared behind me, and then Lachlan's voice said, "You have two seconds to remove your hand before this whole picnic goes south." Jason released me, pushing me away from him and meeting Lachlan's gaze with challenging indignation.

Lachlan caught me, and his hands replaced Jason's by encircling my upper arms softly. His thumbs rubbed my sore skin with gentle, reassuring strokes.

"I was leaving anyway. Best of luck with your research, *doctor*," Jason snorted.

Then he was gone, but my mind barely comprehended the end of our interaction because my heart was doing a painful stuttering thing, and emotion had clogged my throat with a thick bubble of tears that threatened to burst. I forced it back down. Jason had done exactly what I'd wanted him to do. I didn't need to get my panties in a wad over that. Mission accomplished.

Once Jason had gone through the door, Lachlan turned me in his arms and lifted my elbow, inspecting where Jason's fingers had dug into my flesh. "Motherfucker," he gritted. His thumb smoothed over the welts before he pulled me into a hug. "Hey, are you okay? If I'd thought he would get physical with you, I never would have—"

"No, I'm fine," I assured him.

Remington jogged over, glancing over his shoulder where the kids, oblivious to the altercation, were playing on the swings. "Shit, Laurel, are you okay?"

I nodded. "I think it's safe to say I pissed him off."

"Jesus," Remington exhaled, running a hand through his blond curls. "Bold little fucker, isn't he?"

"Something like that," I said acerbically.

"Azura is going to love this," Remington added with a half grin. "I have cameras everywhere. Obviously. You won't have to get within a hundred yards of him for the rest of your life, now."

Lachlan pressed me to him, kissing the top of my head. "I don't know

what you said, but you looked sassy as shit while you were saying it.”

I gusted out a laugh. “It was no less than he deserved to hear, honestly.”

The sun had begun to disappear behind the mountains, and the lower it sank, the calmer my nerves became. With each minute that deepened the sunset to violet and midnight blue, my fears seemed to vanish with the fiery glow. Remington and Michaela lit a fire in their firepit, and we sat in comfortable lawn chairs around it, laughing at the kids’ antics and roasting marshmallows. I ate like twelve of them before Lachlan confiscated the bag and trapped my arms to my sides on his lap.

Then, Michaela and I got the kids ready for bed, and she assured me that Calla was welcome to sleep in their guest room while the adults broke out another bottle of wine to unwind. Calla must have been exhausted from driving all day and then playing all night, because only halfway through the first song on her sleeping playlist, she was out cold.

As I closed her door behind me, a computer *ding* sounded from the kitchen. Then another one. And another one. *Ding, ding, ding.*

Remington bounded through the sliding doors, snatched a pair of thick-rimmed glasses off the dining room table, and then skidded to a halt in the kitchen in front of the marble island where four laptops had been set up. He jammed the glasses on his face and clicked his mouse.

I joined him warily. “What is it?”

He grinned. “My God. This is so much better than I thought.”

Lachlan came in at a measured pace, his expression curious. “He took the bait?”

“Boy howdy, did he.” Remington typed code into a black box, and then he cackled. “Jesus, he didn’t even use an encrypted server. He stopped at some random gas station and went to town on his personal computer. What a

doofus.” Remington looked up from the computer and pushed up his glasses with the back of his hand. “Laurel, you tell me what you want to do. I’ve got his balls in my hand, and I can squeeze as hard as you want.”

I’d been thinking about that all night. Part of me wanted Remington to do his worst, to take Jason down several pegs and have *him* begging *me* for a change. But then I’d considered all the ways that would tarnish who *I* was, and I wondered how that might affect Calla someday. I knew, in my heart, that this trip with her father would likely be her last for a long time. Jason had crossed lines that couldn’t be uncrossed. Until I knew Calla’s father had pulled his shit together—until I could be sure he wouldn’t harm her just to retaliate against me—I couldn’t let her be with him.

And with that came the sobering responsibility to give Jason the *chance* to change. For Calla’s sake, I needed to give the fucker the room to do better. I couldn’t control him, but I could give him the chance.

I folded my arms. “I don’t know how your trap works, but I think the best thing would be to protect yourselves. Whatever wall you can build to keep him out and deter him from trying again.”

Remington pulled a face. “Aw, come on. You don’t even want me to give him a teeny tiny malware virus?”

I made an uncertain, sweeping gesture with my hand. “I don’t know. Sure, give him a virus. Especially if it will wipe whatever he has on that computer.”

“That I can do,” Remington said with evil glee.

Lachlan kissed the side of my neck and sighed against my skin. “You’re way too nice, Miss Brook.”

I scoffed, pulling my head back to give him an offended glare. “I’m not nice. I’m sassy, remember?”

“Uh huh,” he rolled his eyes.

I pursed my lips. “Hey, Remington.”

“Yeah?” he asked, looking over his shoulder at me again.

“There are certain ways to sell someone’s information to telemarketers and stuff, right?”

Remington snickered. “Among other things.”

“Sign him up for all the things. Preferably the annoying ones.”

“With pleasure, madam,” Remington agreed.

Lachlan *tsked*, pulling me away from the kitchen to the darkened dining room. “I guess I’d better watch myself with you, Miss Brook. I might find myself with a mailbox full of furry porn.”

“You’re not into that?” I teased, letting him turn me so our hips fit together and his palm pressed the small of my back. “Not your jam?”

Lachlan fingered my earlobe with a gleam in his eye. “I don’t know. I could get behind Laurel with fox ears.”

“Ugh,” I grimaced.

Laughing, he bent his head to skim a kiss on the corner of my mouth. Then he molded his lips to mine slowly, achingly, promising delicious, naughty things. “Alright. No cosplay. But I seem to remember a certain gorgeous creature who wanted to play out a few doctor fantasies.”

I shushed him, looking around the dining room to make sure no one could hear him. “Say that a little louder, will you?”

“What, you don’t want to?” he teased.

My mouth went dry as I turned my attention to his lips, his chin, and then down his body. “I, uh... wouldn’t hate it.”

Lachlan chuckled, dark and low. “I have a few ideas.”

My mind went sprinting down a back alley of fantasies, and suddenly not

caring where we were, I let Lachlan's mouth and hands run as wild as my desire for him. Trusting felt good. Really *really* good.

## Twenty Four

# Lachlan



**A**s I turned left off the pitted dirt road, I kept an eye on the misty, two-lane highway for oncoming traffic, but it was clear that no one else was out at this hour. Apparently, the lazy town near the Palisades Dam didn't rise at six AM. Behind me, the clouds had descended on the majestic peaks and crags of the Snake River Range, fogging the green, blue, and gray color swatch that cut through the sky. Like Mount Olympus, the mountain range towered over the sloping valley below. Even in early June, the air held a slight chill that chased the mist and impending rain.

I checked my phone periodically as I drove, hoping for a bar to magically appear on the screen, but no such luck. Finally, I saw "The Dam Store," which Laurel had found incredibly hilarious on our way to our campsite, and I turned into the parking lot.

Sure enough, they had free Wi-Fi. And coffee. Good enough. After grabbing a cup of coffee and deciding against the preservative-laden selection of junk food on the shelves, I went back to my truck and checked out the Wi-Fi signal. It was decent enough for a video call, at least.



I called Brady and then waited, sipping the Dam Store's finest, watery brew. He answered on the third ring, his face deadpan as ever, but his skin glistening with a sheen of sweat and his dark hair plastered to his forehead. "Did I interrupt? You're usually done by six," I said.

Brady grunted, and the camera dipped with him as he sat down on something. "I'm letting out some aggression."

"Uh oh. You feeling stabby, now?"

Brady actually looked like he was considering it. "I won't bore you with the details."

"Bore me," I said. "I have terrible news for you, so by all means, lighten the mood. Who do we need to kill?"

"My receptionist," Brady said through clenched teeth.

I lifted my gaze in thought. "Is this the same one you just hired, or did you fire that one and get a new one already?"

"It's the same one," he said tersely.

"Hm. What did she do? Catalogue the patients by first name instead of last or something?"

"She set my pants on fire," Brady glowered.

I opened my mouth, but no sound came out.

"Yeah. She set my pants on fire and then blamed me for it. And they believed her. Now, Carla is sending our entire office to the boonies for a Kumbaya retreat to learn how to get along." Brady wiped his face with a towel. "She's a menace, Cade. I'm telling you—if the Tasmanian Devil applied for her job, I'd give him a signing bonus."

I tucked my lips between my teeth to keep from laughing. Finally, I said, "Wow. That's... very unfortunate."

"Thank you for putting me in a fantastic mood by reminding me. What's

the bad news?” Brady scowled. Amos Brady had all the charm of a Victorian-era banker most of the time. But, at the moment, he’d make Ebenezer Scrooge look like a children’s TV show host.

“Before I lost service, I got an email from UC Health.”

Amos pinched the bridge of his nose. “They filled their slots.”

“They filled their slots,” I confirmed.

Brady sighed deeply, looking to the side.

“I mean, at least your receptionist didn’t mess that up,” I offered. “We sucked all on our own, there.”

“Trust me, Cade. If there’s bad luck to be had, June Matthews can cause it. Thanks for letting me know.”

I gave him a mocking “cheers” with my coffee cup. “I’m going to disappear into the mountains now. I’m less of a failure up there.”

“Not a bad idea,” he muttered.

“You said you were going to Peace and Love Camp. Have fun with that.”

“Shut up, Cade.” Brady hung up, and I snorted, sipping my bad coffee again. Well, it could have gone worse. I didn’t curse even once, and Brady didn’t threaten to break someone’s nose.

I ran back inside the Dam Store to fill a plastic grocery bag with sugary shit that would win my ladies over, and with a fresh, hot cup of coffee for Laurel, I headed back to the mountain road that led to our campsite. Rain hammered against my windshield as I bumped up the dirt road, one hand on the top of Laurel’s coffee cup lid and the other maneuvering around potholes and washboard road texture. By the time the mountains and pines had swallowed my truck in their misty shadows, the storm had released in earnest.

Through my fast-moving windshield wipers, I could just make out our

tent and picnic table, and found Laurel running around the campsite, her feet in unstrapped sandals and her lace-capped pajama tank already drenched from the downpour. She was wearing her new pair of glasses, which I'd known she'd desperately needed, but she hadn't given in to getting an appointment until she'd saved up enough money to afford it. We'd have to work on that—she still didn't accept my help if I offered.

I put the truck in park and dashed into the rain. As Laurel ran around, ducking down and picking up items off the picnic table, I shook my head. I didn't care what her reasons were for being out there in the rain, but I did know that I wasn't going to let her continue. Knowing her, she'd end up with whatever worst-case scenario waited at the end of her harebrained thought process. She'd slip on a puddle and bash her head on a cast-iron pan, or the wind would blow a tree branch on her head and make her forget I ever existed.

She looked up as I approached, her brown hair molded to her neck and down to her breasts. Her red glasses were fogged over, and she was panting slightly. She shouted over the din, "Can you believe this? We left all our stuff out here!"

"Get in the tent," I said, like that was obvious. "Why are you in the rain?"

"Our stuff!" she said, brandishing a can of insect repellent.

"For God's sake," I grumbled. "Is Calla still sleeping?"

"Oh yeah, she's out."

"Good." I hooked an arm around her waist, and ignoring her gasp of protest, I hauled her back to the warm, dry truck that was still running behind us. I opened the driver's side door and clamping her ass and back to my stomach, hauled us both into the cab.

As I slammed the door, Laurel curled her legs up to avoid the steering

wheel, and then rotated her body so she sat sideways on my lap with her knees against the driver's side door and her fingers clutching my damp T-shirt. She fit snugly in my lap in the same way a cat curled into a round bed in a semi-liquid state.

I reached up to take off her glasses, perching them carefully on the dash behind her.

In the sudden hush of the truck cab, Laurel licked a drop of rainwater off her upper lip, staring at me with wide, slightly annoyed, cerulean eyes. "What are you doing?" she hissed, like the sudden quiet required muted voices.

"Saving you from yourself," I replied honestly.

"We have stuff getting soaked," she whispered.

I leaned forward so our lips were a centimeter apart. "Why are we whispering?" I breathed out, so softly, she could have felt the words better than she could have heard them.

Her breath caught, and her fingers splayed against my chest. "I don't know," she said in a breathy voice. "It's so quiet in here."

I couldn't resist. I flicked out my tongue to taste a bit of rainwater on her lower lip. The freshest fjord spring water couldn't have tasted purer than that.

Laurel swallowed audibly. "Stop distracting me. I have to save our marshmallows and graham crackers."

My fingers kneaded soothing circles over the tight muscles bracketing her spine, and as I did, Laurel melted into me like a toasted marshmallow. "That's probably for the best," I said.

"I like marshmallows," she protested, her voice drowsy and her eyes already heavy like she'd been sedated.

"You know what's better than marshmallows?"

Laurel angled her face so our lips were close again. So close I could feel

her breath fan out across my mouth. “Mnh,” was all she said.

A smile curved my lips. “You did that on purpose.”

“Mhm,” she agreed before her lips pressed to mine, fitting like the most meticulously crafted cogs. When I couldn’t take it anymore, I opened my mouth to slant over hers in hungry need.

I shifted her on my lap, and she followed, wanting the same thing I did and resting both her knees on either side of my thighs, straddling me. I smoothed her wet hair away from her face as I deepened our kiss, and she moaned into my mouth, flicking her tongue against mine and pressing her hips down.

A low sound of appreciation escaped my lips because, *fuck*, she felt good. I yanked her soggy tank top up her waist, but Laurel stopped me, sitting up and breaking the spell with a snap. She frowned down at me, her lips pink and her cheeks flushed. “I’m not having sex in a truck like a horny teenager.”

“What’s wrong with horny teenagers?” I asked. My fingers did a dance up her cold skin, playing under her shirt and inching up her ribcage.

Laurel’s ribs contracted with a sharp breath as her attention wavered to my hands. But then she blinked, and valiantly, she continued, “They’re stupid. We aren’t stupid. Plus, isn’t car sex awkward and uncomfortable?”

I had about ten different ways in my head I could fuck this goddess in my truck that would not only be comfortable but would also blow both our minds. Instead, I let my fingers drift to the underside of her breasts, which were now rising and falling a little faster. “Hm,” I hummed. “Maybe.”

“And, anyway, Calla’s going to wake up soon,” she reasoned, even as her eyes caressed me from my hairline to our fused hips. “And breakfast,” she added weakly.

I let my hand travel around the back of her ribs, down to the small of her

back, and then I pulled them out of her tank top so I could lift them back to her shoulders. I hooked her straps down her arms as I smoothed a line to her elbows. Rain pounded on the metal roof, thundering down the windshield in tempo with the blood roaring in my ears. But calmly, I murmured, “Yes, breakfast is important.”

Laurel leaned into me a bit, though I was unsure whether it was consciously or not. “I just don’t want to be irresponsible,” she said, her tone falling to a whisper again.

I sat up, using one hand to grind her ass down on my dick and the other to tease the fabric of her neckline an inch down her damp breasts. I bent to kiss the ridge of her collarbone. “You’re very responsible, Laurel Brook.” I kissed a little lower, and Laurel exhaled, letting her head fall back a touch. “And no one in your custody case is going to know or care if you had sex in a truck with your boyfriend at six-thirty in the morning before your kid woke up.”

Laurel had been worked up about her impending court case against Jason for almost two months now. But we hadn’t heard from the cocksucker other than his regular calls with Calla. Laurel had initiated the case to smooth out the issues in her divorce decree, and as far as we could tell, Jason wasn’t even fighting the thing. She still worried that every little misstep could be used against her in court, and while I couldn’t blame her, I wasn’t going to let it stop me from pulling my favorite sounds from her body.

“True,” she said, and I heard the strain in her voice.

I smiled against her skin and peeled the lacy neckline all the way to the edge of her rosy nipple. I kissed just above it, eliciting a soft moan from her. “I can stop if you want,” I teased.

“Don’t you dare,” she gusted out.

Chuckling, I lifted my head, adjusted her on my lap again, and framed her

face with both my hands. Her bright, blue jean eyes did a little staccato dance between mine. “I’m definitely not stopping anything. Not unless you say the word.”

Laurel seemed to understand what I meant. She’d heard the promises I made to her every day, and slowly, very slowly, she was beginning to believe I really meant them. It was a painstaking process to help her heal. She still had nightmares. She still had doubts. But every day with her felt like a gift to me, and I would do everything I could to let her know it.

I kissed her lips, and she whispered, “I love you.”

I smiled again. These days, it seemed like I smiled so often, my cheeks were perpetually sore. I kissed her again and said, “I love you, Laurel Brook. Now take off your clothes before I start ripping seams.”

Laughing, she obliged. And as the sun rose in a hazy burst of light, diffusing over mist and rainfall, I worshipped the beauty who had come into my life so suddenly. I worshipped her with my words and my body, and someday, I was going to marry her, and we’d fill that house on the mountain with more laughter and joy than I’d ever dreamed of. I didn’t have a timeline on it. I didn’t have expectations around it. But as if it had been written on my skin, I knew it would happen. I’d been given a chance, and I didn’t second-guess those. Not when she had a trilling laugh, wicked charms, and a warm heart.

Laurel had given me her trust, and in return, she had my soul.

Twenty Five

Thank You!







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# About the Author

Devon lives in the mountains of Wyoming with her husband, their children, and a menagerie of animals. Devon's favorite thing is writing in silence with a good playlist on in the background, but she will settle for her usual ambiance of bickering children, barking dogs, and cheerio crumbs under her butt. Her currently published works include *The Irador* series, *K-Love*, *The Faie King's Mortal* series, and *Love Rx*.

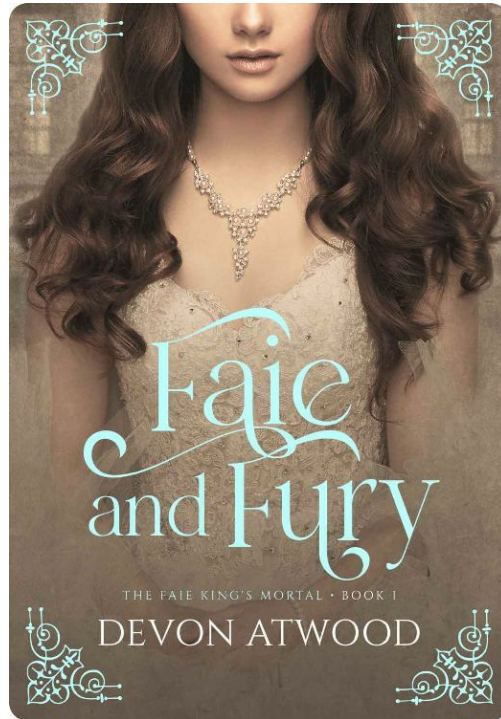
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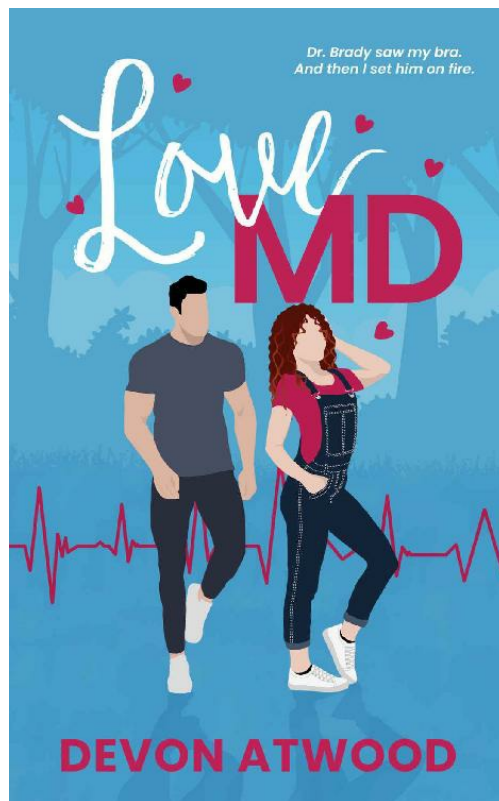
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