

AN AGE GAP SURPRISE
PREGNANCY ROMANCE

MY

Ex-Boyfriend's

DAD

SOFIA T
SUMMERS

MY EX-BOYFRIEND'S DAD

AN AGE GAP, PREGNANCY ROMANCE

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DESCRIPTION

“You’re two months pregnant.”

My doctor’s words shock me to my core.

But he has no idea it’s *his* baby.

One trip to the ER and my life is ruined. Those words said by my doctor will destroy me. And it’s only a matter of time before *everyone* finds out.

I broke up with my ex because he drank too much. One hookup later and I’m pregnant? Just my luck . . .

My doctor in the hospital just happens to be the chief surgeon, Owen Thorpe—my ex’s super-hot, super-off-limits father.

The one person I shouldn’t have gone near.

But I did . . . and now it’s too late to fix it. This baby is here to stay.

PROLOGUE

Harper

My head hurt so badly that I winced and pressed my hand to it. My arm hurt too, so much that I had to drop it to my side and not move it. Something was wrong. I could smell the stench of hospital cleaner and hear the din of machines whirring and beeping. It was hard to keep my eyes open, but I tried, blinking rapidly and wincing as my vision slowly adjusted to the bright light. I tasted blood on my tongue and knew it was mine.

Slowly, I became aware of a figure hovering over me. I squinted, trying to make out the face. It was a woman wearing a crisp white coat. She had graying hair and kind eyes. She smiled at me.

“Hold still, honey,” said a female voice. I tried, but I was in so much pain. My arm hurt, my chest. All I remembered was the sound of smashing glass. I looked up and saw Becky, a charge nurse in the ER. My thoughts moved so slowly, I wasn’t able to comprehend why Becky was here and what she was doing.

“Where am I?” I asked, my stomach churning. The incessant beeping sounded like it was inside my head. I moaned, and tears welled up. Every cell in my body felt on fire, like I was being boiled alive.

“You’re at Hudson, baby. You’ve been in a car accident.” Becky worked on an IV, untangling the lines and trying to hook up a drip line. I’d seen it a million times and knew what

she was doing, though my head was thinking much too slowly to process things. I tried to see the monitors, but my vision was blurred. When I craned my neck, I felt like I was going to pass out. I wondered if she knew me, if she'd seen me around like I'd seen her around.

"Lily," I moaned, whimpering. A sudden moment of clarity made my heart rate increase. I heard the machine beep faster and clenched my eyes shut. It hurt to think, and now that's all I could do. Mom needed me home. She had plans. I was supposed to be there. I opened my eyes and looked down at my body, covered with a hospital gown and blanket. My pants lay on the floor, covered in blood. My arms were caked in it too, probably my own, though I couldn't tell what was cut.

"Who's Lily?"

"My little girl. I'm supposed to be home. Mom is babysitting." I tried to move my other arm, but it felt like a lead weight. I wanted to touch myself, see where I was bleeding from, what had happened. It felt like shards of glass were stuck in my hand, and I turned my palm toward my face to see, but my eyes wouldn't focus.

"Okay, we'll call Mom and let her know. Is her number in your emergency contacts?" she asked, but I had a hard time processing what she said. I let my eyes fall shut, then blinked them back open. She was there, shining a light into my eyes. "Pupils are fixed and dilated, not a good sign. She's coherent enough, talking about her daughter." The light hurt. I tried to blink, but she held my eyelids open while she did her exam.

My head throbbed, and I felt like I might throw up. How did this happen? I strained to remember, but I was foggy, unable to recall anything. When I blinked my eyes open again, I saw Owen, or at least I thought I did. He could have been a hallucination, except he spoke to me. He looked sad and hurt. His eyes locked on my face. I wanted to lean into him, feel him hold me, but I found it painful to even breathe. Why was he here? How badly was I hurt? Owen was a surgeon, not an ER doc.

“Owen, what’s going on?” I almost started crying right then. Emotion bubbled up inside me. After seeing him last week, I’d been pining again, wishing I hadn’t broken up with him. This had to have been some strange dream. No way was he actually here.

“You were in an accident. We need to do some imaging, Harper. You might have broken bones and a head injury.” He shifted from one foot to the other. “Did you know you’re pregnant?” He reached for my hand.

“I’m what?” I asked, confused. I tried hard to focus on what he was saying, but my body was about to explode. I felt bile rising up the back of my throat.

Did he say I was pregnant? I couldn’t be. That wasn’t possible. I had PCOS. The doctors told me Lily was a miracle, not to mention I was on birth control anyway. While my stomach felt like turning itself inside out was not the time to discuss a pregnancy. I wasn’t even sure whether this was real or just a horrible dream. I wanted the bad parts to be a dream, but the Owen part . . . God, I wanted it so badly. I wanted him to be real, to be here, to want me.

“Harper, you’re pregnant. Is it mine?” he asked, staring at me intently. I looked up at him as my chest tightened. Surely, I hadn’t heard him right. I felt as if the air around me had suddenly become thick and heavy. I looked into Owen’s eyes, standing before me, trying to discern some meaning from his words, hoping to find something that would make sense of the confusing situation.

“Owen, I’m . . .” My body convulsed, and I lurched over the side of the bed so I didn’t vomit on myself. I sobbed hard, letting the emotion drain out of me. He had said I was pregnant. It wasn’t a hallucination. It was real. The man I loved more than anything in this world stood right next to me while I threw up, and I had no words.

Then the nurse was by my side again, speaking, but I didn’t hear a word she said. I lay back on the gurney and cried. As they wheeled me out of the room, I saw Owen. He stared at me with a hurt expression. I’d never hurt him, but there he was

thinking I was a monster. I cried harder as they pushed my gurney down the hall. “Oh, God, my head,” I mumbled, realizing it was as much my broken heart as it was my head hurting.

If what Owen said was true, then I had a lot of thinking to do. Just not until my head stopped throbbing like this.

Owen

I stood outside room 301, chart in hand. Chelsea, a fifth-year resident under me, stood next to me, waiting as I reviewed the chart on my tablet. It should be Chelsea doing this surgery, but the parents—quite worried about their nine-year-old son—asked for the absolute best surgeon Hudson had to offer, so I stepped up to the plate. I took on very few surgeries, but I had time in my schedule to handle this, and having a son myself, I knew exactly how those parents felt.

“You ready for this?” she asked. Though I had shadowed Chelsea on several surgeries, she hadn’t seen me do one myself. Part of the fifth year was to be fully hands on, letting the student overtake the master, so to speak.

“Ready as ever.” I nodded and opened the door, and she followed me in. I expected a couple of nervous parents and a rambunctious child, antsy and frustrated. What I didn’t expect when I walked into that room was to see quite possibly the most gorgeous woman I’d ever laid eyes on.

All eyes in the room pointed in my direction as I strolled in, but I was oblivious to any but the hazel gaze coming from the nurse’s direction. Her smile took my breath away. “Hey, Doctor Thorpe,” she said, diverting her attention back to the boy. She was drawing blood, and he was being a good sport about it. That was the bad part about being Chief of Surgery here at Hudson. Everyone knew who I was, but I knew almost

zero of the nursing staff. My name and face were plastered everywhere, but I rarely interacted with any nurses or doctors who were not directly reporting to me, and this goddess had evaded me, though I didn't know for how long.

“Good afternoon.” I tore my eyes away from her to see the anxious gaze of a frazzled mother. “Mrs. Hallsworthy.” I reached out my hand and looked to her right. “Mr. Hallsworthy.” Each of them shook my hand in turn but didn't rise. They sat on the edges of their seats, wringing their hands as they waited for me to speak. “I'm Dr. Thorpe, head of surgery here at Hudson. When Dr. Nickels indicated that you wanted only the best surgeon for your son's surgery, I volunteered.” I clasped the tablet in front of me but let my arms hang.

My mind should have been fixed on the questions I was supposed to be asking, but I couldn't help but steal another glance at the nurse. She was talking quietly with the boy, who snickered and sucked on a large sucker. Her playful banter tugged at my heartstrings. She was very good with the boy, who obviously enjoyed the attention.

“I'm really worried, Dr. Thorpe. I've heard there can be brain damage if you do this.” Mrs. Hallsworthy's voice quavered as she spoke. No doubt, there was reason to be cautious, but her fears were unfounded. I grabbed the rolling stool and pulled it up, and before moving on and answering her concerns, I introduced Chelsea.

“This is Doctor Chelsea Marshal. She is a fifth-year resident here at Hudson. She will be with me in the operating theater to observe the procedure.” I gestured at her, and the unhappy mother nodded abruptly, frowning at me. Chelsea pulled up a chair and sat next to me. I handed her the tablet, and she took it carefully. I sat in such a way that I could watch the gorgeous nurse working and let Chelsea explain. “If you don't mind, though I will be doing the surgery, I'd like Dr. Marshal to walk you through the pre-op instructions. She will get more practice this way, and I am here to answer any questions.”

Both parents nodded as Chelsea took off in her pre-op speech. I'd heard her give it a million times. Yes, there are risks. No, we're not perfect. I tuned it out, watching the nurse, whose name I didn't catch, tickle the boy's side as he giggled.

She had such a radiant smile, I found it hard to look anywhere else but there. Her presence in the room was intoxicating. I found it hard to stay serious or burdened about the stress I was under with work simply because she was here.

While I kept one ear tuned in for any questions, I allowed myself to ponder the nurse's station in life. She was an RN, caring for a pediatric patient. She likely had at least one specialty, and by the looks of it, she either had younger siblings or maybe even children of her own.

No woman was that amazing with children without having been around them a lot, and that was one way straight to my heart. After Nancy did me the way she did, I determined that if I were to date again, it would be with someone who loved kids.

Maybe that was just my ill-fitted, preconceived notion of life and women, but I didn't believe for a second that you could be a sadistic narcissist if you loved children.

"Alright, Dr. Thorpe will walk you through the actual procedure now. Remember, because this is considered major surgery. Jake will have to stay for several days afterward. That doesn't mean anything is wrong. It is absolutely normal." Chelsea smiled at me and nodded.

Again, I was forced to pull my eyes away from the magnetic nurse as I focused on the parents. "Now, the surgery will remove a portion of his cerebral cortex to hopefully stop the seizures he's experiencing. We'd like to have him at less than one per day, down from the twelve to fifteen a day he's experiencing. The medicines, as you know, have been unsuccessful at treating this, but when we are finished, he'll be much happier and safer."

As I walked them through step-by-step what I'd be doing, I noticed the nurse packing up her cart and leaving the room.

My chest immediately swelled and ached, then fell, as if there were so many words caught in my throat that I couldn't say.

I'd never been so enamored of a woman so quickly, never clicked so instantly without even speaking to someone. That nurse, however, had done something to my mind, cast a spell on me the likes of which I knew would torment me for weeks.

When the pre-op appointment was over, I excused myself and Dr. Marshal, and she followed me into the hallway where we recapped the conversation. I was distracted, thinking about that nurse, and she called me on it.

"Where's your head at?" Chelsea asked, handing me the tablet. I chuckled, caught red-handed in my reverie.

"Well, if I'm honest with you, I think I am very attracted to that nurse who was in there caring for the boy." If I were less of a man, my cheeks would be burning, but I found it easier to own my truth than to wear a mask. And over the past six months, Chelsea and I had gotten on well. I'd consider her a work friend at the very least. And her husband, Cameron, was head of surgery at Mercy in Yellow Springs. I'd known him for a long time, so Chelsea was almost like family.

She snickered at me. "But you're not really dating anymore," she said coyly, raising her eyebrows. It was true. She had tried to set me up a few times, but I drew the line. My career took all of my time, and I was really busy. I had used that line on her a number of times to dissuade her from trying to shove women in my direction.

She insisted that I needed a woman to take care of me and that she and Cameron were very happy despite being in the same situation. He had sworn off women for more than a decade after his wife died, but Chelsea caught his eye.

I just got hurt bad enough that I believed no woman would ever treat me well enough to merit a second glance. Who knew . . . Maybe that nurse was just as horrible as my ex-wife, but wow, was she fantastic eye candy.

"Yes, well, you're right. I did say that." I fumbled with my words, feeling like I was digging a hole she would bury me in.

Chelsea snickered again and patted my arm. “I can find out her name if you’d like?”

“No . . .” I shook my head firmly. “I don’t need the distraction. I really don’t have time for a relationship.”

In my head, that reply made sense because it was what I had been telling her for months. But something in my heart felt weak, even hurt, that my brain would make that snap judgment and disallow me the chance to fantasize. It was for the best. I didn’t need drama or more heartbreak.

“Alright, well, don’t say I didn’t offer. Look, I have to run. Cam will be here with the kids to get me soon. I’ll see you bright and early for the surgery.” She walked away, and while I wanted to linger there, watching for the nurse to return, I decided I should move on.

As I strolled toward the elevator, my phone rang, so I answered it. With only a few more tasks left today, I would be heading home myself. Tomorrow’s surgery would go off without a hitch, and I would be set to leave for Barbados and a week-long vacation this Saturday. Dr. Fischer would cover my rounds for post-surgery, and I would come back refreshed and that nurse would no longer be on my mind.

“Yeah?” I said, holding my phone to my ear. It was Wyatt, probably with questions about the trip.

“Hey, Dad . . . Just checking whether you have some extra board shorts. I don’t have any. I’m not much of a beach person, and I don’t want to buy something I’m not going to wear.” His words were slurred, an indication that he had been drinking again. I had told him too many times that he needed to get sober, but a child has to learn the hard way. Even if the hard way is thrice through rehab, only to relapse again.

“Yeah, bud. I have a few pairs. I’ll pack them with my things. Listen, is Harper coming? Her daughter? The pilot needs a final head count.” I had paid for a private plane to fly us to Miami where we would catch the commercial flight. Even the last-minute tickets—as expensive as they were—were on my dime. Wyatt just needed to get his act together long enough to let me know what was going on. It was

ridiculous at times, but he was my son and I loved him. Maybe a little too much.

“Yeah, she said yes. I think Lily is coming too. Just buy the tickets, and I’ll pay you back if they cancel.” He hiccupped, and I rolled my eyes.

“Alright. I’ll let everything lined up. Seven a.m. Saturday is when we leave.”

“Yeah, I got it. Seven a.m. I gotta go. I’ll see you Saturday.” Wyatt hung up, so I locked my phone and slid it in my pocket.

He had been dating this Harper woman for almost six months now, and whoever she was, she hadn’t gotten him to change either.

I didn’t fault her.

Wyatt was the sort of person who would only learn by experience—even if that experience was very painful and came with horrible consequences. And it didn’t surprise me that he wanted to borrow shorts. He barely made a living being a public defender, though I’m glad he hadn’t just flunked out of law school.

I pressed the call button for the elevator and took a deep breath. Only one hour left and I would be set to head home and pack, then just one surgery and a day of rounds, and it was vacation time. Nothing better than that.

Harper

I hung my head in embarrassment as Lily threw another handful of fries onto the floor. She didn't like them, and that was okay, but despite my best effort to contain her frustration with the meal, she wasn't listening. The worst part wasn't Lily making a mess, though. Wyatt was being a total jerk again, the way he always did when he was drinking.

"I can't believe you just let her do that. Children need to be disciplined. Look, when you have my kids, they're not going to be allowed to act that way." He slurped his beer, and I picked up Lily's plate and scraped her mac and cheese onto my empty plate, then slid it in front of her. If she didn't have access to the fries, she couldn't throw them. And she loved her mac and cheese.

"I'm sorry that she is embarrassing you. She's a good kid, Wyatt. She just doesn't like fries. She's trying to tell us that in the only way she knows how." I attempted to pick up a few fries, but it was difficult trying to watch her at the same time, so I gave up. A four-year-old doesn't mean to be a pain in the butt. They just don't know any better yet. I had patience for her because she was my angel—the only good thing to come out of a bad relationship.

"Yo, waitress." He snapped his fingers in the air and shouted at her, and I felt mortified. This was some of the worst behavior I'd seen yet. There had been so many red flags in the beginning that I ignored simply because he was devilishly

handsome and very charming. I wondered where the man I got attached to went. “Look, this kid made a mess, and if you were doing your job, you’d have cleaned it by now. I can’t let my girlfriend pick up food off the floor.”

I grimaced then offered the woman an apologetic smile as he pointed at the floor and ordered her to clean. She looked frustrated, and after the evening of waiting on Wyatt and his bad manners and temper, I understood why.

“We’ll take the check, please,” I told her, sighing. Wyatt was only getting worse. He promised me that he would cut back on the drinking, but that had been a lie. When I asked him two months ago why he was drinking so much, he told me to mind my business. I should have left him then, but he helped with Lily’s daycare bill.

I felt guilty—like I was using him just to be able to afford life, but it wasn’t just that. He was a really sweet guy when he wasn’t drunk. Someone, somewhere, had taught him to be so kind. If only he could tap into that all the time, the emotional pain he was in that drove him to drink would go away.

“Why’d you ask for the check? I’m not finished.” He scowled at me, and I felt ready to snap.

“Lily is tired. I need to get her home and put her to bed.” I glanced at the time on my phone and realized it was a bit early, but I’d had enough of him.

“You don’t decide when we’re going somewhere.” His tone was sharp, but rather than bickering in front of Lily, I poured on the kindness. It was the only thing that worked when he was like this.

“Look, babe, the beer is cheaper at the gas station. You can pick up a six-pack on the way home and save money.” I batted my eyelashes at him as he processed what I was saying. It was true. Beer was one-third the price at a filling station than it was at a restaurant, so I really was saving him money.

He didn’t argue, and when the waitress came back with the check, he paid and we left promptly. I forced him to let me drive. He would have driven, but he was drunk, and I wasn’t

about to ride around with him while he'd been drinking. Let alone put my child in danger like that. By the time we got back to my apartment, Lily really was sleepy.

I pulled her out of her car seat and juggled my purse, the diaper bag, her sippy cup, and her, attempting to make it up two flights of stairs to my apartment.

Wyatt followed, not even attempting to help even when I dropped the cup and it banged down the stairs. I'd come back for it later. Right now, I wanted this date over and my sweet, caring boyfriend back. Maybe he'd be nicer tomorrow and I could have that important talk about his not drinking so much again. Maybe this time, it would work.

"If you want to make yourself comfortable, I will tuck her in and come back." I hoped maybe he would say he was just going to get the beer, but he plopped on the couch, remote in hand, before I even finished my sentence.

I carried Lily to the bedroom, changing her into her pajamas as she dropped like a limp noodle. She was so sleepy she was drooling on me, and I tucked her in more quickly than normal. I sat on the edge of my bed, hands covering my face.

Life had a way of throwing curveballs at me so frequently that I had gotten used to them. When Tim and I learned we were pregnant, I had been ecstatic. He had not. He'd left days later and was dating a blonde bimbo a week after that.

I was alone for a while and happy to be single, but Wyatt came along as an answer to my prayers. He'd never been thrilled that I had a kid, but most guys weren't. They wanted the woman, not her baggage. But he was happy enough to give me space to be a mother, and that was important to me. He wasn't clingy, and he let me be independent.

Something happened, though. Something that changed the way he acted. When we first started dating, he was different, kind and funny. Now, he was moody all the time and drunk half of it.

On the verge of tears, I stood, thinking maybe I should end it with him for my mental stability. But we had history, six

months of it. I had shared some of my most intimate pains with him, and he—in a very sober state—had comforted me. Now, if I could just get a sober version of him, he was constantly apologizing. I saw him wrestle with drinking. I knew he hated it.

But it controlled him.

I walked into the living room, wiping away a few tears that leaked out, and sat down next to him. He didn't say a word, but he did rest his hand on my knee. He was watching some smutty film where the characters were about to have sex, and I knew what would follow.

I had no interest in sleeping with him tonight, or any night that he was hammered, for that matter. But his hand inched up my thigh until his pinky finger was dangerously close to my groin.

I scooted away, removing his hand from my leg, and he scowled at me. "Why'd you do that?" he snapped, clenching his jaw.

"I'm not really in the mood tonight, and Lily only just laid down. She could wake up." My chest tightened in anxiety. Wyatt would never hurt me, but I did wonder sometimes if he would just take what he wanted without my consent. Especially if he'd been drinking.

"What good is it having a girlfriend if she never puts out? You used to screw me whenever I asked."

"Wyatt, please," I hissed, attempting to defuse the situation. I didn't want him raising his voice. "Lily is sleeping."

He scoffed and threw the remote, then stood. "Yeah, well I guess I'll go home to beat off again. Thanks for nothing." He stomped over to the door, picking up the keys from the table where I dropped them. "Oh, yeah, I will pick you guys up at six-thirty Saturday. Plane leaves at seven, I guess. Maybe you'll want me when we're in paradise."

"I—" I started but cut myself off. I wanted to tell him I wasn't going. Barbados sounded fun, but not if he was like

this. It would only make things between us worse.

Then again, Lily would love it, and I needed a vacation so badly.

He turned around to face me with a glare on his face. I didn't think he was angry with me. He just always looked grumpy now. Especially after being relegated to pro-bono work as a public defender.

“What?”

“I'll be ready,” I told him, biting back my words. He told me his father was paying for the entire trip, and maybe I'd have a chance to talk to him. If anyone could get through to Wyatt, maybe his father could. Then maybe our relationship could get back on track. If someone didn't knock some sense into him soon, however, I was breaking up.

He left without another word, and part of me worried about whether he'd even get home safely. I pulled my phone out, toying with the idea of calling the sheriff's department to report a drunk driver.

I'd memorized his license plate for just the occasion, but I'd never had the guts to call. At least I wasn't in the car with him, and he was gone. It should have been a red flag again, but there had been so many red flags waving that I was seeing red.

I curled up into a ball on the couch and cried. How had I let this go so long without putting my foot down? And where was the sweet, handsome man who wooed me and pursued me?

My mom tried to tell me that men change over time, but she had said that about Tim, not Wyatt. I'd been with Tim for three years. She was just trying to comfort me after he left me high and dry. But Wyatt? I didn't think he ever changed. I thought it was far worse.

Wyatt had worn a mask, pretending to be someone he wasn't until the pressure made him crack and the mask came off. He just wasn't whole enough to put it back on. I didn't want the mask, though. I wanted the man, and I wanted that mask he wore to actually be real.

Then again, maybe it was just my sick fascination with fixing people. I loved caring for the ill and infirm. It made me feel whole to help someone else. Except, when I tried to fix Wyatt, it made me fall into a hole I couldn't get out of. I was afraid of breaking his heart as much as I was angry with him for not being who he'd led me to believe he was.

Why did all men have to be pigs?

Owen

I couldn't help but glance in the rearview mirror as I drove. When Wyatt showed up with his girlfriend, I had to hide my shock . . . and the instant level of arousal I felt causing my pants to bulge.

It was the nurse, the one who'd caught my eye so intensely two days ago while prepping the parents for their son's surgery. It seemed fate was having a joke at my expense, sending me the most amazing woman and making sure she was untouchable.

"Just don't let her touch stuff. It's that easy." Wyatt was grumpy, snapping at Harper—I just learned her name a few minutes ago, but I loved it already. Her daughter, Lily, had rolled the window down a few times already, challenging Harper's patience.

"It's okay. Just keep her fingers clear, and I'll roll it up and put the lock on." I glanced at Harper in the mirror, and she nodded appreciatively, her cheeks pink with embarrassment.

I hoped I could be a calming influence for Wyatt. I knew he struggled with traveling, had since he was a child, but it got worse the older he got. I was surprised he was still sober, though Harper may have had something to do with that.

"How will I roll the window down to vape, then?" he asked, snarling at me.

“It’s not a long drive, Wyatt. You can wait until we get to the airport.” I used a cool tone, but he angrily sighed anyway and I saw his hands turn to fists. To keep things on the level, I asked Harper, “How old is Lily?”

“She’s four and a half. She has a fall birthday.” Harper’s smile wasn’t as dazzling as it had been two days ago, but given the current situation with Wyatt, I knew she likely faked it.

I was upset with him too, but I knew him well enough to know that if I tried correcting him in front of Harper, he’d fly off the handle. Once we got to Barbados, he would calm down and enjoy the trip. It was the flying part he hated.

“Is she in preschool yet?” I glanced at her again, and she seemed more relaxed. She held a sippy cup for Lily, who seemed irritated that the windows weren’t working anymore.

“Not yet. I will start her in the fall, I think.” That smile was genuine, and it made me feel a billion mixed feelings. Never in my life had I had feelings for a woman my son dated.

It was ludicrous to me to think a woman that age would even be interested in me, and given the fact that I knew she wasn’t single, I felt guilt needling at my conscience. I had to keep this strictly platonic. I’d never hurt Wyatt like that.

“Hudson has several great options, though I never had children that age by the time we moved here. Wyatt went to school in Upstate New York where he grew up with his mother.” The minute the words left my mouth, I knew it was a mistake. Wyatt was antsy, probably wanting to take a drag off his vape, but he would have to wait. The child’s tender lungs were far more important than his frustration or anxiety while driving.

“I’ve looked into several. I think I’ve made my choice. I just have to make sure it works out financially. I never knew how expensive preschools were.”

Lily took the cup from Harper, had one sip, then threw it. It launched through the car and smacked Wyatt on the shoulder, and he whipped around with an angry expression. I

had to stifle a snicker. After his attitude, he deserved that. He had already insulted Lily a few times, and Lily was a bright kid.

“Look, if this is the way she’s going to act the whole trip, maybe you can call your mom and ask her to babysit?” Wyatt’s tone was hostile, and Harper flinched, shrinking into herself.

“Mom was too busy. I don’t really have another sitter. If it’s a problem, I can just Uber home from the airport.”

“Nonsense,” I interrupted. “I’ll help with Lily. Wyatt, would it make you more at ease if you were driving?” Calming his temper had become a full-time job ever since his mother deserted us, but it was more difficult now that his problems were adult problems. And the minute he could legally drink, he developed a lot of them.

“No, just get me to the plane and pour the drinks.”

Stopped at a red light, I watched Harper in the mirror as Wyatt turned around. She was sad, probably thinking the same thing I was thinking.

That Wyatt was incorrigible and needed to calm down.

I would be the first person to tell her that Wyatt had such a good heart if you could dig past the unresolved pain he carried around. It was the only reason I could see her enduring his nasty attitude for so long. This was the longest relationship he’d ever had, so either Harper was a saint or Wyatt hadn’t always treated her like this.

“Almost there, bud.”

It took us another twenty minutes to get to the airport and thirty after that to get through security and board our private plane. The commuter jet was large enough for eight people, though the four of us took up a lot of the space. As promised, Wyatt had a drink in hand the instant we were seated with several more delivered to him throughout the four-hour flight. He only got worse as we hopped the commercial flight from Miami to the island, and he treated the stewardess with disrespect.

After getting our luggage and getting him a cup of coffee, our taxi drove us to our villa. I had arranged for a three-bedroom unit with a fully stocked kitchen. I was just as frustrated with Wyatt's behavior as I could tell Harper was. He parked himself on the back patio while Harper and I carried in all the luggage after laying Lily down for a nap. Harper looked exhausted despite it being only midafternoon, and I was too.

I grabbed a beer and left Harper to care for her daughter, then slipped out to the patio where I could have a chat with Wyatt. It was obvious he was tense, and I hoped that now that the fear of flying was past, he would calm down.

"Hey, bud, how are you feeling?" I sat next to him and sipped my beer. Thankfully, he did not have any more whiskey in the condo, only a few light beers which I ordered. He took a gulp of his and shrugged.

"I'm moody. I hate flying, and honestly, I don't like kids that much." He scowled as he stared out over the palm trees and sandy path that led out to the private beach.

I was confused. He knew Harper had a kid before he started dating her, so it made no sense why he would woo her into a relationship when he knew full well that he'd be taking that responsibility on. He and I were very different. The idea that Harper had a child made her all the more appealing to me, which made me feel even more guilty.

"You didn't know she had a child when you started dating?" My question was innocent enough, but it irritated him. He snapped at me.

"Yeah, she made that loud and clear before we even had our first date." He shook his head. "I just didn't think she'd make the kid more important than me all the time." He stood and left his empty beer bottle sitting on the patio table, sweat puddling around its base. "I'm getting another beer."

I sighed as he walked away. He just needed more time to calm down. I was sure by tomorrow, he'd be back to his pleasant self. I had suggested stopping by a doctor to get something to help him not be so anxious on the flight, but he had refused. He could only blame himself for this, though I

was certain anyone who said something to the contrary would be the object of his blame.

The breeze kicked up, tossing the palm leaves, and I heard some shouting. When it died down, I tuned my ear toward the condo. Wyatt was upset, shouting something at Harper, though I couldn't make out what he was saying. I heard something bang and worried he was getting a little out of hand, so I set my drink down and opened the door. He had Harper by the wrist, angrily shouting at her about taking him to the store to buy whiskey.

“No, Wyatt. Please, I think you've had enough.”

“Look, I'm an adult. I will decide when enough is enough. So just get the keys from my dad and we'll go get some. I can't drive like this.”

I stepped in and heard him confess that, and I was grateful he'd learned his lesson since the DUI he got two years ago. But Harper wasn't having it and she was standing up for herself.

“Baby, I think maybe later this evening we can go, when you've sobered up a little. Okay? We'll buy a bottle of wine to celebrate being here, and I can—”

Wyatt smacked her across the face. Not hard enough to leave a mark, but hard enough to stop her from speaking, and she held her cheek and stared at him in shock. I rushed over, taking his wrist and pulling him away.

“Woah, buddy, I think she's right. You have had way too much. You should have a walk to calm down.” I had to remove him from the situation before I checked on her, and he was angry about it.

“Screw off, Dad.” He jerked his arm away from me and backed up. “I'll just walk.”

I stood there watching him walk away until he was out the front door, then I whipped around and moved toward Harper. “My God, I'm so sorry.” I guided her to the couch, and we sat. She was crying, holding her cheek. I wasn't certain whether she was hurt physically or just her feelings, so I pulled her

hand away. There was only the slightest pink mark. “Has he done this before?”

She shook her head and sniffled, and I reached for some tissues. “He is just upset. He told me last week how much he hates flying, and I tried so hard to keep Lily happy.”

“Woah,” I said, stopping her. “This is not your fault. You didn’t do that. Lily didn’t do that. You’re right. Wyatt has a fear of flying, but he is fully responsible for his own actions. You shouldn’t feel to blame.”

Harper shrugged, and her head dropped. “I just keep thinking if I love him better, maybe he will snap out of this.”

My heart sank. I had thought that same thing a million times, but no matter what I tried, he still struggled. His mother had done this to him—to us.

I was an adult, so I was better equipped to handle the strong emotions that came with her desertion of our family, but Wyatt was only twelve years old. For the past thirteen years he had tried to find a way out of that pain, and he was failing, sucking others into his vortex.

“Stay here,” I told her, standing. I walked to the kitchen and got a few ice cubes in a plastic baggie and returned. She nodded and smiled appreciatively, and I reached for some tissues too. “Harper, you are not responsible for making him regulate those emotions, and he was wrong for treating you that way.”

“He’s just drunk. He doesn’t act like this when he’s not drinking.” She blew her nose then put the ice back on her cheek. That was a lie. I’d seen him act like a buffoon in the car before he’d even had a drink, not to mention the various family gatherings he’d nearly ruined because of his outbursts.

“Alright, why don’t you tell me your favorite thing about him? Tell me what you like.” I warred within myself to maintain my space, but I really wanted to hug her, kiss away those tears. She deserved to be treated like a queen, and he was using her as a doormat.

“He is a romantic. I mean, when he’s sober. He sends me songs that make him think of me and buys me flowers. Once, he planned this really romantic dinner where we had the entire dining room to ourselves.” She smiled softly, but tears filled her eyes. “That was a long time ago. We’ve been dating just over six months, but he never does that stuff anymore. Something happened about three months ago, and he just turned into a monster.”

My mind raced back to February and the anniversary of the date his mother left. He got bad with his drinking that time of year, every year. It was a dark part of the year for him, coming off several months of reduced sunlight. I had chalked it up to seasonal affective disorder when he was a kid, but none of the antidepressants we used helped. Alcohol only made it worse.

“I’m not happy, Dr. Thorpe. I’m hurting. I want the sweet man I met to come back. Not this monster. And the more I ask him to think about how much he’s drinking, the more he lashes out. I’m thinking of breaking up with him.”

While my mind logically processed what she said, it took everything inside me not to touch her face, wipe the tears away. I felt so conflicted.

Wyatt did not deserve her.

Not with a heart so pure that she would stay with him and try to love him through his pain, not when he treated her like that. And I wanted to tell her to leave, to end it and be happy, but I also wanted to pull her onto my lap and surround her with my arms. I wanted to make her heart whole again, the way she wanted to do for my son.

I cleared my throat, ready to say something, when I heard Lily crying. Harper’s eyes widened, and she swiped at her cheeks again. “I should go.” She started to stand, but I shook my head.

“No, I’ll get her. You lie down here and rest a bit. We’ll be fine. You are on vacation, and you deserve some down time. I’m a pro at this.” I stood, and without thinking, I cupped her

cheek and brushed a tear from her face. My hand tingled with electricity, but I slowly withdrew. "I'll be back in a second."

I went to Lily's bedroom in the villa and noticed she had already mostly self-soothed. She was draped halfway off the bed with her thumb in her mouth, so I hoisted her back into bed and covered her up. When I came back to the living room, Harper was lying down. She had to have been exhausted too. Her eyes were shut, the ice pack lying on her chest. She was dozing. I covered her up too and took the baggie of ice to the sink to dump it out.

I couldn't believe my luck. Wyatt really didn't know what he had. Harper had a heart of gold, a heart I instinctively wanted to nurture and protect. I gripped the edge of the sink, thinking very bad things about her—how I'd like to make her mine, show her how a real woman should be treated. Love her like no man had ever loved her. I hadn't realized how deeply I felt for her until I saw him manhandle and smack her.

That sexy, gorgeous nurse had gotten into my head so badly I was certain I was already hooked, but I couldn't act on that feeling. I had never been a believer in love at first sight, but here I was knowing without her, I'd never be the man I was supposed to be.

So, why did I feel like the world's worst father? And how could I ever reconcile that with my son?

Harper

I rolled over for the thousandth time, and still, the bed was empty, except this time, the sun was up too. I glanced at the alarm clock on the nightstand and saw it was past seven a.m.

Lily would wake up soon, and I wanted to be showered and dressed before that happened. I didn't know where Wyatt was or why he hadn't come back to the room, but it was nice to wake up in paradise, with the summer breeze blowing in the open window and knowing I had six more days to soak up the sun and luxury.

I slipped out of bed, careful to carry the baby monitor with me. As I passed the door on the way to the bathroom, I heard noise in the kitchen. It sounded like singing.

I stopped and cracked the door quietly, noticing Dr. Thorpe standing over the stove cooking something. A sweet aroma filtered into the room, and I inhaled deeply. It smelled delicious.

Standing there watching him, I felt my heart ache. Wyatt was just as gorgeous as his father, downright sexy, but he hadn't gotten a shred of his father's compassion. I felt so comforted by how he just listened to me yesterday afternoon. And we spent the evening chilling by the pool.

He wasn't kidding when he said he was a pro. Lily loved him. They splashed and played, and he even reminded me when it was time for more sunblock. I felt guilty thinking the things I thought too, as if Wyatt would know somehow that I was attracted to his father, that I thought his father was quite possibly the most incredible male specimen I'd ever seen.

I shut the door and clamped my eyes shut. If only Wyatt were more like his father when it came to children. When Lily wasn't around, he was different, kinder. Though lately, even that part of him seemed hidden by his irritability and stress. All my attempts at loving him were shut down, and the only thing he was ever receptive to was sex. After which, he was the man I met—charming, caring, happy. But when I didn't or couldn't give him sex, he was this jerk I didn't know.

I shuffled into the bathroom and set the monitor on the counter and picked a towel. While the water heated up, I stripped out of my clothes and relieved my bladder, then brushed my teeth.

Just thinking of what I would say to Wyatt when he came back to the room had me on edge. I was certain he would be grumpy, probably hung over. I wondered where he even slept. Though, for all I knew, he was passed out on the patio in a chair. I had gone to bed early, still exhausted from the day of traveling.

The water was the perfect temperature as I stood beneath it, lathering my hair with the coconut scented shampoo. The suds rinsed over my body as I rubbed my hands on the bar of soap with my eyes shut, and as I scrubbed over my curves, I felt my body tensing again. I wanted release, but I wasn't going to get that from Wyatt, not after that argument yesterday. Orgasm just made me feel better, more relaxed, less irritable.

As I washed myself, rubbing the soap across my soft folds, I noticed how moist I was. Just thinking about getting release had done that to me, though I knew it was also thinking of Dr. Thorpe.

For an older man, he was really hot, not that he was old. I guessed his age to be somewhere between forty-two and forty-

seven. I'd never imagined myself with an older man, but someone like that probably had a lot of experience and things he could teach me.

I touched my sensitive nub, feeling how responsive it was to my slick fingers. My body ached to be touched, so I touched it, rubbing and smoothing my soap-covered fingers through my slit. How was it that Wyatt's father, a man probably at least fifteen years older than me, had me so aroused I needed to touch myself? All he'd done was talk kindly to me, and encourage me . . .

I pulled my hand away, feeling slightly guilty, but when I turned to face the water to rinse myself, the sensation came back stronger than the first time. I gritted my teeth, trying to resist, but I knew now that I was worked up, it would only be worse for me all day long. I had to take care of this problem or I was going to be in a foul mood, and I didn't want that for Lily.

My fingers sank again to my core, rubbing and teasing, but I wanted more than just my fingers. I wanted a dick inside me so badly. I leaned against the shower wall, panting, aching to be filled, and raised my leg to rest on the side of the bath. When I let my eyes flutter shut again, it wasn't Wyatt there with me. It was his father, rubbing my clit, saying dirty things in my ear.

My eyes popped open, and I pulled my hand away again, but this time, I couldn't resist. The idea of Dr. Thorpe in the shower with me was too tempting, too arousing to stop. I closed my eyes and pictured him, dropped on his knees, licking my clit. His thumb pushed into me and his lips sucked me. God, I needed more, so I grabbed the shampoo bottle and tested its girth. It was slightly bigger than my dildo at home, but I had nothing else.

I had made so much sticky, thick moisture that the bottle slid right into me, filling me, but in my mind, it wasn't at all the bottle. It was Dr. Thorpe. His cock ground upward into me, slamming into my back wall and bringing me to orgasm so fast and so hard my knees buckled and I sank to the floor of the shower. I had to clench my teeth and hold my breath as spasms

overtook me, and even after the first orgasm, I wasn't satisfied, so I continued.

My fingers worked my clit, rubbing in a circular motion, but it was him—his fingers, his thumb—pressing and pulsing and massaging my clit as his cock slid in and out of me, over and over. I panted and gasped and whispered his name, and hearing the word, “Owen,” escape my lips had me convulsing again. I thrust that bottle into myself, whimpering and wishing it really was him, and when I finished, I sat there as the bottle slowly slipped from my vagina and rolled across the floor of the shower.

When I finally recovered, I rinsed off, washing the shampoo bottle for good measure, and turned the water off. I felt slightly guilty for thinking of Dr. Thorpe in that way instead of picturing Wyatt, but it wasn't like I would ever say anything to him. Besides, Wyatt and I were on the outs, and if I actually got the nerve to break up with him, I'd never see his father again—except at work. That would be manageable.

I wrapped one towel around my body and the other around my hair and walked into the bedroom to get dressed. My legs felt like rubber, wobbly and weak.

I felt so relaxed that even if Wyatt walked in grumpy as hell, I'd easily put him at ease without getting upset myself. I dried my hair as best I could and draped the towel over the end of the dresser before drying my body and doing the same with that towel.

I hadn't unpacked anything yet, so I dived into my suitcase, searching for something to wear for the day. I settled on a yellow sundress and my chunky heels and selected some white panties so they wouldn't show through the material of the dress. I barely had my panties pulled up when the door creaked open.

“Wyatt, can you do me a favor and check on Lily? I forgot the monitor in the bathroom after my shower, and I thought I heard crying.” I turned slowly, dress in hand, and noticed a very intrigued Dr. Thorpe. His eyes drank me in for a split second before I gasped, covered my breasts, and turned away

from him, my cheeks instantly hot. “I’m so sorry. I thought you were Wyatt.”

He didn’t move to shut the door. Why didn’t he move? And the way his eyes searched my curves, like he was staring at a thick, juicy steak or something. That look made my pussy ache instantly again, and I’d just fixed that problem.

“I apologize for barging in. I thought you were still sleeping. I heard Lily crying, so I thought to wake you up.” He was so calm and collected, but how? He’d just seen me nearly naked, and his eyes had not been on my face.

“Uh,” I stuttered, remembering how I’d just imagined him boning me in the shower. It made me feel so conflicted. “Thanks . . . Um . . .” I struggled with the material. Clearly, he was very comfortable staring at me naked, and God, how I wanted him to stare at me naked, but if Wyatt walked in and saw this . . . I could never cheat. Not on anyone, not even Wyatt in his height of stupidity and anger.

“I’ll take care of her,” he said, now sounding a little awkward. It took him long enough to register that this was obviously immoral, but as he backed out, I giggled. It had been a very long time since a man looked at me like that, ogling my thick curves. And I wasn’t even done up, still dripping wet from the shower. It gave my confidence a huge boost as I dressed in the short sundress.

As I strapped on the sandals, however, I realized dating Dr. Thorpe wasn’t really in the picture. He was very successful at work, and I knew coworkers would gossip.

Not to mention Wyatt and how he would feel if I broke up with him and then started dating his father. I knew Wyatt’s dad was chief of surgery when we started dating. I even knew what he looked like in his professional portraits. It was hard not to with his face on the wall of the hospital. I just hadn’t known how incredible of a man he was until now.

Just thinking of it confirmed a few things in my mind. I was thinking of dating another man, masturbating to fantasies about him. Even if it wasn’t my boyfriend’s father, it wasn’t right, and it meant I wasn’t happy. Dr. Thorpe was right. I

deserved better. I had to break up with Wyatt, if for no other reason than to just give myself time to figure out what sort of man I wanted.

And it also showed me exactly what I didn't want. Never again would I date a man who couldn't love my daughter the way I did. If I dated a man, he got the whole package, child included, and that meant he'd better bring his A-game. If I could make it through the vacation without flipping out on Wyatt and just end things peacefully, that would be a huge step forward. For now, I had to see about that delicious smell and defuse some of the awkwardness between me and Wyatt's dad before Wyatt learned that he saw me in the buff.

That would be a fun conversation.

Owen

I cut the pancakes neatly into bite-sized pieces before adding a dollop of ice cream and a pinch of cinnamon. Wyatt used to love them this way, and I could tell by Lily's expression—eyes wide and a huge smile—that she was excited to try them.

“Here you go,” I cooed, sliding them in front of her. She dug in immediately, using her hands rather than her fork, but I only chuckled at it. I loved watching kids learn and grow, and using silverware was difficult for some little ones.

“Oh, yummmm,” she said, grinning as ice cream dribbled down her chin. What she didn't know was that the pancakes were made with a mix of whole grain and almond flour and the ice cream was sugar-free. The entire breakfast was packed with protein and healthy nutrients, so she could indulge and enjoy it, and I didn't feel guilty serving up a second helping once she had cleaned the plate.

“You're hungry this morning?” I asked her as I prepared the second plateful.

Lily nodded appreciatively and clapped her sticky hands. She had ice cream smeared all over her face. Her pajama top was soiled with the vanilla confection, and she was eager for more. It warmed my heart. Harper had such a precious daughter. I didn't know how Wyatt couldn't appreciate that.

“Here you go, sweetheart,” I said, putting the second plate in front of her.

When the door across the room opened, I looked up to see Harper coming out of the bedroom. She looked stunning in the pale yellow sundress that flattered her curvy figure. The neckline dipped in front, giving a hint of her cleavage, but it was the hard nipples that appeared through the thin fabric that caught my attention. The dress was too revealing to wear a bra, and my cock liked that fact very much. I had to look away or I'd get hard instantly.

“Enjoying?” I asked Lily, who was already halfway done with the second plate. Either she was a big eater or she was learning a bad habit about binge eating, but she was too adorable to say no to. She nodded again but hardly even looked at me, the food too fascinating to look away from.

“What? Ice cream for breakfast?” Harper’s tone was sharp but not cutting. She looked up at me with a bit of concern, and I raised my hands in defense.

“It’s called Halo Top, sugar-free, made with extra protein. And the pancakes are healthy too, Mom.”

“Yeah, Mom,” Lily said, mouth full of food.

Harper chuckled and sat next to her daughter, and the ice was broken. I flipped the pancake in the pan and pulled another plate out to prepare some for Harper.

I figured there would be a bit more awkwardness after I walked in on her and saw her nearly nude. I had apologized, but the guilt lingered. Not because she was nude. God, no, I loved seeing her naked like that. I just felt like Wyatt would be hurt by that, and I was seriously conflicted. What sort of father gets a boner after accidentally seeing his son’s girlfriend like that?

“Uh . . .” I stammered, deciding another apology was in order. “I’m really sorry about that. I really did think you were sleeping.”

I stacked the pancakes on the plate and added a dollop of ice cream and a pinch of cinnamon, just like I had for Lily. Then I set the plate and a fork in front of Harper, whose cheeks were pink. “As long as you liked what you saw . . .”

she said, taking the plate without making eye contact. She focused on cutting her first bite, and my mind reeled from her comment. I couldn't tell whether she was being flirtatious or she was just sarcastic. I knew almost nothing about her except her temperament and bedside manner.

“What's not to like?” I asked, instantly regretting letting that slip out. Now my cheeks burned, and I felt my dick swelling. I turned my back to them, pausing for a moment to breathe deep and force the hormones away. This woman did things to me, things that I was finding very difficult to push away. I clenched my jaw and reached for another plate.

“Heard from Wyatt?” she asked, and I could tell she was fussing over Lily, so I turned to help.

“Here, let me handle that. I'm the one who got her all messy. You enjoy breakfast.” I grabbed a wash rag and dampened it, then walked around to where Lily was playing in her food. “He was here when I woke, sleeping on a patio chair. He went out for coffee and said he'd bring us back some too.”

Harper nodded, though I saw her shoulders tense. My heart went out to her. Wyatt seemed to be in a better mood this morning when he woke up, but I knew how tense things had been between them yesterday. I hoped he came back as pleasant as he had left. We all desired a good day.

“Well, he does like his coffee.” Her tone was just as sharp, only this time, I felt the sting. I wasn't sure how to comfort her in this particular situation other than to let her feel what she was feeling and take care of Lily. I washed her hands and face, then stripped her soiled shirt off and took away her dirty plate.

“Lily, you want to help me with dishes?” She nodded eagerly, so I pulled a chair up to the sink and got some dishwater ready. We had a dishwasher, but this would keep Lily occupied while Harper ate.

“I'm sorry. I don't mean to be snappy. I'm just frustrated that he was here and didn't even come to bed.” She pushed the food around on her plate as her ice cream melted.

“He was passed out hard, so I’m sure he didn’t do it on purpose, but I’ll have a talk with him. You’re right. He should be treating you better.” I was angry with Wyatt for disrespecting his guest. He had invited her, but he seemed to not care that she was here or upset.

“No, it’s okay, Owen.” She bit her lip and grimaced. “Is it okay if I call you that? I mean, I know you’re Dr. Thorpe, but we’re not at work and—”

“Absolutely,” I told her, though any other woman Wyatt had dated had been invited to call me “Dad” right away. That would never work, though, not with the way my dick swelled every time she was in the room. I was not about to be her “Daddy”.

“Anyway, it’s fine. I feel like we need to work out our own problems. The more I think about it, the more I feel like it’s not really working out, and I honestly feel guilty for coming on this vacation and spending your money when I knew that several weeks ago. I’ve just been procrastinating telling him because I don’t want to hurt his feelings.”

God, she was absolutely perfect. *Unhappy in a relationship with a man who isn’t treating her right, and she is still worried about his feelings.* He really didn’t deserve her at all, and she didn’t deserve his treatment of her.

“You should always be able to say how you’re feeling in any relationship. You should tell him.” As I finished my sentence, Wyatt burst through the door with a scowl on his face and a stain on his shirt. It appeared that he’d spilled his coffee on himself and wore it rather than drinking it.

“Tell who what?” he snapped, walking straight to the table where she sat. He plopped a coffee in front of her and then handed me one.

“Nothing,” Harper said, but I could hear the guilt in her voice, and it didn’t escape Wyatt, either. His scowl deepened, but she continued as if nothing had happened. “So, what are we going to do today?”

“Well I have a hangover and I spilled my coffee on myself so I can’t even wake up properly. So I’m going to go sleep it off for now. Be ready for dinner at eight. I made reservations.”

“You’re going to sleep until eight tonight?”

I turned the stove off and set the hot pan on a cold burner as I watched Lily playing in the bubbles. Harper’s question was an honest one, though I doubted she fully understood what Wyatt was saying. Part of me wondered if part of their relationship issues were that they weren’t communicating clearly until Wyatt opened his mouth again.

“No, idiot. I am not sleeping all day. I’m going to wake up when I wake up, and I just want you to be ready at eight for dinner. Is that too much for your small brain? A woman your size, you’d think you’d have a bigger brain.” Wyatt shook his head, and Harper looked down at her plate. I could see tears forming in her eyes.

“I will have to bring Lily, you know. And she can’t be out that late. Can we change the reservation to earlier?” She was blinking hard, trying to be kind to him and not snap back, and I knew instantly that it was not just a communication failure. Wyatt was heartless, and I had no idea how I’d raised a man to be so cruel.

“Look, guys, I’ll keep Lily for you. You should go have a good dinner.” My own breakfast sat on the plate getting cold while I tried to play referee to two bickering adults. Though, I didn’t blame Harper at all. Whether or not she agreed with it, I’d have to speak to Wyatt. His behavior was reprehensible.

Harper looked up at me appreciatively, and Wyatt walked off, not even saying goodbye or giving her a kiss. The minute he shut the door to the bedroom, closing himself in his tomb for the day, she mouthed “Thank you” to me and dipped her head again.

This was turning out to be a stressful vacation, and I had to figure out some way to put Wyatt at ease because I felt personally responsible for Harper now.

I also felt torn between my desire to rescue her from my own son and my duty as a father to keep my hands off her. I watched her as I slowly ate my food. She didn't take another bite, and her sadness showed in her posture, her expression, and even the silence in the room. If I could fix it I would, but it made me feel like a traitor to even think that.

Harper

I was surprised to find that the restaurant Wyatt had made reservations for was only a five-minute walk from our suite. It was dark already, sun setting early on the island, but I didn't mind. It was a warm night.

The breeze from the south felt heavenly as we walked to dinner. And Wyatt was pleasant after his long sleep. I hoped this was a turning point for the trip.

"I heard this place has amazing pasta," he said, opening the door and letting me enter first. Without Lily around, he was always more caring, which was as encouraging as it was discouraging. I wanted to have a caring man. I just wanted him to care about my child too.

"Oh, great. I love some good linguini." I nodded at the hostess as she greeted us.

"Welcome to Tavaló's. How many in your party?"

"Two of us. Reservation for Thorpe," Wyatt said, taking a commanding presence. He put his hand in the small of my back, and I almost felt wooed, as if the man I met six months ago had returned. I liked the feeling of being cared for.

The hostess led us to a table in the center of the restaurant, and Wyatt scowled. "I said a booth. Can't you people get that right?"

The hostess glanced at me then around the room. “I’m sorry, sir, I wasn’t here when you made the reservation. This is the table we have assigned for your party.” She held the menus out, and I took one hesitantly while Wyatt crossed his arms over his chest.

“I’d like a booth, please, or just let me speak to the manager.”

“Really, Wyatt, it’s okay. We can sit here,” I told him, trying to make peace, but he was obstinate.

“Booth or manager,” he repeated, and I felt my cheeks warming. The people in the immediate vicinity were watching the whole thing transpire, and she fumbled. She pulled a tablet out of her apron pocket and scrolled through it, tapping on a few different screens.

“Right this way, sir,” she said nervously. I could tell she didn’t want trouble any more than I did, and I was grateful she was able to switch things up for us.

We followed her to the booth in the corner. It was a horrible spot to eat, but it was a booth, and Wyatt couldn’t really complain. I’d have rather sat in the other spot. This one was beneath an air conditioner vent, and I hadn’t worn a sweater.

We sat, and I focused on the menu, hoping to not anger him further. He was right. The menu was loaded with pasta dishes, and when the waitress came to take our order, I knew exactly what I wanted. I perked up, ready to order, and the waitress smiled at me.

“Do you know what you’re having?” She held her pen ready. She was a foxy little thing, and if I were that sort, I’d have found her very attractive.

“I’m going to start with some water—add lemon, please—and I’ll have the baked cavatappi. It sounds so good.” I folded the menu and handed it to her, and she nodded, then tucked it under her arm and scribbled down my order. When I looked at Wyatt, his eyes were not at all where they were supposed to be. He may as well have been drooling.

“Sir, for you?” she asked, ready to write.

“I’ll have the steak and shrimp, please, and bring me a glass of Jack Daniels, neat—make it a double.”

I cringed as he ordered the drink, knowing he hadn’t eaten all day. If the drink came before the meal, he’d be feeling it before he even ate.

That wasn’t a good thing. And neither was the way he ogled the woman standing next to our table.

Yes, she was gorgeous, and I didn’t mind if he noticed, but he didn’t have to make it obvious he was checking her out.

She scribbled on her pad and licked her lips, then said, “Anything else I can get you for now?”

“I think that’s all for now, unless you want to come back more frequently so I can watch you walk away.” He snickered, and I felt like the wind got sucked out of me. Right in front of me, he was flirting?

The waitress glanced at me and looked back at him. “I’ll be back shortly with your drinks.” I swore she winked at him, but from my angle and with the anger I was feeling, I couldn’t be certain.

When she walked away, his eyes followed her, drinking her in, and I was furious. “Wyatt, do you know how that makes me feel?”

“What?” he asked, feigning innocence. “She’s a foxy lady. I was just paying her a compliment.”

“Yes, she is good-looking. I admit that myself. I would never tell you that you aren’t allowed to notice a beautiful woman. That would be ridiculous. But you don’t have to ogle her and then flirt right in front of me.” It made me wonder what he did when I wasn’t around. If he was brazen enough to say something like that to a woman he didn’t even know with me here, what was he doing when I wasn’t?

“Well, if you looked like that, I’d check you out like that too.” He pushed his silverware around and shrugged one

shoulder. I knew the comment was a slight, and I was upset with him.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“I mean, if you just went to the gym, ate a little less, you’d look like that too.”

I felt tears welling up in my eyes. I could punch him right now, but that would not be the right thing to do. I tried to bite back my words, but I’d had enough of his rudeness and bad manners.

“There is nothing wrong with the way I look. I am just as beautiful and confident as she is.” I felt my hands turning to fists beneath the table trying to defend myself. Fat shaming was degrading, and I wasn’t going to put up with it. He had pushed me to my limit. He’d never once complained about my size or shape when he first met me, and this was going too far.

“Yeah, and twice the woman.” He scoffed and looked up as the waitress returned with our drinks. She set the water in front of me and the whiskey in front of him, and I had half a mind to take his drink and down it myself. Maybe then I’d have the courage to tell him off.

“Thanks, baby,” he said, winking at her, and I lost it.

“That’s it, Wyatt. It’s over. Look, I tried to be patient with you. You were the most charming, amazing man when we met. Now you’re just an ass.”

“Excuse us, please,” he said to the waitress, who glanced at me nervously then walked away. This time, his eyes stayed on me. When she was gone, he continued, all his anger directed at me. “You are not breaking up with me. Not like this. We are in paradise.”

“I’m not. I’m in hell!” I snapped, finally at my breaking point. “You treat me and my daughter like garbage and flirt with a stranger right in front of me.”

“Yeah? Well, you refuse sex to me just because your four-year-old is in the house.”

“Ugh!” I scoffed, doubly hurt by his hatefulness. “Just leave. I’m done. I’m not arguing with you anymore. You are never going to change, and that fake act you put on to convince me to date you? Well, it was a lie. I don’t date liars.” I let tears stream down my cheeks, and he stood.

“I can’t believe you.” He picked up his drink, downed it, and stormed off. What had I done? I wanted to do that in a peaceful way, not in a shouting match in the middle of a restaurant with other people staring at me. I sobbed, covering my face, and pulled out my purse.

I had a little cash, so I dropped a few twenties on the table and snuck out. On the way out, the waitress grabbed my elbow. I was angry, but it wasn’t her fault. “Honey, he was a sleaze. You’re better off without him.”

I walked away without responding, wondering if her flirting back was her way of showing me how ridiculous I was for dating him or if she had intended to steal him away from me if she could.

By the time I got back to the suite, I was worn out. I fully expected Lily to be wired and bouncing off the walls, but when I walked in, Owen was seated on the couch reading a book and the villa was quiet.

“You’re back early.” He looked up at me, and I melted into a puddle of tears and hysterics. “Whoa . . .” He stood and walked over to me, putting his arm around me. I went with him to the couch, where he sat next to me and offered me a tissue. “That bad?” he asked.

I could only nod and sob, then blow my nose. He was cautiously distant, not touching me more than he had to, but I could see the pain in his eyes. He wanted to comfort me as much as I needed comfort.

“Need to talk?”

“I broke up with him. He was flirting with a waitress, and . . . and he said really hateful things about me. Like, if I was thinner, ate less, and worked out, he’d look at me the way he did that woman, and I just can’t even anymore.” Just saying

those things out loud made it obvious to me that I should have done this a long time ago.

Not because there was another man I found attractive. Because Wyatt was a jerk and I deserved better. It just took a man paying attention to me in the right way to prove how badly I was being treated.

“Oh, Lord,” Owen said, and before I knew it I was being crushed to his chest. His strong arms surrounded me as I wept, and he offered me tissue after tissue until I was done sobbing. “I’m so sorry he said those things and did that. I completely understand why you broke it off. Are you okay?”

I shrugged, dabbing my eyes. I had to look like a raccoon with the mascara smeared around my eyes, but I didn’t even care. My heart hurt too badly to think about how I looked. I had never once doubted myself. I was strong and beautiful. Wyatt had no right to make me doubt my beauty or smash my confidence like that.

Owen put a finger under my chin and forced me to look up at him. “You are a gorgeous woman, Harper. I’ve really never seen a woman who was so captivating or alluring. Your smile, your eyes, they are stunning, and the way you carry yourself with such grace, it’s magnetic. Not to mention you’re smart and strong. You’re a fantastic mother and you are a phenomenal nurse.”

His words did something to me, stirred my heart. “You really mean that? That’s what you think about me?” I didn’t know what he was trying to do, but part of me didn’t believe he meant it. I needed that reassurance that he was telling the truth.

“Yes, I absolutely mean it. The other day when I saw you in that hospital room, I was floored. I had no idea you were dating Wyatt, and if I had been given the chance, I’d have asked for your number then and there.”

My chest tightened. “You what?” I asked, now a bit confused and stunned. I remembered him being there, but not for a moment did I suspect he was looking at me. He was busy with his patient’s parents, and I was just drawing blood.

“You were fabulous with that boy, and I was very moved by that. And when I first saw you, my jaw hit the floor. You’re literally gorgeous. Okay? So don’t let Wyatt’s words discourage you. He is out of control, and he doesn’t deserve someone as amazing and attractive as you.”

My heart felt like it would burst open. After so many months of being talked down to and belittled, Owen’s words were like salve in a wound. Our eyes met for a very intense second, and before I could think, I acted. I cupped his cheek and kissed him, parting my lips and tracing his lip with my tongue. To my surprise, he kissed me back too, hard, diving into me with a hunger all his own. It was the perfect moment until he grabbed my wrist and slowly pulled away.

“I . . . uh . . . We shouldn’t, Harper. Wyatt . . .” His eyes searched mine, and despite the fact that I wanted to continue kissing him, I knew he was right. Wyatt was a jerk, but I refused to be a bigger jerk by making out with his father on the couch in the villa he’d invited me to.

“You’re right,” I mumbled, but God, did I want to kiss him more. I didn’t even care that he was at least fifteen years older than me. He was charming, sweet, funny, kind, he loved Lily, and he was hot too. Hotter than Wyatt would ever be because he had a good personality to go with his looks.

“Let me pour you a drink and rub your feet. Lily is down for bed already, so you can just let your hair down and enjoy yourself a little.” He stood and walked away, heading to the kitchen for that drink, and I kicked off my shoes and stretched out on the couch.

I had no idea where Wyatt was or if he was coming back to the suite tonight, but I didn’t care. I planned to sleep with Lily so he could have the bed.

Owen came back with a glass of wine and a bottle of lotion, and he pulled my socks off and dabbed some of the cream on his hands before beginning what was quite possibly the best foot massage I’d ever had. I nearly fell asleep there while he worked on my feet, but he talked to me softly, saying

how amazing I was and how much he thought I deserved better.

When he was done, I thanked him—awkwardly—and picked some pajamas from my suitcase before slipping into the room with Lily. At least I had Owen's support on this. The rest of this vacation would be horrible if he didn't agree with me. As it was, I'd have to put up with Wyatt for at least three more days. Something I was already dreading.

I lay there in bed for hours, unable to sleep. I tossed so much I thought I'd wake Lily up, so I got out of bed and paced. Wyatt had come in a short time ago, and I could hear him snoring through the wall, but all I could think about was that damn kiss. It wasn't fair that Wyatt had beaten me down, convinced me I was worthless and needed him somehow. I had tried so hard to love him, and he wasn't even worth it.

But Owen? God, he was worth it. He was worth everything I had given Wyatt and more. So much more. And I wanted him to know that. I wanted my power back, the confidence Wyatt stole from me. Nabbed like a thief in the night. When Owen kissed me back, I felt the passion in it, the heat. I'd never experienced that much energy or electricity, not even with Wyatt, and especially not with Lily's father. Dr. Thorpe was something sensational I couldn't just let slip through my fingers.

I wanted to feel comforted by how his words had made me feel earlier today, and I wanted to be held. I didn't know if he was still awake, but I had to try. Sleeping was off the table because my brain wouldn't shut down, so I decided to take a risk. I picked up the baby monitor and snuck out of the room, making sure Lily was sound asleep, and I headed down the hallway.

When I slipped into Owen's room, he moved a little, but I wasn't sure if he was already awake or if I had awakened him. I hurried to the bed, setting the monitor on the nightstand as I slid beneath the blanket and scooted closer to him. He turned as I did so, and in the dim light, I caught the look in his eyes—hungry, feral, like he was waiting for me to do just this.

“Couldn’t sleep . . .” I whispered, holding my breath in hopes that he’d respond how I imagined.

Owen

When I heard movement outside my bedroom door, I thought Wyatt had woken up to get more alcohol. I never expected Harper to sneak into my room.

And here she was, beneath the covers next to me. She smelled like heaven, her light floral scent following her into the room. It made every hair on my body stand on end. I had been lying here trying to keep my mind off the fact that she was in the next room, sad and alone, and she was single too. An untouchable single, but not committed to anyone.

“Harper, you shouldn’t be in here,” I told her, rolling to face her. She lay there so innocently, eyes full of desire for me. I had to restrain myself, though every fiber of my being ached for this moment since the second I saw her in that hospital room. “You’re vulnerable. It isn’t right.”

“I am an adult. I can make my own decisions, Owen. I thought you could hold me. I’m feeling sad, and I don’t want to be alone.”

“You’re only feeling this way because you just broke off a bad relationship. You’ll feel differently tomorrow. I can’t let you throw yourself at me like this. It would be irresponsible of me.” I pushed a few strands of her caramel brown hair off her face, and electricity sparked at my fingertips. I wanted her so badly.

She sighed and looked down. “Owen, you made me feel more loved and more confident about myself in a fifteen-

minute conversation than any man has my entire life. If this is wrong, then I don't want to do the right thing." Her tone and the way she said the words broke my heart. I felt the same way about her, but something needled my heart. What sort of father was I if I took my son's ex-girlfriend into my bed the very night he broke up with her?

She lay there with her eyes downcast, and it was all I could do not to kiss her. What harm could it be to hold her? "Alright, I will hold you for a few minutes." I reached for her, pulling her against my body, but I made the mistake of not turning her over first. She lay facing me, legs tangled in mine. Her thin T-shirt did nothing to shield my abs from the firmness of her nipples. Either she was cold or she was as aroused as I was, and the pulsing need in my groin swelled into evidence that lay on her inner thigh, betraying my pure intention.

"Owen?" she said, snuggling closer into my chest. I could feel her hot breath against my bare skin. I wished I could feel that feeling over every inch of my body.

"Yeah?" I tried to keep my tone as quiet as possible. Wyatt wasn't a light sleeper, but I really didn't want to wake him and have the mother of all arguments tonight.

"You really believe those things you said about me? That I'm smart and funny, and that I'm really that attractive?" She felt good in my arms. Right. As if she were the thing I had been missing my whole life. For a moment, I let myself believe this was real, that I could have her. I'd never felt such strong feelings for a woman so quickly, but I was certain this was love at first sight.

"Yes, I really do." I cupped her cheek and forced her to look up at me. "I think you're the most beautiful woman I've ever met." I pressed my lips against her forehead and kissed her. "You should never doubt how beautiful you are. Especially not because of someone else's opinion."

"I . . ." she started, but her words fell, lost in the sheets as I leaned down to kiss her lips.

It was too overwhelming, her nearness too intoxicating. My conscience told me I shouldn't, that Wyatt would be hurt.

Logic told me her breakup was too fresh, that this was just a rebound for her and it would never work out. Even my brain screamed “red flag” as I slid my hand around her lower back and pulled her into me, grinding my cock against her mound, but my body spoke louder, and my heart louder still.

Something deep inside me connected to her in that hospital room, like a drink of water in the middle of the desert when you’re dehydrated and near death. Or the first bite of food after having fasted for three days and your stomach hurts so badly you think you’ll pass out if you don’t eat.

I spent years of my life ignoring any woman who made a pass at me. Helen broke me, ruined my ability to see goodness in the opposite sex. I put my blinders on and focused on Wyatt and my career, and I wasn’t even looking for this, but I walked into that hospital room and I knew I had to have her. And here she was, in my bed, vulnerable and clinging to me. I was a man of strong morals, but even the strongest man has a breaking point.

“This is so wrong,” I whispered against her mouth as the kiss heated. I nipped at her lip, pulling it as I backed away.

“Who says it’s wrong?” Harper lifted her T-shirt, pulling it up until her stomach and chest pressed against mine, and that was the final straw. I lost all ability to resist my own urges.

“God, I want you so badly. I think I wanted you the minute I laid eyes on you.” I rose, rolling her to her back and crushing her into the mattress. She spread her legs, letting me nestle between them, so I started grinding against her. “This is so crazy, Harper.” I kissed my way down her neck, and she arched toward me, moaning. She ran her hands down the side of my body, scraping her fingernails along my abs and up to my chest, making me shudder.

“I don’t mind crazy.” Her hands slid into the waistband of my pajama shorts and pushed them down over my butt as I kissed her again. The front got hung up on my cock, now fully erect and demanding to be touched. I lifted my hips, letting her free me from the tangled mess, and she wrapped her hand

around my girth and stroked. “God, you’re huge,” she moaned as she toyed with my cock.

“You like that?” I kissed along her jaw to her earlobe and nibbled, feeling her shudder beneath me as I breathed into her ear.

“Yes . . .” She hissed, sucking in a breath as I slid my hand under her shirt up to her breast. I pinched and twisted her nipple, then squeezed her full tit. It was soft and supple in my grasp. It made me want more.

“You need to get these clothes off so I can enjoy you and make you feel good.” I backed away, slipping off the side of the bed. I tiptoed to the door and listened for a moment. I heard movement, but it wasn’t from the baby monitor. The door had no lock. I was worried Wyatt might barge right in, but the moment was already too intense to stop. When I turned back, I saw every inch of her creamy skin bared for me in the moonlight streaming through the window.

“I’m ready,” she mewled, pushing the blankets to the side. She sat with her legs spread, knees up, leaning back on her arms. Her hair framed her face, strands covering her nipples, and God, was she seductively gorgeous. I pushed my shorts down and stepped out of them, walking straight to the nightstand where I noticed the resort had a stash of various sizes and styles of complimentary condoms.

“Safety first,” I told her, selecting one and laying it on the bed within my reach. She nodded, biting her lower lip as I crawled back onto the bed. The anxiety that Wyatt would walk in didn’t go away, but the drive to claim her as my own overrode any sense I had. I positioned myself right up between her legs until my dick pressed at her entrance, and I captured her lips in mine and laid her down. Her hands smoothed across my sides and up my back, fingernails lightly scratching me. Her kiss was exhilarating, reaching to my very core. It stirred a primal need inside me, fueled a hunger that I couldn’t push away.

Harper whimpered when I pulled my lips away. I pressed her knees wider, and she let her legs fall open. “A woman like

you deserves to be a queen, honored like a queen,” I told her, slowly drawing one finger up the inside her inner thigh on each leg. “Spoken to like a queen. Built up like a queen, and even pleased like a queen.” Her body jolted as I brushed a fingertip across her clit. She grabbed the sheets and sucked in a breath. “And most of all, a queen deserves love,” I cooed, pressing my thumb to her hard nub, swollen and sensitive. Her eyes fluttered shut, and she arched her head back. “Love that she can feel in every fiber of her being.”

I slipped the tip of my finger into her aching pussy, curving my hand so that when I slid it deeper, her G-spot was in reach. Harper groaned and pushed her pelvis off the bed, reaching for me. I gave her what she was asking for with another teasing stroke and another finger squeezing into her. She was tight, and when she clenched around my fingers, I could hardly thrust them into her. I had to force my way in.

“You are so tight,” I growled, pressing my thumb to her clit as she rocked up against my hand.

“You are so going to split me open . . .” Her breathing was heavy, coming in labored grunts.

“A nice, tight pussy like this deserves a little extra pleasure.” I worked her good, sliding my fingers in and out of her as she writhed beneath me. I couldn’t help but touch myself, stroking as I brought her closer to the edge. The more I rubbed her clit, the more moisture she made, and it spread around her like a thin layer of icing on a cake that I wanted to lap up and enjoy.

“I’m so close,” she moaned, reaching between her legs. Her hands clawed at my arm, urging me to help her finish.

“No, sweetheart,” I told her firmly, removing her hand from my arm. “It’s my job to bring you to the finish line.”

Her eyelashes fanned out over her cheeks, and she shook her head. “Owen . . .” Her voice was needy, caressing me so seductively it made my cock throb. I felt like she was dragging her tongue across every inch of me, branding me.

I shook my head. “Your pleasure is mine to give.”

Harper's back arched, and she squirmed beneath my hand, clenching around my fingers. She really was close. I could hear it in the way her whimpers begged me for more. I leaned forward and breathed across her skin as I worked her pussy.

"I'm right here," I repeated, letting my tongue tickle over the curve of her nipple. Her low breaths quickened as I sucked one into my mouth and swirled it around before letting go again with a soft pop. Her hands were light as a feather against my skin when they landed on my shoulders.

"I'm going to come," she groaned.

"Not until I say you can," I ordered, pressing a hand against her abdomen to hold her down. "Maybe it's all the anticipation that makes you so sexy?"

"Oh, God, don't tease me," she whimpered, trying to grind against my hand.

I sat back again, watching as her juices slowly spread, slick and creamy. She was flushed all over, and I could tell my slow torment was getting to her. Her moans were out of control and she begged openly, "Make me come."

So I did. I found the spot inside her that begged to be touched and stroked my fingers along its rough texture until she was moaning so loudly she covered her face with the pillow. Her body writhed, squirming as it convulsed around my fingers. It felt amazing that I could do this to her so easily, that I had this power over her.

"Yeah, that's it. This is exactly how a queen should feel." I kept working her until she had devolved into twitches and soft panting, but I wasn't finished yet. I stroked myself a few times, keeping my cock hard and ready to join with her, but I backed away.

"God, no, I need you . . ." she whined in a whisper, reaching for me.

"You can't possibly think you can make this much moisture and not share it with me," I said, smirking.

Harper's eyes grew wide, and she took a deep breath. Her chest rose, pushing her tits out. The erect peaks made my dick

twitch. I wanted to penetrate her now, but I really wanted to taste her first. She propped herself up on her elbows and watched as I lowered my face between her thighs and set her legs over my shoulder. She writhed with anticipation as my tongue made long, swirling motions through her juices, sucking up every drop and savoring her taste.

My tongue found her tight pussy, and I slid it deep inside her, lapping her juices with it, then dragged it to the edge of her opening and back to her clit with the tip of my tongue. I pressed down on it so that she could feel pressure but not get the satisfaction she really needed.

Harper's skin was slick, shining with a film of sweat, and she quivered whenever I touched my lips to her. She sucked in a sharp breath when I rubbed my cheek against her thigh, letting my stubble scratch along the soft curves.

I was at my breaking point, but I calmed myself. The need to hear her sounds grow more frantic drove me to the edge, and I almost couldn't take any more. My tongue dove into her again, finding that spot and bringing another major orgasm from her. Her whole body jerked wildly as she cried out for more, pushed me away with one hand over my head and reached for me with the other, pulling my hair.

I growled against her pussy, my stubble scraping at her sensitive flesh, and she pulled my hair harder, but I enjoyed it too much. She tasted like salted candy.

"Come here," she pleaded huskily while trying to pull me back.

"Are you ready to know how I treat a queen? Are you beginning to understand what I would give you if you were mine?" I was practically grinding my teeth as she writhed beneath me and begged me to enter her. Feeling how wet and sensitive she was now as her body arched against mine nearly drove me mad, but somehow, I had held out longer than I would have thought.

"Yes, Owen, I want to be your queen. Please," she whined, "show me how you'd make me your queen."

She welcomed me eagerly when I lay back down on top of her, kissing her hard again and grinding against her core with more force than before. I searched the bed with my hand as I kissed her again, letting her taste her own juices on my lips. I found the condom and pulled back enough to rip it open then slid on the condom before positioning myself so my cock teased against her opening.

I hesitated for less than a second, but that was enough for Harper to make a noise of disapproval, so I thrust inside her without another thought. She groaned into my shoulder as she squeezed me tightly, wrapping her legs around my waist and pulling me deeper into her than I could possibly be inside someone else ever again. It felt like home, like a place where I was supposed to be.

Her eyes shot open, and she gasped and clawed my back. She was so tight I almost came instantly. I fell onto my elbows and eased myself in and out of her tight channel inch by agonizing inch. She was so wet for me, and so warm, like she was made just for me to fill. For a moment, the reality of the situation shook me and I froze. The anxiety of Wyatt finding us like this was almost enough for me to pull out, but I looked down at her, examining her beautiful face from so close, the way her eyes fluttered as her walls flexed around me and how they closed every time she moaned. The priceless expression of feeling utterly taken by me was etched on every lovely feature of hers, and she bit down on her lower lip so hard it might start bleeding soon. Her chest rose and fell in a shallow pattern beneath mine as I took a second breath to calm myself.

I claimed her lips once again, just as she gripped my waist in some sort of need and pulled me close in an offer of affection so deep and intimate that it made me forget everything other than my cock inside her. Our tongues interlocked once more as though we were familiar with each other already, used to this kind of intimacy. She pulled me deeper into her tender warmth with a rasping moan falling from parted lips when I slid to my hilt within her walls.

“You don’t understand what you’re doing to me. Do you?” I thrust into her, grinding my pelvis against hers. I wanted her

to come again, just as I did.

“God,” I growled, watching her face contort with pleasure as I thrust into her channel. It clenched around me tightly, squeezing each time I sank into her.

“So deep.” She squirmed beneath me, clutching my biceps to keep herself from being pushed back by the force of my thrusts. She locked our gazes as I claimed her for the first time, and her hands wandered down to take a grip on my hips. As she pulled me deeper, I could feel myself getting closer too. I loved the way she moaned through each breath as she realized what kind of power she had over me. That she could make me feel like this just as much as she could enjoy it as well.

“Owen . . . Oh, almost . . .”

“You are so tight . . .” My teeth gritted together as sweat rolled down my forehead. She shivered and squirmed beneath me. With every thrust she whimpered and arched into me. She made my shaft throb with every twitch of her muscles, and I was so close, I had to slow down or explode.

“No . . . don’t stop,” she groaned, so I jumped off the edge, letting my body feel it. The pressure released, filling the sleeve as she convulsed around me, squeezing and milking my cock. I covered her mouth, swallowing her moans until she relaxed and went limp.

The moment I pulled out, a whine echoed through the room. Lily was stirring, and if we didn’t get to her right away, she’d cry and wake Wyatt. Harper’s eyes went wide at the same time mine did, but I held a finger to my lips and said, “You stay. I’ll get her.”

She nodded and relaxed, and I climbed off the bed, hurrying to the bathroom. I slid the condom off and flushed it, then grabbed my shorts and slid them on. By the time I opened the bedroom door, her whimper was a full-blown cry, so I rushed to the kitchen and grabbed the sippy cup Harper had prepared before bed, then headed for the bedroom.

Lily was at the door, trying to leave the room, and I scooped her up and tried to calm her down. She was too fussy, awakened in a dark place by herself, which she was not used to. She cried louder, rubbing her eyes.

I bounced her. “Shh, sweetheart, it’s okay,” I cooed, rubbing her back, but her wails got louder. This was definitely a job for her mom, so I started toward my bedroom, hoping Wyatt had not awakened, but he burst out of the room when I was halfway across the living room on my way to my bedroom.

“What are you doing with Lily? Where’s Harper?” he snapped, obviously very tired and quite drunk. I had no clue how much he had before he went to bed or when he even went to bed, for that matter. He could have been awake drinking for hours after I climbed into bed. Regardless, his angry tone would scare Lily further, so I shushed him, holding a finger to my lips. I tried to distract him, drawing his attention in my direction.

“Lily is scared. Do you know what song she likes? Maybe if I sing to her, I—”

“Dad, where is Harper?” he asked again, advancing on me just as Harper walked out of my bedroom, fixing the hem of her shirt. Her hair was disheveled, and she still glowed from sex. God, she was gorgeous. Wyatt’s eyes didn’t reveal the same truth. Her beauty was lost on him in his angry, drunken state. “What the . . .?” He rubbed his eyes and turned to face her.

“What’s wrong, Princess?” Harper walked right past him, ignoring the fact that he was angry with her, and took Lily from my arms. Lily calmed right away, clinging to Harper’s chest.

“Maybe you should take her into the room,” I told Harper, but rather than returning Lily to her bed, she scowled at Wyatt and walked right back to my bedroom and shut the door.

“What the hell? What’s going on?” He barged over to my bedroom door, but before he got it open, I intercepted him,

blocking his path. “What are you doing? What happened? Why is she in your room?”

His questions stacked on top of each other, a load of bricks he piled on my already heavy shoulders. Guilt washed over me, but my priority was not to defend myself, rather to calm him so he did not scare Lily any more. I held my hands up defensively and moved toward him. “Wyatt, take a deep breath. You’re really angry and really drunk. You should go lie down. We can talk about this in the morning.”

“Screw that. What did you two do? Why is she in your room?” He tried to step around me, but I hooked an arm around his waist. He was surprisingly strong given his drunken state, but I was stronger, pulling him back.

“Wyatt, I’m telling you to back off. Go to your room and calm down. We will talk about this in the morning. You’re scaring the baby.” I had no clue if he was, but I knew it was a possibility if he continued shouting.

“You screwed my girlfriend while I was passed out?” His words cut like a knife.

“Wyatt, calm down,” I repeated, refusing to fight. “We will discuss this later.”

“That’s awesome.” He shook his head and laughed an angry, resentful laugh. “My own father, stealing my girlfriend. Is that why she wants to break up?”

“She did break up, Wyatt. It’s over between you two. She made that pretty clear to you at dinner.” I pressed my hands on his chest as he reached for the door again and denied him access. So he smacked my hands away and backed up.

“Is that what she told you? Because I said she’s fat? Well, maybe she’s a whore too—doesn’t even wait one day to jump into bed with my father. And you’re old, too . . . I guess that means she’s twice as bad. She couldn’t even find someone her own age. She had to go for my dad.” He scoffed and raked a hand through his hair.

I took a deep breath and sighed. I knew this would happen, but I took the risk. I couldn’t take it back. All I could do was

shield Harper from the worst of the fallout. Wyatt stormed off to the bedroom, but he didn't shut the door. I waited, knowing he wasn't finished. When he emerged wearing a hat and tennis shoes, I knew he was headed out. He walked straight to the front door and stopped and looked at me.

“I'm going home. I can't even stand to look at you.” He slammed the door when he left, drawing another round of crying from Lily, and I knew I had screwed up really badly, even if it had felt like the rightest thing in the world.

Harper

“**T**hanks for giving me a ride home. I’m really sorry vacation got cut short because of me.” I hung my head, more from sadness than from shame. I knew in my heart that it wasn’t entirely my fault. Wyatt was out of control with his drinking and said really hurtful things to me. But part of me knew I should have broken up with him before the trip and never gone with him and his father. Now Owen was driving me home from the airport after deciding to come home early. He worried that Wyatt would go off the deep end if he didn’t come home and find him.

“Stop apologizing, Harper. It’s not your fault at all. Things happen.” Owen turned into the apartment complex parking lot, and I pointed out my building.

“There, 404.” I still felt to blame even though Owen was being so generous and gracious. Add to that the awkward silences between me and Owen, and I had no desire to stay on that island any longer than I had to. Which is why when Owen told me he booked flights home, I agreed it was for the best. I glanced over my shoulder at Lily, who was sleeping in her car seat. “Do you mind helping me with my bags? I don’t think I can carry them all up by myself with her too.”

He parked and shut the car off and nodded. “Of course I can help. I’ll just leave her strapped right in her seat and carry the whole thing, and maybe she will nap a bit more while you unpack.”

God, he melted my heart every time he opened his mouth. Owen Thorpe was the most incredible specimen of manhood I'd ever encountered. So why did I feel so conflicted now?

"Thanks." I unbuckled my belt and climbed out, rounding to the trunk which Owen had popped. I collected all the bags, slinging one on my shoulder with my purse and hefting the other two, one in each hand. We made our way up to my apartment, and Lily successfully stayed asleep the entire way. Owen set her seat on the ground next to the kitchen table, and I parked the suitcases by the couch. He hovered just inside the door as if waiting for an invitation or something, but I was exhausted.

Not only had I not had any time to think about what had happened between us, but I'd been bombarded with guilt over Wyatt's spinout and subsequent sudden departure from Barbados. I'd seen how Owen was disappointed and hurt by that, and I felt to blame for at least that much, though I took no ownership of shame when it came to what happened. I had broken up with Wyatt. I owed him no explanations or apologies. When I slipped into Owen's bedroom, it was as a free woman, and I refused to feel guilty for that.

"Thank you," I told him again, feeling timid. The entire trip home had been one awkward conversation after another. We danced around the sexually charged feelings we had for each other, avoiding eye contact and physical touch in any form for the past thirty-six hours. Waking up the next morning in bed with him was an amazing feeling that got destroyed immediately when he told me Wyatt left and went home—charged it on Daddy's credit card to boot.

"Uh, so, should we talk?" His question made goosebumps rise on my arms. I knew we really should talk, but I didn't know what to say, and I didn't want to make any snap decisions about anything based on emotion in the present. I needed to carefully analyze everything that happened and think through what the consequences might be before I said anything.

"Yes, we should definitely talk, but I think maybe we both need some time to think first?" Dating Owen would be an

entirely different experience from dating Wyatt. I knew that. He was kind and caring, and I hadn't gotten any red flags from him. Though I'd only been with him the past four days, so there was still time for him to reveal any act he might be putting on. God knows, Wyatt put on an act for weeks until he had me hooked before the bad behavior started. And Wyatt was Owen's son, so there was that . . .

"Yeah, you're probably right." His face fell, and I knew I'd let him down, but it was for the best.

"I'm not saying what we did was a mistake or that we have no future. You even said it yourself before we had sex, that I just broke up. It was a bad experience. I just want to make sure that I do this right and that I'm not just jumping into something to fill a void. I don't want to hurt you in the future if this is just a rebound thing."

Owen reached out and took my hand. His soft smile warmed my heart. I knew he understood, valued, and appreciated my heart. That made it very difficult to stick to my guns because he was everything I wanted in a man, and I sincerely believed he wasn't faking it.

"You are absolutely right, Harper." His fingers laced between mine, and he nodded. "I am not one to jump into things. You should know that my ex-wife, Wyatt's mother, hurt me pretty badly. I haven't even dated a woman in years. I tried, but I found it very difficult to open up or trust women again."

I knew exactly how he felt. After Wyatt's behavior, the way he wore a mask of compassion and love, then shifted and turned into a total jerk, had made me leery of dating anyone. Even the perfect Owen Thorpe. It was a good thing that we were both on the same page. And I almost let my guard down until Owen opened his mouth again.

"I also want you to know that I never believed in love at first sight until I saw you. And you are going to call me crazy, but I think I'm in love with you, which is why I'm going to do everything in my power to make you feel like the most incredible woman on Earth—happy and cared for. And I'm

going to give you space and be patient with you while you process your thoughts. But I'll be here waiting, eager for you to see that I can be everything you want and need."

Owen's gaze locked on mine and then dipped to my lips and back to my eyes. He said all the right things, did all the right things, but my gut stopped me. I needed to pace myself. No jumping in this time. When he leaned in to kiss me, I stepped away, dodging it.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled, glancing at Lily who was stirring now. "I have a rule . . ."

"Of course," he said, nodding. He didn't look upset or disappointed at all. He smiled and squeezed my fingers, then walked over to Lily and kissed the top of her head. "Goodbye, little one. I'll make you pancakes again soon, I hope."

As he walked past me, he squeezed my shoulder and paused. "Talk soon?"

I nodded. "Of course."

His hand slid down my arm to my fingers, hooking his pinky around mine and walking away until our hands broke contact and my arm fell. The minute the door shut, I whimpered and threw my head back. "My God, what is wrong with me?" I whined, moaning my frustration. Owen Thorpe was so perfect, and I wanted him so badly.

But how the heck could I date him?

I crouched in front of Lily and unbuckled her and checked her trainer pants. She was still dry, so I handed her a sippy cup and kissed her cheek. "Go play, baby. Mommy has to take care of our bags. You can turn the TV on if you want."

Lily smiled and rubbed her eyes, then took a big drink and toddled off to turn on her cartoons. I lugged the bags to the couch and opened them, sorting through the one stuffed full of our dirty clothes. When my phone rang, I dug it out of my purse as I carried an armload of laundry to the washing machine.

"Yeah . . ." I held the phone to my ear with my shoulder as I stuffed the dirty clothes into the washer and poured in some

detergent.

“Yo, Harps, how’s it going? I got your text. You’re home early?” Ben—A.K.A. *Dr. Dreamy*—my best friend, was a lifeline and a half. Talk about perfect men. If he were dating, I’d have snatched him right up. Well, maybe. We were too good of friends to ruin that by getting emotional, but he really would make any woman’s dreams come true, if only he would decide to get back in the market.

“Yeah, sorry I’ve been incommunicado lately. It’s been a bit rough.” I added the fabric softener and peeked into the living room to check on Lily. She was sucking her thumb, watching a counting show.

“Alright, now you have to tell me all the details. I can’t come over right now. still in Yellow Springs until next week, but I’m here. I have time to listen.” Ben was seriously amazing. This was just what I needed.

I shut the lid of the washer and slogged out to the living room, plopping onto the couch. I kicked my shoes off before propping my feet on the coffee table, and then I let him have it. “So, I broke up with Wyatt.”

“Oh, thank God. Finally, girl. You should have done that two months ago.” He was right, and that was the nicest way of saying “I told you so” that any person could hear. “But I get the feeling there is more?”

“So much more . . .” I sighed. “I slept with Owen.” I bit my lip, ready for the chastisement of the century.

“Owen? You mean Wyatt’s dad? Dr. Thorpe?” He sounded baffled, as if he didn’t believe I was capable of it, or he thought maybe I’d met a different Owen in the past few days.

“Just listen to me, Ben. Wyatt was a total jerk. He basically called me fat and told me I needed to work out—right in front of a skinny, gorgeous waitress with whom he was flirting. So I dumped him. I went back to the room, and I was very upset, obviously. His dad was all like, ‘hey, let me comfort you,’ and I didn’t even resist that.”

“So you just slept with him?”

“God, no, Ben, listen.” I huffed out a sigh and closed my eyes, letting my head fall back. “Owen was so incredible the whole time. Every time Wyatt was a jerk, Owen was there to calm him down and talk me up. He is so great with Lily, and she loves him.” Lily’s ears perked up, and she looked at me when I said her name but turned back to the TV quickly. “He sat there when I was really hurting over Wyatt’s words and the way he flirted with that waitress. Owen said all the right things. He did all the right things.”

“Ah, I see . . .” Ben’s voice didn’t have a trace of judgment in it. For that I was thankful.

“It was a rough night. I couldn’t sleep. I wanted Owen to comfort me again, maybe just hold me or something.” I really did, didn’t I? I mean, sure, I had touched myself while thinking of him, and then the way he looked at me when he walked in on me was less than innocent. So maybe I’d sent the wrong signals, or maybe I really did intend to sleep with him when I went in there. I was confused now.

“So you snuck into his room in the middle of the night?”

“You make me sound like a slut or something.” I felt defensive, though it was only because I was painfully aware of how it made me look. I dumped my boyfriend and slept with his father in the same night, hours later. What had I done? Why had I done that? He was almost old enough to be my own father.

“No way, girl. Nope. I’m not saying that at all. When your heart is broken, you do crazy things, and I just consider that rebound sex. I think just about everyone does that.”

“With their boyfriend’s father?” It was starting to hit me what a mistake that was. I was so blinded by hurt that I’d used Owen as my rebound to feel better. Or had he taken advantage of my vulnerability? No—that couldn’t be, because I went into his room.

“Listen, Harper, there are some things you should know.” Ben’s tone grew serious. “People talk about Dr. Thorpe. They say he kicked his wife to the curb and refused to pay alimony. He cut her right off and left her homeless.”

I swallowed hard. That was a huge red flag. “How do people know that?” I wasn’t one to believe gossip, but knowing what people say wasn’t a bad thing. At least I’d know what to ask him if the opportunity arose. God, what was I thinking? I couldn’t date Owen.

“Not sure, except the head of oncology is married to a lawyer who was Dr. Thorpe’s divorce attorney. So there is some truth to some of it. He is rumored to have several mistresses at once and refuses to commit to any of them, something about not settling down anymore. I’m just saying, you need to protect yourself and Lily. Be careful.”

“I really appreciate your concern and love, Ben. You are my best friend.” I sank farther into the cushion and let the words he said sink into me. I couldn’t make my choices based on hearsay. As it were, I needed time to find out whether I was even ready for another relationship. Wyatt really hurt me, took away my self-confidence, and destroyed my ability to trust people so much that I even doubted my best friend. I’d never doubted Ben before.

“It’s okay, babe. I really want to see you succeed. And for what it’s worth, Wyatt was a douchebag. You are the most amazing woman I know, and you have a rockin’ body. You could get anyone you want with those curves and booty. Look at all those scrawny girls shoving pillows in their pants trying to get what you got in spades.”

I chuckled. “You’re not wrong.” My chuckle grew to a laugh, and he laughed with me. “It’s nice being trendy without trying.”

“Girl, you know it.” He cleared his throat and said, “I have to get back to my shift now. Don’t you let what that prick said destroy your self-image. You have always been confident in who you are and what you look like, so own that big, beautiful body of yours. The right man will love those curves and he won’t put you down.”

“Thanks, Ben. I love you, buddy. You go work, and I’ll look forward to when you get back to Hudson and we can do lunch or something.”

“You know it. See ya.”

Ben hung up leaving me feeling better, but not as amazing as Owen made me feel. I sat there watching Lily, wondering if I'd done the right thing. My breakup with Wyatt meant I would struggle to keep the same routine for her, but it meant peace for myself. That was part of being a single mom. Peace when you're alone, however, isn't quite the same as peace in a relationship, and even though I knew I could feel peace with Owen, I couldn't take that leap. Not right now. I needed a bit more time to think on it.

Owen

The young boy was so much healthier now. He'd even gained some weight back and had good color again. The surgery had been successful, and his sudden onset of epilepsy was starting to fade, managed now by medication.

"Thank you again, Dr. Thorpe," Mrs. Hallsworthy said, shaking my hand then Chelsea's. "For the past three weeks we've seen the seizures decline from more than twelve a day to one or fewer per day." Mr. Hallsworthy was not here today for Jake's checkup, but she passed on his thanks too.

"You're very welcome. I am so happy to hear that everything is back on track. Now, the medications that Dr. Marshal prescribed for Jake are to be taken every single day. If he forgets, he may have more seizures. These don't build up in his system, which is why it's important to remember them."

Jake sat on a chair across the office, playing a game on a tablet. He was entirely absorbed in it with a serious expression on his face. It reminded me of the day I first saw Harper and how good she was with him. I wished she could see him now, happier and healthier. But she had been working in a different department for the past three weeks. I'd been giving her space as she requested, though I did text her a few times a week to let her know I was thinking of her and to ask how her day went.

"Yes, well, we already forgot one dose and learned that the hard way." Mrs. Hallsworthy shook her head and sighed.

“Won’t be doing that again.”

“Don’t beat yourself up,” Chelsea told her. “Just get a kitchen timer or something and set reminders. It helps to have a pill divider so you can put the right doses into each daily compartment. You can buy different colored ones for the different times of day. That way, you will know when you’ve accidentally skipped a pill.”

Chelsea was so good with patients. When her residency was over, she was going to make a fantastic surgeon. She coached Jake’s mom through a few more instructions for long-term care, including following up with his family doctor in a few weeks and for any further needs. I was done with this patient, but I wasn’t done with my workday, and just seeing him made me so consumed with thoughts of Harper that I couldn’t sit still anymore. I stood.

“Excuse me, if you will. Chelsea, you can finish up here. I have to attend to something.” I nodded at her, and she glanced at me, confused, but nodded her head.

“Sure, Dr. Thorpe.”

I let myself out and walked straight to the watercooler. My heart had been on edge for three weeks. I didn’t know if Harper had washed her hands of me and had only responded to my messages to be polite, or if she was waiting on me to make another move. She was a busy woman too, so it was possible being a single mom and working full-time hours were just keeping her super busy.

I filled a cup with water and drank it, then another. I wasn’t thirsty, but I needed a distraction. Not knowing what was going through Harper’s head was driving me nuts, and it wasn’t like I could just ask Wyatt for information. I stood there around the corner from my office, hiding from everyone, until Chelsea rounded the corner and rolled her eyes at me.

“Well, that went well.” Her tone was dry. She picked up a paper cup and filled it and stood staring at me. “It’s her again?” she asked. I told her as much as I could without defaming Harper in any way. I’d led such a private life that I

had no one else to talk to, really, so when Chelsea noticed my behavior change, I vented to her.

“Yeah. The first time I saw her was when we came to consult for Jake.” I crushed the empty paper cup and tossed it in the bin. “Just got overwhelmed by thoughts of her. Thanks for handling that.”

“Just go talk to her, Owen.” She cocked her head and continued, “You are tormenting yourself. If you just go talk to her, you’ll know whether you have a chance. You deserve to be happy.”

If she knew the half of it, she’d understand it wasn’t that easy. I hadn’t told her I slept with Harper right after she dumped my son. I hadn’t told her Harper was even dating Wyatt. And as if she could read my mind, Chelsea changed the subject.

“How’s your boy?” I knew she meant to be comforting. She was a sweet woman like that. She probably thought the change of subject would help me get my mind off Harper, but it only made things worse.

“Well he’s not talking to me much. He’s been drinking a lot. I heard from a buddy of his that he’s been sleeping in his car some nights.” I ran a hand through my hair. This entire situation with Wyatt was so troubling. I blamed myself for what happened. He was already so vulnerable, and I went and slept with Harper. True, they had broken up, but I knew I’d kissed her when they were still dating. And I had seen her nearly nude. And I hadn’t done a good enough job of restraining myself that entire trip. I knew she was his, and I failed him.

“He’ll be okay, Owen. You should invite him for dinner to talk about things. Maybe he just needs someone to listen to him. It’s right around the time of year his mom left, right? He’s probably just remembering that. You know your body can remember trauma without your mind telling you it’s that time of year.”

Chelsea was so intelligent, yet so wrong. It was true that Wyatt’s body probably sucked him into the cyclical pattern of

remembering his trauma, but this went beyond that and I knew it. He blamed me for Harper breaking up with him. He'd said as much in the two conversations we'd had since we were home.

"Thanks. Yeah, maybe that's it." I shrugged and took a deep breath. "I'm going to head out. I have a few more things to do today."

"Alright, well if you need to talk, you can call me anytime." She held her glass up as if she'd given a toast, and I nodded.

"Will do," I told her, shuffling away. I actually had nothing else to do until after lunch, so I headed for the elevator, thankful she'd bought my lie. I just wanted to be alone.

When the elevator doors opened, however, I was face to face with the stunning creature my heart had been fixated on for weeks. "Harper?"

"Owen . . ." she breathed.

She was perfect. Her dark hair was tied up, but her hazel eyes drank me in. The blue scrubs she wore hugged her in all the right places, while leaving a little bit to the imagination in others. My breath caught in my chest. I had no clue what to say. I stood there staring at her long enough that the door started to shut, and she reached out to stop it, holding it open for me.

"Coming?" she asked, smiling at me.

I was undone. That smile was so radiant I lost my brain. "I . . . uh, yeah," I stuttered, stepping into the elevator. Any sane person would have turned and stood beside her, but I was there, just inside the door, staring at her like a begging dog. I was begging. In my heart, I was pleading with her to see that I could be her everything. It felt powerless, weak, as if with a single word she could destroy or complete me. Her smile elicited such strong emotion in my gut, I thought I'd lose control and pull her into my arms.

She said nothing, but she didn't act rude or like she was upset with me. She picked at her fingernails and watched the

readout on the elevator wall that indicated what floor we were on. I had this moment, just the two of us alone on the elevator, and I was blowing it because I had bottled up everything I wanted to say for the past three weeks instead of calling her and saying it.

Harper smiled at me awkwardly as I stared, but my mouth still wouldn't open to speak. This goddess whom I loved was so precious to me, I didn't dare say the wrong thing and ruin everything. I took a deep breath, clearing my mind, and tried to think of anything other than the way her body felt as she lay in my arms that night.

The elevator chimed.

The doors slid open.

And my brain finally kicked into gear.

“Harper, uh . . . Want to have dinner with me? Friday night?” I stayed planted in my spot as she stepped toward me. She smelled amazing, like honeysuckle in the summer when the sun is hot enough to bake you. I didn't move even when she pointed at the open door. I wasn't purposely trying to block her from leaving. My brain just wasn't functioning except for the part that needed an answer from her.

“Yeah, that sounds nice. But I have to bring Lily. No sitter.” She turned her body, as if she would squeeze past me, and I stepped back, but not far enough. Her breasts brushed over my arm, sending a wave of stimulation through my body. My dick throbbed, and I swallowed hard.

“I'd love to have you and Lily for dinner.” I smiled at her, a genuine smile. I really did want to see Lily too, and I wanted Harper to know that if I was dating her, I was dating her little girl too.

“How's Wyatt?” she asked, stepping away.

The doors started to shut, and I pushed my hand on them, stopping the action. My heart sank a little, not only because I had no news but because she had brought that up. I knew it was a hurdle we'd have to jump together if we would make this work, but I also knew it was going to cause problems for a

while. I'd much rather have forgotten about it for the first date, at least.

"He's struggling." I was honest without giving away his entire shameful episode. She knew him well enough to make a proper assumption.

"That's too bad. You just take care of him, okay? I'll see you Friday. Let's say, seven? I'll be ready for you to pick me up."

"I can't wait." I wanted to say more, to let my heart pour out everything I was thinking and feeling, but I knew that was a lot more than she was ready for. She'd been aloof for three weeks. I wasn't about to ruin this shot.

I watched her walk away, standing there with my hand preventing the elevator from moving, until another doctor walked up. She chuckled at me and said, "Going up?"

"Uh, no. Sorry," I mumbled and walked out. My dick was swelling and throbbing so badly, I'd never be able to concentrate. I had no time for lunch now because the only thing I could think about was Harper. *She said yes.* Dinner on Friday night was the hope I had been looking for. I walked straight to my car and got in. I should have been driving across town for some fast food, but I drove straight home instead.

Thoughts of Harper washed over me in a deluge of arousal and elation. If worrying she would cut me off had made me consumed with her, this was complete hypnotism. I parked in my garage and shut the car off, and I had my hand in my pants before I even got in the house. She drove me mad with desire, and I knew if she knew what she did to me, it might scare her. That was the last thing I wanted.

So I headed straight for the bathroom and had my pants open before I got there. I leaned my forearm on the wall and rested my head on it as I stroked myself. Flashes of Harper's face as she came popped into my mind, the way her head arched back and she let out whimpering moans of pleasure. The way she touched herself as my dick slid in and out of her. God, what I wouldn't have done to feel her soft pussy hugging my dick.

I stroked harder, squeezing myself the way she gripped me when she freed me from my pajama pants that night. Her hand was soft but her grip was firm. And the way her eyes devoured my body, like she liked what she saw . . .

It was enough to make me blow just like that, but I held off, teasing myself at the edge as I began to have new imaginations of her. Things we hadn't yet done but I wanted to. Like dinner on Friday night. I'd drop her off and she'd invite me up. We'd put Lily to bed and wait until she was fast asleep, then I'd woo her, make her feel like the incredible woman she was. I would sing to her and spoil her. We'd kiss, and she would invite me into her bedroom where I could enjoy her in every position all night long.

I pictured her sucking me, letting me take her from behind. I imagined crazy sex, wild sex. Sex with toys and lots of steamy talk. Her tits sliding along my cock. her lips leaving a trail of lipstick across my chest. I imagined the way her pussy felt around my fingers and the way it tasted when I made her drip and clench. And when I imagined her whispering my name, telling me she loved me, I lost it.

My dick exploded faster than I was ready for. I tried to point it down, but it shot out onto the wall along with my gasps and grunts of release. I managed to get my head lowered to dump the rest of the load into the toilet, but God, was that release amazing. The only thing that could have made it better was if I'd filled her pussy with my seed and watched it dribble out of her.

I cleaned up and washed the wall down, confident that after that release I could control myself the rest of the day, and headed back to work. I was on cloud nine, and even the missed call from Wyatt when I looked at my phone as I drove back to the hospital didn't bring me down.

Harper

I tugged the soiled T-shirt over Lily's head against her protest and tried to hold her between my knees as she squirmed to run away while I reached for the clean top. With my phone pinched between my ear and shoulder, I tried to get her ready while Ben grilled me for the third time since he'd gotten home two weeks ago.

"You're trying to tell me that the only reason you want to get together with him is to talk about what happened, but I'm not buying it. You could send an email, have a phone conversation . . . You could even just stand in the parking lot or the breakroom and chat. Harper, you are crossing a line here."

I sighed, frustrated that for the past twenty minutes, Ben had done nothing but try to convince me that I was making a poor choice. It had been three weeks. Wyatt hadn't even so much as texted me. It was over between us, and Owen was interested. I warred within my own head about how smart it was to get into bed with one of the higher-ups at the hospital, but he wasn't my direct supervisor. And besides, we really did need to discuss what happened. If not, it was just a slutty one-night stand, and I wasn't that woman. That sex wasn't just a no-strings-attached hookup.

"I really appreciate what you're trying to do, Ben, but I am okay. I don't need your protection. I know what I'm doing. We are going to have dinner. I have a few of Wyatt's things I need

to give back. I think Owen is the perfect person to give them to. That way, I don't have to see the jerk again. Not to mention, we had a hookup, and I just don't want to be that woman who sleeps with a guy just because. I need closure at the very least."

I wasn't fooling him, and I wasn't fooling myself. My body was just as excited to see him tonight as it had been in that elevator when it was awkward and tense and Owen tripped over his own words like a kid with a crush. My heart was racing, my palms sweaty, and I was struggling to manage Lily, who had no clue what was happening tonight.

"I can't actually condone this."

"Well, you don't have to. You are my best friend, not my father. Look, Ben, I have to go. Lily is being a handful right now, and I need to get her ready." I let her go with the shirt around her neck, but no arms in the sleeves yet, and held my phone with my hand. "I'll call you later?"

"Just promise me you're not going to sleep with him again. I know you have a really good, trusting heart, and I'd hate to see you get hurt again."

"I'm not planning to sleep with him again, Ben. We're not even going to be alone. We're going to dinner, and I'm taking Lily with me." Lily, who was now tearing the shirt off over her head already. I let my shoulders drop, defeated, and said, "I gotta go. I'll call you."

"Alright, bye, then."

I hung up and tossed the phone, and just as I reached out to catch Lily's arm, Owen knocked on the door. I picked her up, then snagged her shirt, then I walked to the door and opened it. Lily rested on my hip, tiny hands curled into fists. I had no clue what her problem was, but she was being so frustrating today.

"Hey," he said, smiling, and Lily squealed. She clapped her hands and reached for him, and my heart melted. Seeing her reaction to him made it impossible to stay grumpy with her. It also made it very challenging to turn off the tingling

sensation in my body as I looked him up and down. He wore a polo and some very cute jeans. I could only imagine how nice his butt looked in them.

“Come on in,” I told him, allowing him to take her from my arms. “I still have to get her dressed.”

Owen strolled in carrying her, and I remained there at the door to close it. I couldn't help but look at his backside, and just as I imagined, his butt looked amazing. The jeans had to have been tailored just for him.

“Good, I don't mind helping. Now, where is your shirt?” He sat down on the couch and placed Lily on his knee, reaching for me. I handed him the shirt, which she allowed him to put on easily. There were so many green flags waving you'd have thought we were at the starting line of the Indianapolis 500. Or maybe it was my emotions getting carried away because I'd had sex with him, and that skewed my point of view.

“Pancakes!” Lily cheered. She giggled and wrapped her arms around Owen's neck, squeezing him tightly.

“Not tonight, baby. We're going to a restaurant. We can have chicken nuggets, or mac and cheese.” I tousled her hair and smiled at Owen as he hugged her back. I could see the admiration on his face. The feeling between them was mutual, and I didn't know how to feel about that. Lily really liked him a lot, and so did I. But I still carried Ben's warning, and my own reservations about dating Wyatt's father, in the back of my mind.

“Pancakes . . .” Lily said again, pouting. “You make them wif ice cream, and sprinkles, and I eat.” She sat back and clapped her hands, then patted Owen's cheeks. “You make?”

“Well, we were going to go to get some other food,” Owen said, attempting to change her mind, but she folded her arms over her chest and offered a miniature version of my scowl. She looked exactly like me. It was amazing how she could mirror my expressions at times.

“Pancakes.” She pouted hard, and Owen glanced at me.

“Mom?” he asked, though I wasn’t sure what he was asking.

I’d seen this before, though, Lily’s tantrum outburst. Terrible twos definitely did not end at two years old. I sat next to him, rubbing Lily’s back and talking softly. This was a horrible way to start a date, even if I was uncertain whether there would even be a second date yet. I knew Owen liked her, but she didn’t have to bring her worst behavior on day one.

“Baby, we’re going out. Okay? Maybe I’ll make you pancakes for breakfast.” I rubbed in small circles, the way my mom used to do for me when I was upset.

“No!” she shouted, on the verge of tears. Her little arms hugged herself more tightly. “Pancakes tonight. Ice cream. Sprinkles. Pancakes.”

Owen looked at me with a frown. I could tell he hated seeing her upset. “I can make p-a-n-c-a-k-e-s if you want?” He spelled it out as if she didn’t realize he was trying to fight for her. She eyed him, and her expression softened.

“But . . .” I started to protest, but stopped myself. I didn’t need a full-blown tantrum with screaming, biting, and fist pounding. I also didn’t need to be alone with him in this apartment when I was already feeling like tearing his clothing off again. But when I looked at Lily’s face, I knew if we went out, we wouldn’t get any talking done anyway. She would see to that with her attitude and anger. “Alright,” I conceded, “I think I may have some pancake mix. I’m not sure about cinnamon, though. And I barely have enough ice cream for two scoops.”

“Yay!” Owen cheered, bouncing Lily. Her eyes lit up as she finally got the point.

“Pancakes?” she asked hesitantly.

“Yes! Mommy says I can make you pancakes.” He stood and set her down, then took her hand. “Show me where the stuff is, Mommy, and Lily can help me.”

I led them into the kitchen and opened cupboards, getting everything ready for him to cook, but he acted like he was

dating my daughter, not me. I sat at the table watching him talk to her and coach her through making the batter. He stood her beside himself, careful to keep her away from the heat of the stove as he cooked. And when her food was ready, he got her into her booster seat and cut her food for her. The entire time, he hardly spoke to me, but I was mesmerized, wooed, and even a little turned on by how good he was with her. They laughed and talked, high-fived, and she even gave him several hugs. I loved that she loved him. I sat there with tears in my eyes at the vast difference between him and Wyatt.

And when he set a plate of pancakes in front of me, he winked at me. This wasn't an act to him. He wasn't trying to sell me on himself. This was the real Owen Thorpe. He was eating this up. I wondered what an amazing dad he must have been to Wyatt and realized how badly the trauma of his divorce must have hurt him. My heart went out to him even before we started the conversation about the sex we had, which he did as soon as Lily was absorbed in her third plate of pancakes. They weren't as healthy as the kind he made for us in Barbados, but she was eating and happy. That was a win for today.

“So, you mentioned wanting to discuss the *pizza* we had?”

For a moment I wondered what he was talking about. We had never had pizza. I thought about it for a second as he waggled his eyebrows, and it hit me. “Oh, pizza,” I said, almost laughing. At least that took the edge off.

“It was *really* delicious pizza.” His eyes sparkled as he said it, seductively putting a bite of pancakes into his mouth. I felt my words catch in my throat and sipped a glass of milk he had poured for me.

“Uh . . .” I chuckled. “Yes, it was extremely delicious pizza. Probably the best pizza I've ever eaten.”

“I don't want pizza,” Lily protested, shoving pancakes in her mouth.

“That's okay, sweetheart. You enjoy your pancakes.” Owen grinned at her and turned back to me. “So normally, people wait until they know each other a bit better for pizza,

but I wanted you to know how thoroughly I enjoyed that pizza and how much I'd really like to have it again."

I felt my cheeks literally cooking. The heat that flooded them was rivaled only by the burning in my groin. "You don't think we rushed into the pizza? I mean . . . How do we know we both like the same toppings? Or that we aren't going to regret it later on?" God, I felt like a fool. Talking in code made me feel so out of my comfort zone.

"Oh, I don't mind whatever toppings you want on your pizza, and I will never regret eating pizza with you, Harper. I want to have pizza with you every day for the rest of my life."

Wow, this man was a charmer. I was so sucked in by his charisma, I found it hard to stay objective. I found it hard to want to stay objective. So I gave into him and found myself flirting. "I think pizza sounds way better than pancakes." My insinuation that I wanted him didn't get past him.

He smirked at me and licked his lips. I knew if I slid my foot up across his lap, there would be a hard bulge there waiting for me. And here I was breaking my word to Ben again already.

"I don't want pizza!" Lily whined, devolving into tears instantly. "I say I want pancakes." She cried and rubbed her sticky hands on her face, which made her cry harder.

"God, I'm sorry, Owen. She didn't get a nap today. I bet she is just exhausted." I stood, realizing I had been flirting with him for no reason. There was a very high likelihood that I would be fighting her for the next hour until her bedtime. When she got like this, she refused to sleep.

"No, don't be sorry. I'm a very patient man when it comes to pizza with the woman I love."

He said it again. That word. The one Wyatt had said to me but hadn't meant. The one that made the hair on the back of my neck rise to attention and filled me with apprehension and desire all at once. I tried to push it away, but it lingered over my skin like the memory of his touch.

“I think I need to wash her up.” I lifted Lily into my arms and rested her on my hip. “I’m sorry. You can just let yourself out if you want. It could be a while.”

“That’s okay. I understand.” He plunged his fork into his pancakes, and I sighed as I retreated. He’d leave while I was busy with her, and that would be that. Date over.

I took her into the bathroom and ran some bath water, washing the sticky ice cream off her hands and face. She cried nonstop and fought me, splashing around so much I never heard when he left. I was sad as I dressed her in pajamas and even more sad when I tucked her in and she fell right asleep. There was a huge mess in the kitchen for me to clean up, and all I wanted now was to just sit next to him and feel his arms around me. The night had gone according to the plan I told Ben, but not really how my heart or body wanted it to.

So I was shocked when I walked back into the living room on the verge of tears and saw him seated on the couch. I glanced at the kitchen. He’d done the dishes and cleaned up after supper. The lights were low. There was soft music playing, and he patted the couch next to him and said, “Come sit, Harper. It’s all done. You can rest now.”

Oh, God, I was in trouble now.

Owen

“Owen, I can’t believe you did that. Why?” Harper walked toward me, her jaw hanging slack. She looked shocked and amazed.

“Because you are worth it, and because I wanted you to know what it would feel like to come home to this.” I patted the couch again and gestured for her to come closer, and she did. She nestled into my side. I wanted to kiss her, but she turned her head, hesitating. “Look, we don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do, okay? I’m prepared to just sit here and talk.”

“I didn’t say that.” She played with a button on my shirt as she spoke, and I took her hand.

“Good, then dance with me,” I told her, standing up. She followed my lead, leaning in against me, and I twirled her around until we were standing in the center of the room, bodies pressed together, swaying in time to the music. “Imagine how amazing it would be to have a clean home, supper cooked for you. You could spend time with Lily, or maybe you could pick up a hobby you never thought you’d have time for.” I leaned in and kissed her cheek. Her long, wavy hair smelled amazing.

“Yeah . . .” Harper sounded defeated, as if she’d dreamed that once upon a time and then let go of any hope it could happen. I hated that tone in her voice because it communicated

a place where she was hurting. It killed me that she had lost that hope.

“I think you are closer to that reality than you even know.” I thought it because I wanted to make that her reality, every day and every night for the rest of her life. Something about her had taken my heart captive.

“Lily . . .” she mumbled, pulling away.

“I don’t hear crying. Stay here with me. If she fusses, I’ll get her.” I pulled Harper closer, and she didn’t resist. She did look up into my eyes, though, and searched me. I could see the doubt there, the mistrust. I knew she was hurt by Wyatt. she probably didn’t trust that I was being genuine with her. I hated that.

“If you want to sit down, we can.”

“No,” she whispered, draping an arm around my shoulder. “This is perfect.”

“No, not quite.” I cupped her cheek as we swayed, turning her lips to mine. “This is perfect,” I whispered, grazing her lips with mine. The kiss was fleeting, and she tensed in my arms. Her eyes shot toward the hallway and then back to me. “What is it?”

She sighed and bit her lip. I saw the indecision in her eyes, like she was wrestling with something. I didn’t let her go. I wouldn’t. I wanted her, and not just for sex. Her heart, her mind, everything about her drove me wild. “You want pizza?” she asked, and I knew exactly what she meant.

“I want you, Harper. You are the most amazing woman I’ve ever met. The way you carry yourself, with such grace and compassion. It’s addictive. I’ve seen you in action as a mom, a nurse, and even a partner. Wyatt didn’t deserve half the mercy and love you offered him. He was a boob.”

She chuckled and shook her head. “You’re just saying that to get in my pants.” I knew she was joking, but to ensure she knew I was taking this seriously, I backed away, putting several inches between our bodies. I even let go of her hand.

“I would never do that to you. Your heart is what I want.” I remained calm. I didn’t want her to think she had offended me in any way. Her eyes welled up.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“You have nothing to apologize for. I told you I would be happy to sit and talk. And in fact, if you prefer I go home right now and never ask you for sex or a date again, I will. I respect you fully. If you don’t see me as anything more than a man who wants sex, then tell me. Because I see you as the woman of my dreams, someone I want to come home to at night. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be here. I wouldn’t care for Lily the way I do, and I certainly wouldn’t initiate sex.”

Harper blinked, and the tears sluiced down her cheeks in perfect synchronization. “Why are you like this? Why me? What made me special?” She trembled, and I pulled her into my arms.

“Because when you walk into a room, you change the atmosphere the instant you smile. Because your heart outshines the sun. You are brilliant and kind and loving. Because as a mother, you prioritize your little girl, and that’s important to me. Because no matter what society says or what Wyatt says, your body is about the hottest thing I’ve seen in my entire life and I want to enjoy every inch of it, every day.”

I kissed her hard, lingering there as I raked my teeth across her lower lip. She whimpered, sliding her hands up my back, and kissed me back. “God, Owen. I don’t do this. I mean . . . normally, when Lily is here, I just don’t.”

“I understand,” I said, pulling away. No matter how badly I wanted her, I had to respect that. It was the safe choice, but she was the parent, and I wouldn’t begin to tell her how to care for Lily.

“No,” she whined, grabbing my hand. She glanced at the hall, then the TV stand. I noticed the baby monitor there the minute I followed her gaze. She pulled me after her, picking the monitor up as she walked past the TV, and led me down the hall. After peeking into Lily’s room and seeing she was

sleeping, she guided me to her bedroom and shut the door, setting the monitor on the dresser.

She turned toward me and put her hands on my hips, backing toward the bed, and I followed. “Are you sure about this?”

“Positive,” she said, already working my belt.

“I don’t want to do anything you’re not comfortable doing.”

Harper’s response was to yank my jeans open and slide my hard cock out the fly. “I need pizza,” she groaned, stroking me. I wasn’t prepared for her to sit on the edge of the bed and take my cock into her mouth. She sucked me eagerly, stroking and teasing me as I pulled my shirt over my head.

“The shoes too,” she ordered, taking a breath before sliding me back into her mouth. She was good, very good, letting my length push down her throat several times without even gagging. When she had my fullness inside her, she moaned, sending vibrations into my sack. I gripped her head, pulling her away. If she did that for even a single second longer, I’d shoot my load, and that was not how I wanted this to go. She looked up at me with a smirk, and I knew she was toying with me.

“Naughty little vixen, then, huh?” She rose and pulled her shirt off, then shimmied out of her slacks. I pushed my jeans down along with my boxers, stepping out of them as she leaned over the bed looking back at me. Her round hips called to me, and I reached for them, gripping her panties.

“Don’t.” She giggled. “Let me.” She stood and peeled them off, tossing them over her shoulder. She was bare beneath the palms of my hands, and I caressed the soft globes of her cheeks, chasing the crease of her thigh.

I kissed the small of her back and gripped her hips in my hands, spreading her apart and sliding the wet folds of her pussy against my cock. I circled her clit with my head and pressed against her roughly, grunting.

“Ooh, yeah!” Harper exclaimed when I shoved myself all the way inside her. I could feel how slick she was with moisture as I began to rock on top of her, pushing into her deeply every time. Her hips bucked along with mine as I pressed into her again and again. “Mmm, this feels amazing.”

“God, you’re incredible.” I thrust slowly, reaching around her body to find her swollen nub. She lifted a leg, resting her knee on the mattress so I could have more room to massage her.

“Ah . . .” She panted, licking her lips.

“It’s so good,” I moaned, going a little faster. I sped up my motions, rubbing her clit and sliding into her with speed. My cock slipped out of her, and then I grabbed ahold of her thigh, shoving myself back inside as I plunged as deep as I could. A gasp left my mouth as Harper moaned loudly in response and squeezed my cock tightly with her pussy.

“Mmm!” she moaned, and I kept stroking her clit to try and extend the moment for her. When her body tensed, clenching around me hard, I knew she was there, though she didn’t let a sound escape her mouth except for a breathy hiss.

Harper

The orgasm was incredible, shaking my whole body with tremors from the inside out. I gripped the sheets in my hands and stifled my moans as much as possible to avoid waking Lily, but Owen really knew what he was doing. And he had such control over his own body. If it were me, I'd have shot my load already, but he seemed eager to keep going. And for a split second, I wondered if Ben was right. Had Owen been with so many women that he'd trained himself to go this long?

When he pulled out and pushed my hips to the side, I collapsed. I was breathless, but he was raring to go. He stroked himself, then licked his fingers, cleaning my juices from them. "That was good, huh? Let's go again," he whispered, grinning at me. I couldn't help but smile at him as he manhandled me, lifting behind my knees and forcing me into position.

"Yes!" I told him, spreading my legs as wide as I could and rubbing myself. My stomach was still quivering, and my skin felt like it had electricity running through it. This time, I forced his face into me and arched my back, pushing his head down into my pussy. He raised an eyebrow at me but didn't object as I held on to his hair and bucked my hips up against his mouth. I was ready for another.

He clamped his lips over my clit and sucked hard, using two fingers to play with my insides. I let out a groan and put my hand over my mouth to block any noise, which barely

worked. His fingers were good . . . really good, going in deep enough then pulling out just right to hit my G-spot. He eased down on me until both of us were lying on the bed, me spread out like a starfish with his tongue buried in my slit for what felt like eternity. His mouth knew exactly what it was doing, flicking back and forth over my sensitive little bud and sucking like nobody's business.

Then he started to hum, running his fingers up inside me again then pushing them in deep to stroke the fleshy walls of my pussy that were already starting to shake from all the stimulation. He murmured against me in a sweet voice that made me calm down, my whole body relaxing into the bed like a flower blossoming in the sun.

I grabbed handfuls of my own hair, groaning and breathing deeply to fuel that sweet, lazy feeling growing inside me. And when the pressure reached its peak, my fingers reached for him, finding his hair, and I was grinding against his face so hard that he had trouble keeping rhythm. But he didn't care and kept going, lapping at my clit with a gentle tongue and plunging his fingers deeper until I was spiraling out of control. My insides locked up as the orgasm rolled over me from head to toe, making me squirm under his touch. He didn't stop until it was completely over and my muscles finally relaxed, making me sink back into the mattress with a sigh of satisfaction.

Once I could move again, Owen got to his knees between my legs and awkwardly shuffled closer, panting softly on top of me. "Delicious," Owen said, wiping away a drop of sweat from his face. I inhaled deeply, filling my lungs with the pleasant smells of him and our sex.

"That really was something special," I told him, using my fingers to grip his hair lightly. His eyes glowed with pleasure as he positioned himself above me, gazing at my body intently. Our lips met, and I felt a wave of warmth spread throughout my body. He tasted salty like the sea, and his mouth combined softness and roughness in an incredibly pleasurable way.

My heart raced as he slowly traveled lower along my neck while I shivered with delight. Finally, his tongue reached my

nipples, pushing me closer and closer to the brink until I couldn't take it anymore.

“Ahh . . .” I begged for more, for him, and he teased me by nibbling gently on my flesh. Quickly turning us over so that I was now on top, his hands followed the contours of my back as I caressed his chest intensely. Our lips were mere inches apart, and I breached the space between us hungrily.

Owen grasped my hips and pressed them against his, the way his cock felt against my flesh almost too tempting.

“I need you,” I murmured, and he got the idea. He glanced at the nightstand, and I knew what he wanted. “In the drawer,” I told him. He stretched out beneath me, reaching for the drawer, and pulled a condom out, tearing it open and rolling it on with expert dexterity. Then he pulled me closer to him again, eager to have me. His stiffness felt almost painful as he ground his hips against me. My clit was pinched, spurring a slight yelp from me.

“I want you,” Owen said in a low, passionate voice. He stroked his hands down my body until they rested on my backside, squeezing it tightly before beginning to thrust against me in a steady rhythm.

I lifted myself off him slightly so that his cock could enter me. As I sank onto him, he groaned, filling me completely with heat and thickness.

“Oh, God,” I panted softly, my heart beating fast in my chest. His eyes were clouded with desire as they locked with mine, and he began to thrust faster into me.

I gasped for breath as the pleasure kept intensifying with each movement of our bodies together. His hands tightened around my rear as he bucked against me, and I could barely contain my response as cries of pleasure escaped my lips. I arched my back, pressing harder against him while he kissed me deeply and passionately.

“Oh . . .” I moaned out loud.

“Mmm,” Owen replied, moving his hips even deeper inside me. He then pinched my nipples lightly before rolling

them between his thumb and forefinger, making my already aroused body tense up even more as I felt tightness build within me. I started to sway my hips in circles, egged on by Owen's encouraging words. With each thrust forward of his hips, I increased my speed and felt his hands clutching at my butt as he moved too.

When I was close to the peak of pleasure, my eyes rolled back and my body quivered. He held me steady as he pumped up into me with fervor, his shoulders tightening with every thrust. His jaw clenched as my body took him all in, and I let out an almost desperate cry of need for him. I began to grind back onto him faster and faster, gripping onto the sheets so tightly that my knuckles turned white. He released a deep moan and shut his eyes tightly as his body trembled with desire.

"You feel so good," he whispered through gritted teeth. My insides throbbed around him until at last, we both reached our climaxes together. We both moaned out in pleasure as Owen released and I came around him. I continued to shiver until finally Owen relaxed.

The second our climaxes had subsided, Owen withdrew from me, panting and stretching. Sweaty and spent, I felt a kind of tranquility that had escaped me for years. I rolled over to watch him as he slid the sleeve off and tied it, then dropped it in the trash can and put his underwear back on. He got back in bed with me. I lay there on my side, my head resting on his arm. He kissed my forehead and held my hand. I opened my eyes and smiled at him, lightly tracing circles around his chest with my finger.

Owen held me close, kissing my forehead. If every day was like this, I'd be living in heaven. But I was torn. I didn't want things between Wyatt and Owen to be awkward or tense, and I would never purposely hurt Wyatt even though he had treated me so badly for so long.

"What are you thinking?" Owen asked.

"Honestly, I'm wondering what is happening between us. If it's right." I couldn't look him in the eye. I had indulged

myself with him more than once now. I wasn't leading him on. I was just confused.

“Well, I think we are developing feelings for each other. Perhaps we are testing the waters of what a relationship could look like.” His thumb rubbed over my arm, easing my nervousness. Sex was easy. Talking was hard. When it came to words, I felt like nothing I could say would articulate how I actually felt or the strange dynamic we faced.

“I dated your son.” I shrugged and lay on my back, staring at the ceiling, and he was there, kissing my temple softly.

“You did, but that is over now.” He didn't sound as sure as his words made him out to be. His voice quavered a little as he spoke.

“You don't think that's going to be uncomfortable?” His eyes met mine, and I could see the emotion there. As a father, he cared for his son deeply, but I could also see something else in his gaze.

“I'm willing to take that risk for something so priceless.” Owen brought my hand to his lips and kissed my palm. “Are you?”

“And you don't think it's weird that you're so much older than me?” He guided my hand to his cheek, and I ran my hand through his hair. The silver streaks in the brown waves spoke of wisdom and experience that I didn't have. I wasn't sure if I should feel intimidated by that or comforted.

“Not a bit. Love is love, no matter what age you are . . . within reason.” He looked at me with a serious expression, eyes narrowed. “If you want me to back off, I will. I don't want to make you uncomfortable.”

I shook my head and kissed him hard, lingering there for a moment. “I wouldn't dream of pushing you away. Lily loves you so much. You're so good to her, and I . . .” I didn't want to rush into things, but I felt like I was really falling for him.

“Me too,” he whispered knowingly. “Let's go clean up, okay?”

I followed him out of bed and across the room to the bathroom. He started the water while I waited, but the persistent nagging thought that he was a player needled at my conscience. Ben had to be wrong. There was no way Owen would get a little girl so excited about him and then leave and dump me, only to break her heart. I just couldn't see it as part of his nature. It was the one reason I was able to move on from Wyatt so quickly. He'd disliked Lily so much, my heart just never got attached to him the same way.

Owen climbed into the shower and I followed him. Without a word, he positioned me beneath the flow of water, the perfect temperature. When my hair was wet, he washed it for me, carefully rinsing so no soap got in my eyes. His touch was like magic, soothing away my worries. It felt natural with him, like we'd known each other for years, not just a few weeks. I never wanted it to end.

Owen

Wednesday mornings meant scheduling, and I was seated behind my computer doing just that when the phone rang. I didn't recognize the number, so I let it go to voicemail. If it was work, they'd have paged me or called me on my office phone. I pecked away at the keys, assigning surgeries to different residents and doctors, filling out the entire roster of physicians and perioperatives for each scheduled surgery. It was tricky organizing each operating theater and making sure everyone's schedules aligned, but I'd done it for many years now.

My phone rang again, the same number trying to call me. I stared at it wondering who it could be, but it was against hospital policy to take or make personal calls while on the clock. I was a stickler for rules, so again I ignored it. But when the same number called again for the third time, I figured it must be important. I picked it up and swiped to answer.

"Hello, Dr. Thorpe speaking."

"Dr. Thorpe, this is Sergeant Baker from Hudson Valley Police Department." The minute he introduced himself, my heart sank. The police don't call unless something is wrong, and I knew something was very wrong. "Sir, we have your son, Wyatt, here."

I cleared my throat, not meaning to cut him off, and he stopped talking, so I asked, "Is he okay?" My first thought as a

father was not what he did or why he was there. I was only concerned with his wellbeing.

“Yes, sir, he’s just fine. He’s very intoxicated and belligerent, but he is okay. We would like you to come to the station and pick him up. He’s been charged with driving under the influence of alcohol, along with a few other moving violations. He cannot drive himself home, though we can let him sober up a bit before you come get him if you’d like.”

The officer was polite and professional, though that didn’t make me any less frustrated with the situation. I closed my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose. Now that I knew Wyatt was okay, I found myself being very angry with him. His behavior was irresponsible and reckless. And at ten a.m., he should have been at work, not drinking and driving.

“I’ll be there soon,” I told the officer. I hung up and locked my phone, but I didn’t get up right away. I was too angry. Wyatt had not only endangered his own life, but he had put other people in danger too. I had taught him better than that. I had a mind to leave him at the station until he was well and truly sober so he was forced to deal with the fact that he had made a huge mistake. But I felt bad for how he was likely treating the officers, and I didn’t want his mouth to get him into any more trouble.

I stood, collecting my keys, wallet, and phone, and made my way toward the elevator, stewing. I’d never forgive myself if he had hurt someone. I took personal responsibility for some of his mental health issues, though I knew a lot of them were to do with his mother. At this point, however, given the way he and Harper broke up, his bad behavior could be attributed to that. And for that I felt fully responsible.

My car was in sight as I rounded the corner of the parking garage and almost ran right into Harper. She was looking down into her purse, not watching where she was going, and I startled her.

“Whoa! Owen . . .” She chuckled and smiled at me. “I didn’t see you.” My scowl must have upset her because she

backtracked and said, “I’m sorry. We’re at work. I should have said Dr. Thorpe.”

I shook my head. “No, it’s okay. Owen is fine no matter where we are.” I tried to force a smile and let my shoulders relax, but I couldn’t. I was too angry. Harper’s expression fell, her eyebrows drawing together in the center.

“What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

My heart clenched. I just wanted to get to the station and pick Wyatt up and get this over with. I knew she was only concerned, not being nosy, but if I told her about Wyatt’s arrest, she’d blame herself. I didn’t want that for her. I knew his struggle with alcohol was his own fault for not getting the help he needed, though I did still blame myself.

“Just a little stressed this morning. I have to run out to deal with a few things, that’s all.” I took a deep breath and let the tension out of my shoulders. “Everything is fine.” I didn’t want Harper going into her shift thinking about Wyatt. It would throw her day off and put her in a bad mood, and I wanted her to have a good day. A twinge of guilt prickled my skin, but it was better this way. I should carry the guilt, not her.

My fake smile must have been convincing enough, or she didn’t want to press the issue. She said, “Well, I was thinking we could spend some time together, maybe have dinner?”

I never knew my heart could feel so happy and so upset at the same time. I stood there speechless for a moment as Harper waited for a response. She was initiating, and that was a great thing, but I couldn’t stand here and revel in the moment.

“I think that sounds like a terrific idea. How about Saturday evening?” I took a step toward her, and she moved toward me too. I reached for her, slipping my arm around her and pulling her toward me. She didn’t resist.

“I like that,” she whispered, smiling. I kissed her forehead.

“Think you can get a sitter for all night?”

She looked up at me again, and I saw a hint of desire in her eyes mingled with something else. “What do you have in

mind?”

“Not sure yet, but I want it to be special. It’s okay if you’d rather do something with Lily. I love spending time with her.” I didn’t want her to think for a moment that I was pushing Lily away. I knew Wyatt had done that, and I knew it had been a source of contention between them.

“Sure, I think Mom might do it.” She laced her fingers with mine.

“Okay, I really have to run. I hope you have a great day. Call me tonight, okay? We can make plans.”

Harper stepped toward me with her chin turned upward, and I brushed my lips over hers. “I will. Please be safe.” She turned and watched as I walked toward my car, but by the time I got there and had my door open, she was gone. I paused for a moment, smiling to myself. I felt strongly conflicted knowing I was going to pick my son up for his second DUI while I stood in the parking garage kissing his ex-girlfriend. That thought took some of the wind out of my sails.

I climbed into the car and started it up. The radio was playing a love song, which only pricked my guilty conscience, so rather than enjoying it and thinking of Harper, I turned it off. I had to put her out of my mind or I wouldn’t deal with Wyatt correctly. At his age, he should know better, and I should not be dealing with this.

The officer wasn’t joking when he said Wyatt was being belligerent. The minute I walked in the front door of the station, I heard him shouting. I slogged over to the front desk and slid my driver’s license through the tiny window to the officer seated there. She looked at it once and then up at me.

“Thank God you’re here. Wyatt is in the back, but I’m sure you can hear him. He’s been doing this since he was picked up. His car is in impound, and you’ll have to pay to have that let out, but I suggest signing this boy up for rehab.” She slid the license back to me through the window, then a slip of paper with an X where I needed to sign my name. I picked up a pen lying there on the counter and scrawled my signature,

then slid the paper back. A door to my right clicked then buzzed, and she pointed. “You can enter there.”

“Thank you,” I told her, moving toward the door. An officer on the other side of the door used a metal detector wand to scan my body then pointed down the hallway.

“Third door on the left. He’s with Officer Holmes.” The man scowled at me, his thick eyebrows so close they looked like they touched. I could only imagine the horrors he’d been through because of my son this morning. I nodded at him and walked toward the door.

When I opened the door indicated by the man at the end of the hallway, Wyatt looked up at me with anger in his eyes. They were hooded and heavy. He’d drunk a lot. I could tell it just looking at him, though when he spoke it was evidenced in his slurred speech, too.

“Oh, good, you got my father to come get me like I’m a naughty little boy.” He sat up, though he leaned to one side.

“Mr. Thorpe, thank you for coming.” The officer on the other side of the steel table glowered at Wyatt. “I was just discussing with your son the possibility of going to rehab to reduce the punishment for this offense. He didn’t damage any property or hurt anyone, so the judge will be lenient if he does the program and sticks to it.”

I shut the door and stood there. There were no other chairs, so I hovered. Rehab was a good idea for Wyatt if he stuck to it. His previous attempts had all been failures, though, because he either left early or didn’t follow the program when he got out.

“I think that sounds like something that should happen. What do you think, Wyatt?”

His head swayed slowly to look up at me. “Whatever gets me out of here fastest. Just sign me up.” His head bobbed. He was ready to pass out.

“All you have to do is sign this paperwork indicating that you will go to rehab. I’ve already called the facility, and they are waiting on you.”

The officer sat with the paperwork on the table between the two of them and a pen at the ready. Wyatt eyed it and shook his head, scowling. He took the pen and signed it, then shoved the paper back toward the man and said, "Can I go now?"

The officer turned to me. "They're expecting him any time. The address is on the paperwork you'll receive as you exit." He stood and sighed. "Thanks for coming on short notice."

I reached out and shook his hand. "It's okay. Just wish we didn't have to do this."

"What the hell do you care?" Wyatt slurred. "You only came because you feel guilty for stealing my girlfriend." He stood on wobbly legs and staggered to the door. "Let's leave this bacon shop before they start serving donuts."

I closed my eyes briefly, trying to contain my anger. His behavior was deeply disrespectful, and I felt ashamed. I followed him, avoiding eye contact with the officer in the room. He had to know I hadn't taught Wyatt to be this way and that it was just the alcohol. We checked out, and I collected the paperwork, then drove him straight to the rehab center on the other side of town. It was conveniently located within the hospital's behavioral health wing, but that brought more shame and embarrassment because people I knew worked here. Wyatt passed out on the way, so I had to rouse him from a heavy slumber. When he woke, he acted confused.

"What are we doing here? Take me home."

"Wyatt, you signed papers stating you were going to do rehab. We're at the rehab facility now. I'll bring you a few things later this afternoon when I finish my shift." I climbed out of the car and walked to his side. As I did, a few male nurses came out to greet me. As the officer had said, they were waiting. I was glad they sent strong men, not dainty women. Wyatt could be a handful.

I opened his door and forced him to get out, lifting his alcohol-sodden body out and to a standing position. He jerked

away from me, angry, so I stepped back and handed the paperwork to the man next to me.

“He’s going to be a handful until he’s sober. I’m sorry about that.” The man turned to me and shrugged.

“It’s okay. We see this a lot. I’m glad he decided to sign himself in. We’ll get him the help he needs. Your information should all be on this paperwork already, based on what the guys at the station told us. You’re Thorpe, right?” He thumbed through the first few pages.

“Yeah, that’s Wyatt. He’s been here before, so you’ll have a file on him. I hope it sticks this time. He’s really struggling.” I watched as one of the men led Wyatt toward the doors. He didn’t look back. He just disappeared into the building, and I was left there, feeling guilty.

“It’s not your fault. Men sometimes struggle with their emotions and don’t know how to express what they’re feeling. Leave it to us to help him. Maybe you could sit in on some of the sessions if you feel it’s needed.” He tucked the paperwork under his arm and waited for my response.

“I’m not sure Wyatt would want that. There are some deeper family issues we need to work out. Maybe when he gets sober for a few weeks, we can discuss some family counseling.” I sighed, ready to do just about anything I could to help him.

“We’ll keep you updated. Nothing you can do here anymore today. Go on back to life. It will be alright.”

As I moved to my door, the man walked into the building, but all I could do for several long minutes was sit there. Helen had done such a number on Wyatt that he never got over it. How could a mother do that to their own child? I was so upset with her, but part of that upset was also directed at myself. Despite knowing Harper had broken up with Wyatt before she came into my room that night, I still felt overwhelming guilt. I hadn’t purposefully tried to steal her away from him, but he would never see it as anything other than that, even when he was sober and we explained what a horrible person he was to her.

It made me feel even more guilty, which made me regret making plans to take Harper away for a night. What the heck was I even doing?

Harper

Lily was fussy, a sure sign that she'd sleep well for Mom tonight, and when I heard the knock on the door, I knew Mom was here to babysit. I opened the door, smiling, and let her in. "Hey, Mom. Lily's been waiting for her Nana." As she walked past me, I caught a whiff of her flowery perfume and the scent of freshly baked cookies that always seemed to follow her around.

"How's my little pumpkin?" Mom cooed as she scooped Lily into her arms. Lily giggled and hugged her tightly, nuzzling her face into Mom's neck. At least she was more pleasant with her Nana than she'd been with me all evening.

"She's good. Just a little fussy tonight," I said. "Thanks so much for coming over." Mom didn't always babysit, but I was grateful for the times she did. She loved spending time with Lily, and Lily loved her to death.

"Of course, honey. It's what grandmas are for," Mom said with a smile. She bounced Lily on her hip and dived into a conversation about Lily's new doll. I had a sinking suspicion Mom had purchased more doll clothing for her despite my direct order to not buy her any more toys. It was a grandmother's right to spoil her, though. At least that was her protest.

As I started to gather my things to leave, I heard Mom clear her throat behind me. I turned to see her with eyebrows raised and a half-smirk on her face. "I do have to ask about

this new man of yours,” she said with a chipper voice. “You didn’t tell me much about him earlier.”

And there it was. I paused for a moment, wondering how much I should reveal. Mom could be judgmental sometimes, especially when it came to age, and if she knew Owen was Wyatt’s father, she’d have things to say about that too.

“He’s wonderful,” I finally said. “His name is Owen. He’s chief of surgery at the hospital.” That should have been enough information, but instead of being placated, she narrowed her eyes at me.

“Chief of surgery? That’s a position you get after years of having your own practice. Exactly how old is this man, Harper?” Her skeptical tone and the look of concern on her face took the wind out of my sails. I had enough insecurities about things between me and Owen. I really didn’t need her to judge me too. I tried to present a calm front.

“He’s 45 years old.”

There was a long pause before Mom spoke again. She kissed Lily’s cheek and set her on the floor. Lily toddled off to find some toy or book, and I stood in Mom’s crosshairs, just waiting for the hit.

“Harper, that’s . . . quite a bit older than you, isn’t it?” she asked cautiously. I could hear the concern in her voice and knew she was only trying to protect me. It was her job, after all, to be a mother and guide me, even when I didn’t agree with her. That made me want to listen to her, but at the same time, I also felt myself getting defensive. Why did age have to matter so much?

“Mom, age is just a number,” I said firmly. “Owen is kind, caring, and he makes me happy. That’s all that matters.”

Mom looked at me doubtfully for a moment before nodding slowly. I noticed the concern hadn’t left her eyes, but maybe she just didn’t want to have a knock-down, drag-out in front of Lily. My shoulders sank, and I hung my purse on my shoulder.

“Well, as long as he treats you well,” she said with a sigh. “I just worry about you, Harper. Men like to prey on beautiful women, and you have so much to lose.” She walked toward me, cupping my cheek. I felt frustrated with her and comforted at the same time. I knew my mother loved me, and there was nothing she wouldn’t do for me. It was the only way I made it through moments where we didn’t see eye to eye.

As I stepped out the door, I breathed in the cool night air and tried to shake off the conversation I’d just had with my mom. Despite her best intentions, her words had only fueled my anxiety about my relationship with Owen. Sure, he was older than me, but it didn’t mean he was trying to take advantage of me. Plus, I knew deep down that Mom just wanted to make sure I wasn’t making a mistake. The last thing she wanted was for me to get hurt again.

Lost in thought, I almost didn’t notice Owen’s car parked at the curb. He was leaning against it, looking incredible in those jeans. His eyes crinkled at the corners when he saw me, and he pushed himself off the car to greet me.

“Harper,” he said softly, holding out his arms. I melted into his embrace, savoring the warmth of his body against mine. For a moment, all my worries and fears melted away. “How was your evening?”

“It was good,” I said, pulling back to look up at him. “Mom came over to babysit Lily.”

Owen nodded, his expression turning serious. “And how are things with your mom? She’s not giving you a hard time, is she?” He lifted my bag into the car and stepped back.

I sighed and shook my head. “She’s just . . . worried, I guess.” I hadn’t told Mom how bad the breakup was between me and Wyatt, but Owen probably thought I’d told her everything.

“Worried about what?” he asked gently.

I hesitated before blurting out what was on my mind. “She’s worried that you’re too old for me.”

Owen's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "You told her?" I shrugged, and he sighed. "Well, we can't have her worrying." He opened the car door and reached in, and when he straightened, he held a bouquet of flowers.

"What are you doing?" I stood back as he shut the door and used his remote to lock it. The bouquet was beautiful. He had picked gorgeous roses and tulips, two of my favorite flowers. They were arranged nicely with greenery and baby's breath.

"Well, you're going to introduce me to your mother, and I'm going to do what a real gentleman should do." He held his arm out to me and nodded at the building. "Shall we?"

I smiled, realizing he was serious. "Alright." I chuckled and followed his lead. When I opened the door to my apartment, Mom was already dressing Lily's doll in new clothes for her. I rolled my eyes and smiled as she looked up at me with a guilty expression. "Mom, this is Owen. He wanted to meet you."

Mom carefully handed the doll to Lily, who was all too eager to get her toy so she didn't even look up and see Owen. I wished she would have, because then Mom would have seen how amazing he was with her. Instead, Lily ran off to her bedroom and Mom walked over to us. Owen handed her the flowers and smiled.

"So nice to meet you, Mrs. Black. Harper has said so many nice things about you."

Mom took the flowers, glancing at me skeptically. "It's Miriam." She smelled them and offered Owen a stern expression. "So you're the doctor she's dating?"

He chuckled. "I am, I suppose. I thought it would be nice to introduce myself."

"What do you want with her? Are you one of those rich men who use women and throw them away when you're finished with them?"

"Mom!" I hissed, but Owen's smile never faded.

“No, ma’am, I like your daughter very much. She is intelligent and beautiful, and I want to see if we have a future together.”

“And what about Lily?” Mom’s eyes narrowed at him, but I knew Owen had this one in the bag. He loved Lily.

“She is amazing, don’t you think? So smart and funny. She’s just like her mother.”

Mom’s expression softened, and she smelled the flowers again. “You two should be off. Lily and I have plans.”

I couldn’t hide the grin as I leaned in and kissed her on the cheek. “Goodnight, Mom. I’ll call you first thing in the morning.” Mom gave me a hug, and Owen and I left, this time with a little skip in my step.

“Moms love me, what can I say?” he asked, chuckling.

“You are such a charmer. I’ve never seen her back down so quickly.” I hooked my arm around his and let him lead me to the car. When we got to the hotel, I was breathless. He had booked the most expensive place in town, and he’d already gotten us checked in earlier in the day.

Owen opened the door to the room, and the fragrance of roses wafted out. I stepped in, him trailing behind me with my bag, and I was wowed. He had covered every surface in the room with rose petals. Vases of the same sat on multiple surfaces, and there were candles burning.

“God, this is incredible,” I said, spinning around to smile at him, and he caught me in his arms and held me to his chest.

“No, you’re incredible,” he said, firmly kissing me. I heard the door shut behind him and let myself be ravished. As Owen’s lips devoured mine, I felt a shiver run through my body. The softness of his lips and the taste of his tongue made me want him even more. My hands found their way to his hair, and I gripped it tightly, pulling him closer. His hands roamed over my body, tracing the curves of my hips and waist. I could feel the heat between us building, and it was almost suffocating.

With one swift movement, Owen lifted me off the ground, and my legs wrapped around his waist as he carried me to the bed. He gently laid me down on the soft rose petals, and I watched as he slowly undressed himself. My breath caught in my throat as I took in the sight of him before me. He was beautiful, every inch of him.

As he climbed on top of me, his lips found their way to my neck, and he began to nibble and suck on my skin. The pleasure was almost unbearable, and I moaned softly, urging him on. His hand slid down to the hem of my dress, and he tugged it upward until it bunched up around my waist. With expert fingers, he loosened the clasp of my bra and set my breasts free.

His mouth descended upon them, suckling each nipple until they were swollen and sensitive. My hands clawed at his back as I writhed beneath him, wanting more.

As he reached the hem of my dress, he looked up at me with an intense gaze that left me breathless. Slowly, he began to pull down the fabric, revealing inch by inch of my body to his hungry eyes. I felt exposed and vulnerable under his gaze, but there was also a sense of excitement that made my heart race.

Finally, the dress slipped off completely, and Owen took in the sight before him. I was completely naked, except for a few rose petals that had stuck to my skin. He stared at me for a moment longer before leaning down to kiss me once again. I couldn't wait to get him inside me.

Owen

Harper looked gorgeous spread out on the bed in front of me. I hadn't intended to jump right into sex tonight, but I couldn't help myself. The dress she wore, and having her alone for the first time, made me lose control. She turned over, probably to crawl up farther on the bed, and I pinned her down, holding her hips against the bed. "God, you look incredible," I whispered, and she stilled. I leaned in to press a kiss to the soft skin at the base of her neck, relishing the shiver that ran through her. Her hands fisted in the sheets, arching her back toward me as I trailed kisses down her spine.

She moaned softly as I reached the curve of her hips, teeth grazing over the fabric of her panties. She was already damp, and the scent of her arousal was intoxicating. I hooked my fingers into the waistband, pulling them down slowly as I kissed my way back up her body.

She turned as the fabric came free of her body and spread her legs to allow me to nestle into her. When my kisses reached her breasts, I took one into my mouth, sucking gently as my hand played with the other. Harper's fingers tangled in my hair as she squirmed beneath me, hips lifting off the bed.

"Please," she whispered, breathless and needy.

I grinned against her skin before making my way back down her body. When I reached her thighs, I spread them wider, taking in the sight of her exposed center. Harper's light hair was splayed out on the sheets, her legs spread open, her

pussy glistening with arousal. Her chest rose and fell with each breath, nipples taut. Her arousal was already pooling on her thighs by the time I dragged my tongue across her thigh to her entrance.

Without warning, I plunged my tongue inside her, relishing in her taste. Harper's hips bucked beneath me as I flicked my tongue over her clit, driving her wild with pleasure. Her moans were deep and throaty and a little desperate, filling the room. I smiled against her skin and flicked my tongue over her entrance again, dipping inside momentarily before licking up the length of her wetness, giving a final flick to her clit.

Her hands tightened in my hair as she moaned with need, hips grinding against my face. I wanted more of her. I wanted to hear more of these sounds, feel more of this heat, cherish more of this moment with her.

My tongue searched her, tasting her sticky fluids, and she panted as I sucked her clit, sliding two fingers inside her. She was so wet and warm around my fingers, and I growled against her skin. Her hips lifted farther from the bed, silently pleading for more. I slid one of my hands back, rubbing circles into the silky smooth skin of her inner thigh before dipping a finger lower to press against her tight opening. Harper stiffened beneath me a moment.

"Relax," I coaxed, kissing my way back up her body to murmur in her ear. "Just breathe." And then I dived back down, not stopping until I touched the tip of my tongue to her opening. She gasped and clenched beneath it.

Harper's hands were flat against the mattress as she continued rocking against me as her hips moved with my mouth. Her moans grew more frantic as I pushed my finger into her, slowly thrusting with my other hand into her pussy.

"God, Owen," she gasped. I watched across the soft peaks of her breasts as she looked down at me, eyes wide open. "I'm going to come," she panted.

I continued thrusting inside her and found her G-spot instantly. She arched her back and let out a deep groan as orgasm overtook her, pleasure flooding through her. I gave two

more long, slow licks before crawling up Harper's body and pressing our lips together as Harper shook from aftershocks. She weaved her fingers through my hair as I hovered over her.

I carefully rubbed the head of my cock against her entrance, teasing her before pushing inside her. She gasped against me, fingers digging into my back as I stilled, waiting for her to stop tensing. Her breath came in short gasps as she tried to relax herself, trembling slightly under me. "Owen," she breathed. Slowly, I slid almost all the way out before thrusting back in. Her nails scratched at my skin as she moaned, arching beneath me and pushing against me pleadingly for more.

She was soaked and clenching around me just from the feeling of coming down from that high. I groaned against her neck even though there was no sound from me except for a faint hitch in my breath when I pulled out again, this time thrusting into her harder. Her walls clamped around me, seeming to squeeze with each movement of our bodies.

Her hips rose to meet mine, urging me on as she moaned into my shoulder, hands twining with mine over either side of her head. "God," I whispered roughly against her neck. I rose up, staring into her eyes that pleaded with me.

"Oh, God, you're so huge," she moaned and then whimpered as I thrust again into her pool.

"You're so tight," I growled, still thrusting. I let go of one of her hands, reaching between our bodies to touch her clit. "Where is the condom?" I asked her, teasing her. I knew if I went much longer, I'd end up blowing my load, and we hadn't spoken about safety, not even after having sex a few times. Neither of us wanted an accident, though, so I should have come prepared, but I had been so preoccupied with Wyatt I hadn't even thought of it.

"I thought you brought it . . ." she mumbled, her words trailing off. She was on the edge again. I could hear it in her voice.

I slowed my movements, restraining myself, and she whimpered. "Hold on," I said, sliding out of her. I reached for

my jeans and took my wallet out. At one point, I had a condom stashed in here. As I sorted through the bills and photos I found it, tucked behind my driver's license. When I pulled it out, I noticed the wrapper was faded, but Harper's body shuddered.

"God, put it on. I need you in me." She reached for me, and I gave the foil wrapper one last look before I ripped it open with my teeth and pulled it out. She watched as I rolled it on, and it seemed fine.

I crawled back between her legs and slid into her, this time without the hiss of surprise. She was eager for me, massaging her clit as soon as I began thrusting. Her body clenched around me hard, orgasm racking her again.

"Oh, God," she moaned, her head thrown back. I arched over her, kissing her neck and thrusting slowly, savoring every second of this. My heart raced as I moved inside her, teasing her clit with my thumb one more time. She clung to me tightly when the aftershocks of orgasm finally receded, panting heavily into my ear as she pressed against my face.

I swallowed thickly, my hand sliding up her body to cup her breast. My mouth covered hers, fingers tangling into her hair. Her legs wrapped around me, squeezing with each thrust.

My mind was racing, and everything in me felt like it was boiling. The feeling rushing through me made me feel lighter than air, spreading through me like wildfire. Her lips found mine, and we kissed, deeply and passionately as we moved together. Harper moaned when I reached down again to slide my thumb across her nipple and then down her stomach toward her clit again. The bed squeaked beneath us as I sped up my movements, leaning down and taking one of her nipples between my teeth.

The rhythm built up again until finally, I couldn't take it anymore. A few hard thrusts later, I picked up speed, hammering into Harper's warm core until I felt hot sparks tingling from deep within me, stars swirling behind my tightly closed eyelids. Harper's nails scratched at my arms as she

choked on a scream to push herself over the edge for the third time.

“Still good?” I gasped.

She nodded, blinking open her eyes to look up at me. She was in bliss. “Oh, God,” she whispered, reaching up to kiss me.

My body snapped, release hitting me as I filled that sleeve with my seed, and then I felt it give way, snapping over my girth. Harper’s eyes shot open, and I grunted, trying to pull out, but it was too late. My cum shot into her, flooding her and dribbling out as I pulled away. The condom had split down the side, rolling back to expose my cock.

“Oh, God, I’m so sorry.” I pulled her up, still in mid-orgasm, and forced her to stand to her feet, but she started laughing. She bent over, the spasms in her body still making her twitch. I wasn’t laughing, but her laughter was infectious. “A shower?” I asked, pulling her toward the bathroom, but she leaned on her knees.

“Ah, God, that was amazing,” she said, breathless. She stood and pulled me against her body. “Just hold me.”

Confused, I climbed back into bed with her, folding the blankets back so we could cover up. She snuggled against my chest and kissed my sweat-slicked skin. “I’m really sorry, Harper. I didn’t know that would happen.”

“Hey, it was an accident. Okay?” She sighed and pressed her hand to my chest, feeling my heart pounding. I was anxious, but that was a good workout too. “Look, I have PCOS so my hormones are really off. It’s not really likely that I’ll get pregnant, but I like to try to prevent it. If you’re worried about it, I want you to know I’m clean.”

“Yeah, me too . . .” I kissed her forehead, also damp with sweat, but I couldn’t help but feel badly. As a man, I should have known better and taken precautions. I didn’t want her to think I did that on purpose. “I’m really sorry, though. I think that ruins our night.”

“Nah, I have other holes,” she said seductively, licking her lips. It made me grin just thinking of what her mouth could do to my dick if her pussy was so amazing. “Just hold me for now, okay?”

She curled into my chest again, and I held her, content. I knew I was totally in love with her, and I hoped she was feeling the same about me. Her calmness about the mishap only encouraged me further. She was perfect in my eyes, no flaws at all. I wanted to have her by my side every day for the rest of my life, and I wanted to tell her that.

“Harper, I have something to ask you.”

“Yeah?” She pulled away and looked up at me, but before I could say anything else, my phone rang.

“Hold on . . .” I slipped out of bed, again rifling through my jeans pockets to pull out the offending noise. I saw the number on the caller ID and my heart sank. “I’ll be back in a second, okay?” I stood and walked to the bathroom, leaving her there looking angelic. She nodded and pulled the blankets up around her body.

Once in the bathroom where I hoped she couldn’t hear me, I answered the phone. “Dr. Thorpe here.”

“Dr. Thorpe, this is Tina Harshbarger at Hudson Behavioral Health Center.”

“Yeah, Tina, what can I do for you?” I found my chest growing tight just thinking about what could have happened.

“I am calling because Wyatt has checked himself out. Well, not fully checked himself out. He demanded to be signed out against medical advice, then while we were getting the paperwork together, he just left. Sir, he isn’t doing so well. When he left, of course, he was sober, but I’m not sure where he went.”

The line crackled with tension, and I took a few deep breaths to calm myself. If Wyatt left this soon, only days out, it meant he was likely at a liquor store or bar already. That meant I had to go him, find where he was, and take him back.

“Thank you for calling me. I’ll handle this. I’m going to try to bring him back. Is that okay?”

“Yes, sir. More than okay.”

“Okay, thanks, Tina. I’ll be in touch.” I hung up the phone and stared at myself in the mirror. Not for a second had I thought that this would be a problem tonight, but I knew I had to deal with it. And I knew Harper would be disappointed. I couldn’t believe Wyatt would be this way, especially after getting sober for a few days. It angered me as much as it worried me.

When I let myself out of the bathroom, Harper was sitting up, scrolling on her phone. She smiled at me and tossed the blankets back. “Ready for round two?” she asked. “Remember, I have a few more holes to service.” Her eyes sparkled with mischief, and I felt awful.

“I have to go to the hospital.” It wasn’t a lie. The recovery center was at the hospital. I just had to find Wyatt first and then take him back.

“Oh, no, what happened?”

I dropped my phone onto the bed and picked up my clothes, dressing quickly. “Just a patient that needs my attention. I hope this doesn’t take too long. Maybe you should just nap a bit. I can wake you when I come back.”

Her face fell, sadness crossing her features. “Yeah, okay. I understand.”

I knew she did. She was incredible and would make an incredible wife—if only I weren’t lying to her. I kissed her forehead and said goodbye, escaping as quickly as I could so I didn’t have to answer any more questions. I felt guilty enough as it was, and I was really ready to be done with this entire situation with Wyatt.

Harper

I woke up alone, Owen's side of the bed cold. My phone lay on the pillow next to my head, almost dead. I dozed off shortly after he left, expecting him to come back, but at now six a.m., he was still not here. Feeling sad, I picked up my phone to check if he had messaged. I got one message around midnight telling me it was taking longer than he thought, but nothing since. My heart fell, disappointment creeping in. The entire night hadn't gone as planned.

Forcing myself out of bed, I headed for the bathroom and relieved my bladder, then started the shower. I climbed in and let the steamy water sluice over my body, wishing Owen were there. I had an incredible sex dream about him, and I wanted to tell him. I also wanted to be really naughty with him, and just washing myself tempted me to play. My clit was sensitive, engorged from the arousal the dream brought on. I touched lightly, rinsing after sudsing up with soap, but I knew how incredible Owen could make me feel. I didn't want to ruin that if he came back this morning and wanted me.

So after washing up, I turned the water off and got out. He hadn't returned when I dried off, so I climbed back into bed and picked up my phone. I texted Mom to see how Lily was doing.

Harper 615 AM Good morning. Just woke up. How's Lily?

I didn't actually expect a response from her this early, but she responded quickly, which wasn't a good sign.

Miriam 616 AM I'm doing okay here, but Lily is fussy. She didn't sleep well. I think she's laying down again finally, but she may be coming down with something.

Harper 617 AM I'm sorry. Okay, I'll try not to be out late. Fever medicine is in the medicine cabinet in the bathroom.

Mom didn't respond after that, and my phone was almost dead, so I grabbed the charger and plugged it in, then lay down to wait for Owen. As I lay there, watching the little battery icon on my phone gradually fill up, I couldn't help but think about what my mother had said. Was she right? Was Owen just using me for his amusement? Was I just another one of his conquests? Would he throw me away like a used tissue once he had his fill? The thought filled me with a sickening sense of dread.

But then I pictured Owen's handsome face, the way his eyes lit up when he smiled, and all the love he had showered me with. Maybe my mother and Ben were just being overly cautious? Maybe they didn't understand how a man like Owen could truly care about me.

I lay there, and my mind kept wandering to Owen. Despite the warnings from my mother and Ben, I couldn't help but feel drawn to him. The way he looked at me with those piercing blue eyes, the way he touched me with such tenderness and passion, it was all so intoxicating. But was it enough? Was it worth the risk of getting hurt? Was he really just another one of those rich, powerful men who used women like disposable playthings? Or was he different? I couldn't help but wonder.

I shook my head, trying to dispel the doubts that were creeping in. I couldn't let myself get distracted. I needed to focus on the present. I had a tendency to obsess and worry myself for no reason, so I used my grounding technique, looking around the hotel room. I noticed the soft lavender walls, the plush white comforter on the bed, and the vintage paintings adorning the walls. It was a beautiful room, and it helped to calm my racing thoughts. As I lay there, I began to drift off into a light sleep.

Suddenly, the door to my hotel room creaked open. I bolted upright, startled awake. But then Owen's familiar face came into view and all my worries evaporated. He closed the door behind him, tossed his bag onto the floor, and walked toward me. He had a scowl on his face, which made me instantly want to race to him and help him relax.

"Hey," I said, yawning. I sat up, stretching my arms wide. The sheet lingered across my chest, but he didn't seem to notice I was even there. He slumped onto the bed and sat there with his shoulders hunched. "Are you okay?" I crawled over to him, leaving the blankets behind.

Owen's shoulders shrugged, and he ran a hand through his salt and pepper hair. "Rough night," he mumbled. My heart went out to him. I knew his position was important, but I hadn't realized that he still had nights like this. I thought the surgeons handled emergencies at this point, but I'd never been an administrator.

"I'm so sorry, Owen." I put a leg on either side of him and slid up behind him. Laying my head on his back, I hugged him from behind. His heart was pounding. He'd probably had coffee or energy drinks just to stay awake. At his age, it was probably difficult. Even at twenty-nine, I struggled sometimes to stay up past ten p.m.

He patted my hand and took a deep breath. "I'm spent. I've gotten no sleep and I am feeling it."

I kissed his back then decided to rub his back. Rising up on my knees, I began massaging the tight muscles of his neck and shoulders. He squirmed and lifted one shoulder, then the other, and I got the point that maybe he didn't want a back rub. He hadn't even looked at me to see that I was naked yet, but maybe he would like to have sex. The release of hormones always helped me calm down. So I leaned on him, pressing my breasts against his back, and kissed his neck.

"Maybe we can do something to help you relax, then you can nap before we have to check out." I nibbled on his ear as I reached for his crotch. He sighed hard when I slid my fingers into the waistband of his trousers and found his dick, limp and

squishy. For a moment, he allowed me to stroke him, though it was difficult with his pants buttoned. “Do you think this might help?” I asked him, nipping at his neck. He turned his torso slightly, giving me a better angle to kiss him, and our lips brushed. He unbuttoned his slacks, and I pulled his cock out, but he wasn’t getting hard.

“Let me help you,” I whispered, pushing him backward. He lay down on the bed, feet still on the floor, and I stroked him as he examined my body. His eyes drank me in, one of his hands reaching for one of my tits, but still, nothing. After nearly ten minutes of foreplay, touching, and soft whispers, he scowled.

“Look, this isn’t working. I’m sorry. It’s been a really bad night, and I’m just not into it.” He sat up, and I sat back on the bed, covering myself with the sheet. “I’m sorry,” he mumbled before disappearing into the bathroom.

I was heartbroken to see the state that Owen was in, the look on his face. I wanted to comfort him, but at the same time, my own insecurity and doubts crept in. What had caused this change in him? Was he regretting our relationship? Leaving him alone felt like the wrong decision, so I’d wait for him to come out and ask him to take me home.

He turned on the shower, and I couldn’t help but let my mind wander even further. What if he was meeting someone else? What if I was only one of his mistresses like my mother said? My chest tightened, and I could barely find the strength to get up and go over to the bathroom door. “Owen,” I called out softly, trying to gauge whether he was okay with me checking on him. There was no response. I slowly returned to the bed with tears streaming down my face. The ideas swimming around my head overwhelmed me. He couldn’t get hard after being gone all night. Either it was too stressful of a night or he was with another woman . . . and Ben was right.

I dressed and packed my things up while he showered, and I was ready to go when he walked out of the bathroom in only a towel. On any other day, I’d have been very aroused by that, but this morning, after the night I had, I just wanted to go home.

“Something wrong?” he asked, grabbing his bag. He pulled clothes out of it and laid them over the bed.

“Just need to get home. Lily isn’t feeling well.” That wasn’t the reason I wanted to go home, but I didn’t dare ask him if he’d been with another woman. Given the abuse I’d suffered with Wyatt, I was afraid. Owen had never even raised his voice at me or in my presence, so I didn’t think he’d be physical with me, but if he was, I’d be in danger. He was twice the size of Wyatt.

“Oh, gosh, I’m sorry. I should have been back earlier.” He scowled again, which made me feel like he was upset with me for saying Lily was sick. It was like he thought I was trying to leave him, which was sort of true because of my fear, but not at all what I wanted to feel.

He was curt with me as he packed up and drove me across town, not at all like himself. When I asked him what happened overnight, he snapped at me and told me everything was fine, so I didn’t ask again. But I didn’t invite him in, either. He kissed me goodbye in the car, and I lugged my suitcase up to the apartment alone. He didn’t even seem to want to help, which only reminded me more of Wyatt. I wondered how much of Wyatt’s behavior had been taught to him by Owen.

“Oh, Harper, how was your night?” Mom chirped as I walked in.

“It was magical,” I told her, forcing a smile. Because it was, for all of forty minutes while we had incredible sex—before Owen deserted me.

“Lily is resting now, but her fever is quite high. I gave her medicine, but you should schedule an appointment.” Mom stood, grabbing her sweater. “I need to run. Carmen called, and she wants to meet for coffee.” Mom kissed me goodbye on the cheek and vanished, which was okay with me. I was in no mood for company, anyway.

I flopped onto the couch, regretting the day I’d met Owen. It seemed to me that Ben and Mom might have been right, or if they weren’t, Owen had other demons he was fighting. I had

no interest in another man with demons like Wyatt's. Maybe I should just call it now.

Owen

I drove home from dropping Harper off, and I felt horrible. I could see she was trying, but fatigue, coupled with outright anger toward Wyatt, had made me irritable and snappy. I never wanted to treat her like that, but I couldn't get out of my head. The only thing on my mind was getting home to make sure Wyatt didn't do something stupid or leave. Even Harper's attempts at helping me relax hadn't helped, and the fact that I couldn't get it up only added to my self-loathing. So when I pulled into the drive and saw the lights on in my office, I knew Wyatt had gotten into my liquor and I was furious.

I charged into the house, heading straight for my office. He sat with the door open, at my desk with his feet propped up, sipping something out of one of my whiskey tumblers. He had my laptop open in front of him and a scowl on his haggard face. For a young man, he looked too old, at least ten years older than reality. His eyes were sunken in, bags beneath them, and he glared at me.

“What are you doing, Wyatt? This is my office. Why is my computer open?” I moved toward the desk, but he sat up abruptly, putting his feet on the ground. He turned the computer so I could see the screen, and I knew instantly why he was so angry. He'd been reading the messages that I'd sent to Harper, and I silently cursed the people who invented cross-platform messaging. Every single text I sent her was on the screen.

“You just couldn’t help yourself, could you?” He downed the rest of the whiskey in his drink, and I could tell he was already wasted.

“Wyatt, you are drunk. Now is not the time to talk about this.” I walked over and closed the laptop, making a mental note to add a password to the device. I’d never had to worry about this because no one ever came into my office before. “I think we need to discuss your going back to rehab.”

He shot out of the chair like lightning and charged around the end of the desk to get in my face. The stench of alcohol only further cemented my belief that he needed help. He’d been home for less than two hours, and he was already drunk again. I wondered if he’d even been sober once since we got home from Barbados other than his short stint in rehab.

“You know what you need to do? You need to mind your own business and keep your hands off my girl.” He pressed his chest against mine, nudging me backward. I let him, not wanting to fight with him at all but certainly not wanting it to be physical.

“Stop.” At the door, I held my ground. “You are drunk. We should talk when you’re sober.”

“No, we’re going to talk now, Dad. We’re going to talk about how you seduced my girlfriend, made her break up with me, and then made her your own. Why’d you do that, huh? Couldn’t get someone your own age so you get a baby to get your jollies?” He pushed hard, forcing me into the hallway, but I resisted. His shouts would wake the neighbors. I was too angry to have this conversation with him, but he pushed the issue and had no idea how bad I was about to crack.

“Settle down,” I said calmly, but he shoved me hard and I slammed into the wall behind me.

“You fess up. You screwed her just to hurt me. Didn’t you!” He pushed me again as I stepped away from the wall, but this time, I didn’t budge. Instead, I pushed back, forcing him back into my office.

“Knock it off, Wyatt.” My own shout startled him. I rarely shouted at him, not even when he was a child and deserved a good lecture. I hated arguing and yelling. It wasn’t in my nature, but I wasn’t about to be bullied. Wyatt had spent the past several months being physical with Harper, and she couldn’t even defend herself. If he got physical with me he, was going to learn his lesson, because I’d failed him as a parent.

“You knock it off. You back off, and you let me have her.”

“She doesn’t want you,” I snapped loudly, realizing it was the wrong thing to say even though it was the truth. He was a drunken fool treating her like that. She deserved better, which is why I had gone to comfort her. What happened shouldn’t have happened between us. There was no mistaking that I’d made a poor choice, but he lost her because of his own actions, not because I horned in.

“Fuck you!” he screamed, ramming into me. He slammed me into the wall so hard the picture hanging next to where I hit bounced and fell to the ground. The glass in the frame shattered, sending shards of glass everywhere, and he struck my stomach. I was ready, having already tightened my abs, so the blow didn’t hurt so badly. I grabbed his wrist and twisted it, spinning him around and pinning him against the wall. My Krav Maga training kicked in instantly, and I subdued him.

“Calm down,” I said sternly, and he stopped fighting me.

“I can’t believe you did that,” he growled. “You had sex with her the same day she broke up with me. Did you plan that? Was that your plan, Dad? You told her to break up with me so you could have her?”

“That’s ridiculous, Wyatt.” I kept him pinned there while I spoke to him. “She was sick of being treated the way you treated her. You smacked her. That’s abuse. You know better. What did you think she was going to do? She broke up with you then came to me for comfort because you made her feel worthless.”

“I did not. I told her the truth, and she couldn’t take it.” The words coming out of his mouth infuriated me more. I

wanted to kick him out, refuse to speak to him until he apologized, but I was his father, and this spinout was my fault. I'd failed to teach him right from wrong, and I'd failed to protect him from the emotional trauma of my horrible divorce. Still, he was responsible for this drunken fit.

"You need to learn how to control yourself or you're going to end up in a heap of trouble. I'm going to put you in my car, and you're going back to rehab."

"The hell I am!" He pushed off the wall and turned with a fist bared to swing at me, but the doorbell rang. I backed away and glared at him, seething, then walked to the front door. Before I got there, I saw the flashing lights dancing in the window against the sheer curtain. One of the neighbors had heard and called the police already.

When I pulled the door open, two officers stood with professional smiles on their faces. "What can I do for you officers?"

"Sir, we are here because one of your neighbors called in a report of noise, shouts, and smashing glass." The short, stout man looked up at me over the rim of his glasses.

"Yeah, my son and I are arguing. Nothing is wrong, though. Just a family thing." I felt him behind me, radiating his pure hatred in my direction. If the cops hadn't shown up, I'd have likely gotten even more physical with him because he didn't seem to want to calm down at all.

"You know you can't come in here. You may as well just leave." Wyatt pushed his way into the door frame, and I backed off. "You have no warrant, no exigency . . . and New York has a castle law. You have no right to be here."

"Sir, there was a report of shouting and other noises. We're just here to check it out."

"Yeah, well you can leave. We're fine." His tone was menacing, his voice raised. One of the officers looked at me with eyebrows raised.

"Are you okay, sir?" he asked, hand resting on his can of mace, safely strapped to his belt.

“Yeah, it’s okay. He’s had a bit too much to drink and I’m trying to convince him to go back to rehab. I’ll call you if I need your help.”

The officers looked at each other and backed away. Wyatt stayed like a sentry on the front stoop until their squad car pulled away, lights off. Then he turned back to me and barged into the house. “I’m not done with you.”

“No, but I’m done with you. Go upstairs and lie down. I’m not going to speak to you until you’re sober.” I stood at the bottom of the stairs pointing upward. Wyatt’s eyes flicked toward my office door, and I could tell he was wanting another drink. “Upstairs or leave,” I ordered, and he sighed hard, then stomped up the steps and slammed the bedroom door as he passed through.

Wyatt wasn’t upset with me because Harper broke up with him. He genuinely believed he’d done nothing wrong and that I’d seduced his girlfriend. I shook my head and walked back into my office and sat down. The fact that he wanted me to back off so that he could get back together with her wasn’t a good thing. If he got reckless in a drunken state and went to her instead of me, he’d hurt her. I knew it. This meant I had to tell her everything, including why I hadn’t come back to the hotel last night.

I reluctantly pulled my phone from my pocket and dialed her number. When it rang through and she picked up, I could hear Lily crying. “Hey, Harper, it’s me.”

“Owen, I’m sorry, but now isn’t the best time.” She sounded fatigued and stressed.

“Is Lily okay? I hear her crying.”

“She’s sick. I have to get an appointment for her.”

My heart went out to her. Not only did she have a horrible night because of my leaving her alone, but she went home to a sick child. And I felt bad for Lily too. She was too sweet to feel sick. “I can come right over. I’ll check her out.”

“No offense, Owen, but you’re a surgeon, not a pediatrician. I need to get her an appointment. I’m just really

tired.” Harper sighed, and I heard her grunt, then Lily calmed.

“Alright, well, this is pretty important. I just need to tell you about Wyatt.”

The line was silent except for the sound of kisses being placed somewhere, perhaps Lily’s forehead. She whimpered, and Harper said, “Okay, go on.”

“So the other day when I was upset in the parking garage, it was because Wyatt was pulled over for DUI. They convinced him to go to rehab, so I left to take him.”

“Gosh, I’m so sorry to hear that. You should have told me. I’d have gone with you.” She sounded sympathetic, not upset, so I continued.

“And last night, he forcibly left rehab and disappeared. I spent an hour searching for him, and by the time I found him he was already very intoxicated. I spent the rest of the night getting him sober. I never meant to take that out on you this morning, and I’m truly sorry.”

“Wait . . . Wyatt left rehab?” Lily started fussing again, and I felt bad for interrupting her mom time, but I knew she needed an explanation.

“Yes, he did. And he is demanding that I break up with you so he can have you back. I just thought you should know if he comes your way, you should be cautious. I’m still going to try to convince him to go back to rehab when he sobers up again.”

“Again?” she asked. I could hear anxiety creeping into her voice.

“Yeah, he’s trashed again, upstairs, hopefully sleeping it off.”

Lily started wailing again, and Harper whispered, “Okay, baby, Mommy knows . . .” Then she said, “Look, Owen, I really have to go. Thank you for calling me.”

She hung up without another word, and I couldn’t tell if she was scared, upset with me, or just worried about her daughter. I had to respect that she wanted a pediatrician, though I knew how to diagnose a sick baby and prescribe

medicine. Still, I had a lot to deal with. I whispered a prayer for Lily and plugged my phone in. I needed to nap an hour or so, so that when Wyatt woke up, I'd be ready for that tough conversation.

Harper

I shuffled to the door and opened it, and Ben's warm smile greeted me. "Thanks for coming. I've been worried sick." I stepped aside so he could come in as I continued. "The doctor at the urgent care prescribed amoxicillin, but I'm not sure if it's doing the trick. It's been four days and her fever is still going." I could always count on Ben to help me out in a pinch, though I hated asking a favor like this of him.

"No problem, Harper. I'm here to serve," he said, patting my arm. Lily lay curled up on the couch, hugging a stuffed bear Mom bought her last year for her birthday. The thing had an eye missing and the fur was matted, but she loved it. I shut the door and joined him as he sat next to her and opened his medical bag. It had been a long time since doctors did house calls, so I was grateful for him.

"She just fell asleep," I warned him.

"Let's take her temperature and see what we're working with," Ben said, pulling out a thermometer from his bag. I watched as he carefully placed the ear thermometer in Lily's ear. We waited for the device to chime, indicating it was done, and I chewed on a nail. I hated when Lily was sick. "Her fever is high. She needs something stronger than amoxicillin." His gaze met mine, and I nodded, feeling grateful for his expertise and willingness to help out.

"So, what does she need? The doctor said strep, but I'm wondering if it's an ear infection." I hovered, like any good

mother would. Ben took out his otoscope and looked into Lily's ears, one at a time, without waking her.

He shook his head. "You're right. it's a double ear infection. Might have happened after a cold or something."

He pulled out his prescription pad and scribbled something down. "This is a new antibiotic that's been effective," he said as he handed me the pad. "Fill this at the pharmacy down the street and give her one pill every six hours."

I took the prescription pad from him, glancing at the piece of paper with the scribbled writing on it. "Thank you, Ben. You're a lifesaver." I meant what I said, feeling relieved that Lily would finally get better. I took the scrip from him and tucked it into my purse. I'd have to run out to have it filled, but at least I had it.

I sat in the recliner across the room as he put his things back in his bag. He asked, "So, how are things going with the good doctor?" His question wasn't completely out of the blue. We'd talked about things, though he didn't know I was actually dating Owen now. The way things stood, Ben probably thought I was just having a fling.

I shrugged. I didn't even know what to tell him. This week, Owen had called multiple times a day, but when Lily was perky and I felt like she might be okay for a visitor, he was busy. We only chatted briefly each time because I needed to focus on caring for Lily. And the one time he called after her bedtime, I missed it. I had been taking a shower at the time, and when I got out I was too exhausted to call him back. We played phone tag so much I felt like he'd given up.

"Things are tricky," I said, not really wanting to divulge all the details. Ben didn't need to know the drama with Wyatt or how Owen left me sitting in a hotel room alone all night.

"I tried to warn you, Harper." Ben shook his head, his expression changing. I knew what he said, but I had charged into the thing recklessly. Still, my fears about Owen were unfounded. He'd been with his son, not with another woman. Even if it was tricky, I still liked him a lot.

“I know. I think you’re wrong about him, though. It’s awkward because I dated his son, that’s all.” I picked at my fingernails, not wanting to hear the lecture, and he spared me.

“I just want you to be safe and happy. It’s all a friend could ever want for you.” He sighed and stood, picking up his bag. “Look, if he’s into you, then test the waters, but don’t let your heart get carried away too quickly. You are a very soft-hearted person. I don’t want you to be hurt.”

I stood too, leading him to the door. He hugged me and I said, “I appreciate you so much, Ben. Thank you for stopping by and for caring about me. I’m going to fill this scrip as soon as she wakes up.”

“Take care of yourself. And if you need to talk, I’m here.” I nodded as he walked out, then I shut the door.

Ben’s advice was solid. He knew I had a tendency to rush into things, but this time I was taking it slow. Sure, sex was amazing, but what was more amazing was how much Owen cared for me and Lily and how much he still cared for Wyatt, too.

I decided to do some housework, but Lily sleeping on the couch wasn’t very helpful, so I picked her up and carried her to her room. She was sleeping so hard, she didn’t even rouse, another sign that she felt awful. I tucked her in and made sure the monitor was turned on, then headed back to the living room to get the shock of my life. Wyatt sat on the sofa sipping a beer with one leg crossed over his knee.

“Hey,” he said, jerking his chin upward. I froze, panicked for a moment.

“Uh . . . Hey, Wyatt.” I tiptoed closer to him, reaching for the baby monitor on the TV stand. I flicked it on so I could hear if Lily woke up and then hovered by the TV. Fear prickled my skin, and I felt my back pocket where I had stashed my phone earlier. I didn’t know if I should call the police or Owen, but I was scared.

“I thought maybe we should talk.” His words were slurred, and I could tell he’d had a lot to drink. The beer in his hand

was definitely not his first. His eyes were sunken in, and he had dark circles beneath them. It looked like he hadn't slept in days, his hair disheveled and his clothes wrinkled.

"Sure, we can talk," I said, leaning against the TV stand. I wasn't about to move closer to him. He scared me, and I didn't feel safe at all. "What do you want to talk about?"

"I'm willing to overlook the whole thing with my dad if you want to get back together." He sat straighter, then hiccupped. Get back together? No way.

"Uh, Wyatt, I didn't break up with you because of your dad. You know that, right?" I found myself backing up until my back was against the wall. He hadn't gotten off the couch, but after having been at the receiving end of his aggression more than once, I had no interest in even being in the same room with him alone. If he got out of control, he'd wake Lily.

"Hmm, not what he said." Wyatt tipped the beer to his lips, and some of it missed his mouth, dribbling onto his shirt. When it was empty, he set the bottle on the coffee table and leaned his elbows on his knees, both feet planted on the floor now. "It doesn't matter. I've forgiven you. Come sit by me." He patted the couch, but I stayed put. He waited, staring at me expectantly, and when he stood I flinched, but he moved toward the kitchen instead of me. "Got any beer?"

"No, nothing in the house." I reached for my phone, frantically typing a text and sending it to Owen.

Harper 413 PM Owen, Wyatt is here. Please come now.

When Wyatt turned around, I had my phone in my hand and he scowled at me. "Who are you calling?"

"I was just checking the time. Lily can't sleep very long or she won't sleep tonight." I shoved the phone back in my pocket and tensed more. His angry scowl wasn't very comforting. My phone vibrated almost immediately, hopefully Owen, but I didn't look at it. "I thought you were in rehab?"

My question triggered a snarl on Wyatt's lip. It curled up like a rabid dog's, and I expected him to bite me or something. "I left."

“It’s good for you, Wyatt. I’m sure your dad was just trying to—”

“Don’t talk about my father,” he snapped. His dark eyes flashed with rage and he moved back toward the couch. “I don’t need rehab.” He didn’t stop at the couch. he walked straight over to me.

“Wyatt, I wasn’t trying to make you upset.” I tried backing up, forgetting the wall was only a centimeter away from me. “Please, I just want to help.”

“Want to help? Why does everyone just want to help? Do I look helpless?” He was in my face, voice raised. I couldn’t help but whimper.

“Wyatt, please. Lily is sleeping. You’ll wake her up.” I turned my head to the side, trying to avoid the stench of beer on his breath. “Please, can we just sit down and talk?”

“You’re a real piece of work, you know it? I thought we had something, Harper, but you just led me on. You made me think you cared about me then dumped me the second my dad showed up.” He grabbed my wrist and twisted it, and I yelped and tried to pull away. “Did you ever care about me at all?”

“Wyatt, you’re hurting my arm. Please let go.” I used my other hand to pry at his fingers, but he was much stronger than me. I glanced at the hallway, afraid Lily would wake, but there was no noise from the monitor.

“You really hurt me. A lot. I deserve better than that, you know?” He raised his voice, now to a shout. I knew it would wake her.

“Shh, please. Lily . . .”

“And all you care about is that kid,” he snapped, pulling me away from the wall. “We are going to have a sit-down, right now.”

I followed him to the couch, but before we got there, Owen burst in carrying a white paper bag. His eyes went wide when he saw Wyatt’s hand on me. “Wyatt, what are you doing?”

“God, you called my dad?” He pushed my hand away and shook his head. “We were just talking.”

“How did you get in here?” Owen asked. His voice was calm, but I could see his shock and concern scrawled across his knitted brow.

“I made a copy of her key. What’s it to you? We’re talking. I think you should leave.” Wyatt turned toward Owen, and I took the opportunity to scurry away, hiding behind the couch where he couldn’t reach me anymore.

“Leave, now,” Owen ordered, setting the bag on the counter. “Harper doesn’t want you here.”

“Harper doesn’t want me here, or you came to screw her again?” Wyatt shook his head and glared over his shoulder at me. “Is this true?”

“I don’t feel safe, Wyatt. We can talk when you’re sober.”

Wyatt moved toward the door, and Owen stopped him with a hand in the center of his chest. “Give me the key.” Owen had a way with his son that I didn’t have. Wyatt reached into his pocket and pulled the key out, slapping it into Owen’s palm before leaving in a huff. I rushed into Owen’s arms, curling into his chest as tears fell.

“I was close. I was planning to surprise you. I bought some meds for Lily and a lollipop.” He wrapped his arms around me and kissed my head a dozen times. “I’m so sorry, Harper. I’m here.”

I sobbed into his shirt until I felt better then pulled away. “You didn’t tell me he never went back. You told me you were going to talk him into going back.” I swiped at my eyes, and he sighed.

“I’m sorry. I wanted to sit and talk with you, but Lily has been sick. I should have told you. I just wanted to be here when you found out in case you were frightened.” He reached for me, but I stepped away. It was wrong of me to seek comfort from him when I was upset, but he was there, and the moment lent itself to that.

“I don’t know what to say. I think I want you to leave. I don’t want Lily to wake up. She needs rest, and I need to fill a prescription.”

“I can make you dinner and fill the scrip for you.”

It was a sweet offer, one I couldn’t refuse. “Thank you. I can make dinner myself, but if you want to fill the prescription, that would be great. I’ll let you know when Lily is lying down. If you are here, she will beg for pancakes, and she really shouldn’t have sugar when she is sick.” I reached into my purse on the counter behind me and pulled out the slip of paper Ben had given me with the order for medication.

“I’ll wait for your call.” He stepped forward and kissed my forehead then walked to the door. “Call your landlord. Have him change these locks. I don’t feel safe now.”

“I don’t either,” I told him, following him to the door. He left, and I locked up. I was still shaking, but I was glad he’d come so quickly. I picked up the bag he’d set down, and in it I noticed exactly what he said he brought. Lily would love the lollipop. It was even sugar-free.

Why did he have to be so amazing? This was a nightmare, trying to decide what the right thing was.

Owen

After running to the pharmacy to fill the prescription, I stopped for a quick dinner. Then I made a trip to the supermarket for a card and flowers since the florist was closed. I had never meant to upset Harper the way I did, and I could see that I had hurt her. I had let my stress over Wyatt get to me, and I took it out on her, and for that I felt horrible. So the bundle of freshly-cut carnations lay beside me on the passenger seat as I sat in my car waiting for her to call and let me know I could come up.

My palms were sweaty, like a kid with a crush waiting for his girl to text him. I wanted so badly to let Harper know how awful I felt, and I fully intended to tell her tonight that I was madly in love with her. It was fast. I knew that, but I felt what I felt. And the way I had been acting didn't reflect my true feelings for her. Part of me reflected over the way Helen had treated me, and I wondered if she had felt the same way, but due to her trauma, her real feelings hadn't shone through. I shook my head, forcing away those thoughts. Those days were gone. All I had was now.

Now, with Wyatt acting a fool again, I worried that he would do something stupid and end up hurting her. I knew if I backed off and walked away from her, he'd calm down—though it could still take weeks or months. And that didn't preclude his strange need to be back together with her, which would only cause more problems. Besides the fact that I had waited so long to find a single woman I clicked with. I wasn't

about to give her up, no matter how selfish that seemed. I knew there was a way forward, but that way required Wyatt being sober and us having honest conversations about things.

My phone buzzed, and I looked down at it. A message from Harper letting me know Lily had lain down and it was okay for me to stop by. I didn't even respond. I picked up the bag from the pharmacy, the card I had written a personal message in, and the flowers. I shut off my car and headed up to her apartment, knocking quietly so I didn't disturb Lily. I was sad that I wouldn't see her tonight, but I knew she needed rest.

The door swung open, and Harper looked exhausted. Her eyes blinked slowly, but she smiled. "You got here fast."

"I was downstairs waiting for your call." I stepped in past her, and she shut and locked the door, sliding the deadbolt into place for added safety. I turned to face her and handed her the flowers and card, then walked over and set the pharmacy bag on the counter. Her eyes flicked up to meet mine, and the corners of her mouth turned up slightly as she smelled the flowers then laid them on the table.

"You didn't have to do this."

I heard what she said, but I knew the opposite was true. She had been upset by what I did and she deserved a heartfelt apology. I waited patiently as she ripped open the envelope and pulled the card out. Her eyes scanned the words as she read. I saw the tears brimming in her eyes and knew she'd gotten to the part about how I wanted to make her a permanent fixture in my life and that starting a relationship without complete transparency wasn't the way to do that, so I took her hand and led her to the couch. She continued reading as she followed.

We sat down, and she didn't withdraw her hand—a good sign. I laced my fingers through hers and then raised them to my lips and kissed them. When her eyes swept up to look at my face, I whispered, "I'm sorry."

"It's okay, Owen. I understand everything that happened. We just didn't communicate well." She blinked and a few tears

escaped. “I was really glad you were close by and could stop in. I would have hated to call the police and get him in more trouble. I understand he’s hurting, and I wish I could help. I feel bad about making it worse.”

I put a hand on her cheek and shook my head. “No, don’t feel bad. Wyatt needs to learn how to handle his emotions in a mature way. You did what you had to, okay?”

“The landlord will come in the morning to switch out the locks for me, but I’m not sure that will stop Wyatt if he really wants to get back together. I care about him still, but we are wrong for each other.” Harper sighed softly. “I don’t really want to be alone tonight.”

“Then I’ll stay,” I told her, scooting closer. “I don’t want to leave you alone if you’re still afraid.”

Harper scooted closer still, our knees touching. “I’d like that,” she whispered, leaning in. I followed her lead, brushing my lips across hers. She responded in turn by intensifying the kiss. “We have to be quiet. Lily only laid down a bit ago.”

“I understand,” I whispered. I slid my hand beneath her knees and pulled her onto my lap before readjusting. She wrapped her arms around my neck, and I lifted her as I stood. She let out a quiet sound of surprise and grinned at me.

“Show off.” She snickered beneath her breath as I carried her toward her bedroom. “Oh,” she said, pointing at the TV stand. I saw the baby monitor there. I stopped there on the way through, and she picked it up, then flicked off the lights before we stepped into the hallway. It was dark, but I carried her to the bedroom and laid her down, then returned to shut the door.

As I turned to walk back, I saw a spark in the darkness and then a flame emerged. Harper lit a candle and laid the lighter to the side. Then she reached into her nightstand and pulled something out—a condom, presumably. I stalked toward her, peeling my clothing off as I went. It lay scattered across her carpet by the time I got to the bed, and she was stripping out of her clothing too.

“God, Harper, you are so beautiful. I can’t get enough of you.” I crawled onto the bed and lay down next to her, pulling her against me. She turned to face me and draped a leg over my hips.

“You know, when you first told me you thought I was beautiful, I thought you were just trying to boost my confidence after Wyatt tore me down.” She brushed the hair out of her eyes and then tangled her fingers in my hair.

“I’d never say anything just to comfort you unless it was one hundred percent true.” I kissed her forehead, then pushed her chin up until our lips met. My body was already growing eager to be in her, swelling and tingling.

“Good, because I don’t like fake compliments. I want only the truth.”

“The truth is, you’re so hot you do this to me.” I ground my hips against her, rubbing my mostly hard cock against her mound. I brought my fingers to her folds and slid two inside. “You’re so wet,” I groaned. My dick was growing harder, demanding to be inside her.

“Because of you. Don’t stop, Owen.”

I didn’t think I could stop even if I wanted to. She felt like warm honey, and I couldn’t wait to feel every inch of her around me. I brushed my thumb over her clit and felt her body tense almost immediately. Her breath hitched, and she leaned forward, pressing against me with more force than before.

“Oh, God,” she moaned, her eyes squeezing shut as her hands tangled in the sheet.

I worked her pussy, massaging her clit as she ground against my hand, forcing my fingers into her rhythm. She turned her chin up and kissed me, nipping at my bottom lip. Her breathing was ragged. Her tits brushed over my chest as her body rolled against me in a serpentine rhythm. I sucked her tongue into my mouth and felt her body clench around my fingers. A slow wave rolled through her, and she pulled her lips away from mine and bit my shoulder just hard enough to sting. I groaned and closed my eyes, enjoying the build of

pressure that signaled her orgasm. The pulses made her pussy clench tighter around my fingers, and I kissed her shoulder when she finally relaxed against me.

I was growling, practically begging her to let me inside her. My cock almost ached with the need to feel her around me. Her pussy was so warm and wet, so eager to have me inside her that it left me breathless. And after a brief pause, her body started grinding against me again. She moaned as she moved against me and started taking me inside her faster and faster while kissing me passionately. She pulled on my hair to push my head back and kissed down my neck, then went back to kissing my lips, making sure our moans were muffled in the darkness.

I reached down and circled my thumb around her clit, causing her to buck against me harder. She was so wet, I could hear a slick sound every time we made contact, and I knew she wanted to come again, but I wanted to taste her.

“Stop,” I whispered. “I want something different.”

Harper

O wen forced a hand beneath my hips, pulling me as he rolled to his back. I had no choice but to straddle him. His cock was hard and dripping already. I rubbed my pussy up and down its length, smearing my juices all over it, but he patted his chest.

“No, here,” he told me, licking his lips. I grinned as I inched higher on his chest, and he squeezed his arms between my thighs until his hands cradled my ass. He pulled me toward his face, and the instant his tongue touched my clit, I was in heaven. He rolled his tongue over the little nub, testing and tasting. I sat up and cupped my own breasts, enjoying his pleased growls as he slid a finger inside me. I didn’t get to enjoy touching myself for long. He reached up and pulled my hands away from fondling my own tits.

“Let me,” he panted against my pussy.

I nodded, too overwhelmed to speak. His right hand continued sliding in and out of me while he gripped one of my boobs with his left hand. He pinched and rolled the nipple between finger and thumb and drew a gasp of pleasure from me as I ground on his face. His stubble scraped my inner thighs as I rode him.

I gripped handfuls of his hair, trying to keep control, but then he added another finger to my pussy and pulled me down hard, sucking on my clit. The combination of sensations was too much. He straightened his neck to bring his lips more level

with my clit and downshifted his finger action into a broad, steady stroke along my internal walls.

“I’m gonna come,” I moaned, grinding as hard against his face as I could.

“Good,” he murmured around my pussy. “Do it.”

“So good,” I moaned, barely able to breathe. “God! Owen!” I came so hard and fast I gasped with surprise. My whole body came alive all at once, and my legs started trembling without much warning. This one was better than the last, making me entirely breathless and in need of a break. I knew I was a bit louder than I should have been, but I couldn’t control the noises reverberating up out of my chest.

Once the orgasm passed, Owen pulled me down again to give him a blowjob. He didn’t mount me even though he was still hard. He wasn’t done playing with my pussy, and I wasn’t done begging for his cock. I sucked him for a few minutes, tasting my moisture on him, then positioned myself to let him penetrate me, but Owen rolled us over. This time, he was on top of me, and the hunger in his eyes made excitement and hunger tingle in my groin.

He hurriedly tore open the condom package one-handed and slid it over himself. The sight itself was impressive and gave me fresh shivers of anticipation. I just wanted him inside me right that second.

“Please,” I begged as he slid into me. He pressed his naked body against me from chest to knee, and I wrapped my arms and legs around him. Owen took his time sliding in, little by little. The slow and steady drag made my heart pound and caused my pussy to open for him freely. He forced his entire shaft inside me inch by intensely pleasurable inch. He leaned down and kissed my lips firmly then pulled back to look me in the eye again.

“I’m in love with you, Harper, and I want you to be mine forever.” He started grinding his cock against my pussy with a new angle that brushed my front wall hard and deep. I moaned through gritted teeth, trying not to come too soon.

“Oh, God, I can’t take much more,” I moaned, squirming.

“What about this?” Owen dropped a hand between us to rub my clit as he pumped into me again, amused.

“Oh, God, yes.” I whimpered as his cock rubbed my G-spot again and again but continued kissing him to keep from shouting the words out loud.

Owen reached between us to grab a nipple and twist it mercilessly. The pleasure-pain arched me off the mattress, pushing all the air out of my lungs, which in turn made my pussy clench hard around him. His cock rubbed over my G-spot again and again with inhumane precision. He leaned down to lavish attention on my neck and shoulder right as he shoved all his remaining inches inside me and twisted one of my nipples for good measure.

The orgasm was different from any I had felt before. It radiated outward from the depths of my pussy and seemed to engulf my entire body at once. I came hard and fast and managed to get a word out of me just before it crested, a shocked cry at how good it felt. He covered my mouth with his to muffle the sounds.

“Harper!” Owen whispered in my ear as I squirted over his cock, coating it, causing it to slip more easily between my shaking thighs. The involuntary orgasm put a spring in his thrusts, and he pistoned hard until finally, he came with a grunt, filling his condom.

Owen’s thrusts slowed, then stopped, but he stayed on top of me afterward, kissing me tenderly. My limbs continued pulsing with residual pleasure. Lingering passion filled Owen’s kiss until he had to let go or risk crushing me with his weight as exhaustion took over. We fell into a delightfully sweaty heap of satisfied bodies, and I promptly snuggled into his arms with a peaceful smile on my lips, happier than I had been in months.

Owen turned to his back and removed the full sleeve, then slid off the bed and walked to my bathroom. Before he even returned, I heard Lily’s faint cries. I knew we had been too loud, but I had hoped she wouldn’t wake up. Once again,

Owen came to the rescue. He kissed my forehead and whispered, "I've got this. Enjoy your afterglow." He grabbed his pants and put them on, and then he was gone. I lay there thinking about him, about how upset Wyatt had been, and when I even mentioned his father, he'd gone off on me.

I turned to my side, knowing in my heart that I was driving a wedge between Wyatt and Owen. I didn't know how I could do this. The way Wyatt had treated Lily made me furious because he had purposely been trying to put a distance between me and her. He didn't like that I gave her attention. I knew how important the relationship between father and son is. I wouldn't for a second think of coming between Wyatt and Owen, but here I was—dividing them, though not on purpose.

While I loved the attention Owen gave me, and the fact that he was nothing like his son, I hated being the reason they fought. I wanted to be with him more than anyone I'd ever met. He was definitely the one for me. I just worried it would be at the expense of being a father to Wyatt when he needed his father the most.

The door creaked open, and Owen walked in. I let my expression calm because I knew my face probably showed how concerned I was. Owen had mentioned wanting me to be permanent in his life, but I didn't see how that would be possible if Wyatt was so upset with me. When Owen curled around me, though, I forgot all my worries. His arms had a way of doing that—making me forget.

"She's sleeping again. I gave her the medicine, and she went right back to sleep." He kissed my cheek and then breathed softly into my ear. "I meant what I said, Harper. I want you in my life forever. I want you to be my wife, and I want to be Lily's father, and I want to protect you both for the rest of your lives."

I felt tears welling up in my eyes. His confession of love was overwhelming. I wrapped my arm around his neck and pulled him down for another kiss, which he returned eagerly. I didn't care at that moment if he was Wyatt's father, or if he was a superior at work, or even if he was so much older than me. I wanted everything he said as much as he wanted it.

“I love you too, Owen, so much it hurts.”

“God, I need you in my life, Harper. I don’t want to live another day without you.” He rolled on top of me again, reaching for my nightstand and another condom.

“Again?” I asked, spreading my legs so he could nestle in.

“Yes, again. I want to make love to you as many times as I can, every day for the rest of my life.” He ground against me, and I could feel him swelling again. He had lost nothing with age. His vitality was matchless.

“Then make love to me,” I whispered, rocking my hips up to meet him. I wasn’t sure if I could come again, but I’d do anything in this moment to make him feel as happy as he’d made me feel just now.

Owen

I couldn't get enough of Harper. It wasn't just her looks. I liked a woman with curves, and she had curves for days, but this went further. And it wasn't because of the way she made me feel sexually, either, though that was a bonus. Something deep inside me felt whole when I was with her, complete, like I'd been missing her my whole life.

"I want to make you the happiest woman who ever lived." I nibbled on her ear, grinding my swelling dick against her mound. She was still wet from the first round of sex, and I had her quivering again, ready for more.

"God, Owen, you're an animal." Harper gripped me with her thighs, and I loved how she took charge in the bedroom. It let me hold her without guilt as she bucked against my rigid cock. Her hair glowed golden in the soft moonlight through the window, and I absently reached out and touched it as she pumped against me. "I want you in me."

This beautiful woman, who meant everything to me, was begging me for dick. She was constantly on the tip of my tongue. And if she wasn't in my arms or hidden away beneath me, I wanted her mouth on me or my mouth on her. At the moment, all I could think about was getting inside her again, feeling her surrounding me. It felt safe there, like we were made for each other.

She looked up at me from beneath her lashes, biting her lip and frowning with a sigh like she didn't have a say in the

matter. That made my dick so fucking hard, like it was going to explode and run off with itself into the night and never come back again. “You drive me wild with lust, but I need you to know that I love you too, more than I’ve loved anyone my whole life.”

I kissed her hard, grinding against her pussy. Her hips rocked in rhythm, sliding up and down my shaft. “I think I’m in love with you too, Owen, and I’ve been afraid to admit it.” Her kisses became frantic, eager, like she couldn’t get enough of me. It made me feel like a king. She pulled away to catch her breath. “I’ve never felt this way before, and I love you for it.” Harper looked up at me, her cheeks flushed, eyes bright.

I shoved my cock deep into the recesses of her warm little pussy and let her lithe body move around mine as I hunched downward to meet her. She came faster than the first time, coming undone beneath me in a few short minutes without even a gentle seduction or idle foreplay. Harper shrieked as I pushed her hard into climax, then moaned as she rolled her hot pussy down on my rampant cock until she was bone dry.

“God, I want to make you feel amazing every day for the rest of my life,” I told her as I pulled out. I knew I was going to explode soon. We needed the condom. She whimpered as I pulled out, but I rolled the sleeve on as quickly as I could.

Then I wrapped my arms around her and squeezed her against me, feeling the warm jiggle of her body against my skin. Her mouth found the side of my neck, rubbing against me and nipping at my earlobe. Then she started to talk, like it was all spilling out suddenly. “I love you so much that sometimes, I can’t breathe when we’re together. And then I’m so scared you’ll catch on and leave.” Her face turned up to me, full of emotion, peering deep into the depths of my soul with those clear blue eyes of hers. “I don’t want to lose you.”

“Baby, I’m not going anywhere. I have no intention of leaving you. You’ll have to chase me away . . .” I winced as I realized the way I said that might have triggered her fear of Wyatt, but she kept rocking her body against me eagerly, like she craved more of me even after everything tonight.

“You make me feel like I was never even alive before I met you, like somehow, I came alive the moment you kissed me the first time.” Harper eagerly kissed me again, nipping at my lower lip.

I moaned, pressing against her and grinding myself into her pussy. “I’m definitely not going anywhere. Trust me.” Harper grabbed my ass with both hands, pulling me closer and guiding me into her hot little silken paradise once more. I squeezed her so hard it left marks on her skin. She was mine until the end of time, the light of my life within the dark confines of my shadowed soul.

She groaned with pleasure as I began thrusting, her body so wet from all the sex that it slid effortlessly in and out of her. “I love you,” I groaned, kissing Harper again with everything I had, gripping her harder and thrusting harder than ever. I could feel my balls swelling as she worked her body across mine, meeting me thrust for thrust, rocking back against me and urging me on with each lift of her hips.

“I’m almost there,” I whispered in her ear. I didn’t want to be alone in this. I needed her to come with me. We were two halves of a whole unit, each making the other better as we came together . . .

I pulled out one last time, rolling to my back and forcing her to straddle me. She slid around me and began grinding, meeting my rhythm. “Oh, Harper . . .” My life was complete now that I’d found this woman. I felt her clench around me, milking my cock, and I exploded to match her shuddering convulsions.

I could barely feel a thing except the warm rush of pleasure pulsing through my system. Her body shook and trembled long after my release was over, her tits bouncing gracefully. Then she rolled off me onto the mattress and turned to lie next to me as she caught her breath. I held her to myself, basking in the amazing afterglow of sex. If I had bought a ring already, I’d propose right now, but I wanted it to be special.

“Oh, God, that was incredible for an old man,” Harper joked, kissing my arm. I squeezed her tit and snickered.

“I still got it in me. I’m not too old yet.” I sighed contently as she relaxed in my arms. “You know, you are just about the best thing that has ever happened to me. I wasn’t even looking for you, and I met you when I least expected it. You mean the world to me, Harper. I want to take care of you and Lily every day. I want you to be happy and—”

A soft snore interrupted me. Harper’s breath fanned out across my arms, and I noticed her breathing had become shallow. Just that quickly, she had fallen asleep. She must have been exhausted from days of caring for a sick child and worrying about Wyatt. I kissed the back of her head and pulled away. I covered her with the blankets and crept to the bathroom, where I pulled the full condom off and flushed it, then washed myself up a bit. When I got back to bed, she was snoring loudly.

My phone buzzed, somewhere on the floor, probably in my pants pocket. So I slid out of bed and rifled through the mess. Upon finding my phone, I discovered a message from Wyatt.

Wyatt 11:23 PM You’re at her house?

As I was reading it, another came through, and I was compelled to respond as I climbed back into bed.

Wyatt 11:25 PM I told you to back off.

Owen 11:26 PM Wyatt, we can discuss this when you’re sober. Go home and sleep it off.

Wyatt 11:27 PM Do you even care about me?

I scowled. Of course I cared about him, but Wyatt had subscribed to the notion at some point that if I cared about him, I’d give him whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted. Part of that was my fault because I had used bribery as a means to help him cope with his mother’s actions when she left us. I regretted that now, but he was an adult. He had to learn that you don’t always get what you want.

Owen 11:30 PM Look, Wyatt, you need to get sober. I can’t discuss this with you so long as you keep drowning yourself in alcohol.

“Hold me,” Harper mumbled, reaching for me.

I sighed and put my phone on silent. If he knew I was at her house, it meant he'd come back to bother her again, and I was glad I had stayed. I laid my phone on the nightstand and curled up around Harper, pulling the blankets up. It was set in my heart now. It didn't matter how Wyatt felt. He wasn't thinking rationally at all. If he actually cared about her, he'd sober up and be half the man she needed. I wasn't going to give her up now, not for anything. Not even if it hurt him.

She was too important to me.

Harper

“**N**o, I’m certain you will actually like her.” I chuckled as I walked with Ben after work toward our cars. “And the game will be fun. Thanks for inviting me and Lily.”

“You know I’m doing this to humor you. I’m not really into dating right now.” He had been closed off to dating as long as I’d known him. After some rough relationship stuff, I understood why. If it weren’t for Owen, I’d likely feel the same way about dating after what Wyatt did to me.

“Well, just give her a chance. Even if you don’t end up feeling like it’s relationship material, maybe she could be a good friend like me.” I patted his shoulder as our paths diverged.

Ben let out a small sigh, his gorgeous blue eyes betraying his concern. Ever since I started dating Owen against his advice, I knew Ben had reservations about him. Despite that, he had been nothing but supportive, always there for me when I needed him.

“You know, Harper, I just want to make sure you’re happy,” Ben said, his voice tinged with worry. “I’ve seen you go through so much with Wyatt, and I’m afraid Dr. Thorpe might not be the right person for you.”

I appreciated Ben’s honesty, even if it was difficult to hear. I knew he had my best interests at heart, but I had to follow my own path. “I understand your concerns, Ben, and I value

your opinion. But I believe in giving people a chance. Owen has been good to me, despite the complications.”

Ben’s brows furrowed with genuine concern. His eyes filled with the unwavering loyalty that made him such an amazing friend. “Harper, I just don’t want to see you hurt again. You deserve someone who treats you right and doesn’t bring unnecessary complications into your life.”

I reached out, placing a comforting hand on Ben’s arm. “I know you worry, and I appreciate that more than words can express. But I believe in second chances, for myself and for others. And I need you to trust me and support me, even if you have reservations.”

A soft smile spread across Ben’s face, the warmth in his eyes unwavering. “You’re right, Harper. I may have my doubts, but I’ll always be here for you. Your happiness means everything to me, and I’ll support you through it all.”

I felt a surge of gratitude for Ben’s unwavering support, even when he disagreed with my choices. He was a true friend, always there to lend an ear and offer guidance, even if he thought I was making a mistake.

“Thank you, Ben,” I said, my voice filled with genuine appreciation. “Having you by my side means more to me than you’ll ever know.” I nodded at my car and said, “This is me.”

“See you Saturday?” he asked, grinning.

“Yep! I’ll have my giant foam finger!” I chuckled and turned to unlock my car. As I did, I dropped my keys and accidentally kicked them under the tire. I bent to retrieve them, dropping my purse too, which frustrated me, but I laughed at myself for being such a klutz. Once I had collected my things, I stood and straightened my shirt and unlocked my car.

I heard tires squealing on the pavement and an engine revving. I straightened quickly to see Wyatt’s car come barreling around the corner, headed straight toward me. My heart rate spiked as I darted out of the way. The car missed me by mere inches as it screeched to a halt. I froze for a moment,

unsure of what to do. I could smell the stench of alcohol wafting from the open window.

Wyatt leaned out of the window, his eyes red-rimmed and wild. “Get in,” he slurred. “I want to show you something.”

“No, I’m not getting into your car. You’re drunk. You need to get out and call an Uber.” I shook with fear, moving back toward my car. Wyatt darted out of his car, blocking my way.

“We need to talk, Harper.”

I swallowed hard, my eyes flickering back and forth between Wyatt and his car. I had to get out of here before things escalated any further.

“What’s there to talk about, Wyatt? I made myself pretty clear earlier,” I said, my tone even but firm. I stared at him, taking in his disheveled appearance and the anger simmering in his eyes.

Wyatt stepped closer, invading my personal space. “You think you can just come into our lives and take my father away from me? You don’t know anything about us.” He grabbed my wrist, his grip tight as he spoke. He took a step closer to me, and his hot breath blasted my face. His eyes were glazed over and unfocused as he reached out to grab my arm. I yanked it away, taking a step back.

“Don’t touch me,” I warned.

“Or what?” he sneered. “You’ll tell my dad on me?” He laughed bitterly, his breath hot against my face. “He doesn’t care about me anymore. All he cares about is you.”

Wyatt laughed bitterly, swaying on his feet. “Oh, come on, Harper. I know you want me just as much as I want you.” He caught my wrist, and it hurt.

I tried to shake him off again, panic rising in my chest. “Let go of me,” I repeated, more forcefully this time. My arm broke free, and he scowled at me.

“You’re going home with me.”

I clenched my fists at my sides, struggling to keep my cool. “You’re drunk, Wyatt. You don’t know what you’re

saying.”

He took another step closer to me, trapping me against the side of my car. “I know exactly what I’m saying,” he growled. “And what I’m saying is that I want you. Right here. Right now.”

I backed away, terrified, and put my hands in a defensive posture. “Please, just leave.”

Wyatt only tightened his hands into fists, lurching forward as he spoke. “You know what? Maybe you’re right. Maybe we don’t have anything else to talk about.” He raised his other hand and backhanded me hard. My head spun and I saw stars. I prayed someone else saw what he was doing because I’d never been successful at thwarting him in his assaults before. Gasping for air, I stumbled back, clutching my face. Wyatt stepped back with a satisfied smirk on his face.

I could feel the anger radiating off him. It was almost palpable. I knew that talking to him in this state was a bad idea, but I didn’t have a choice. “What’s there to talk about, Wyatt?” I asked in a soft tone, trying to calm him down. “I don’t want to fight with you.”

He scoffed and leaned in closer to me. The smell of alcohol on his breath made me want to gag. “You think I’m stupid? You’ve been sleeping with my father, haven’t you?” he shouted, his voice echoing through the empty street.

My heart raced as I looked around nervously. The last thing I wanted was for someone to hear us fighting. “Wyatt, please,” I whispered, tears welling up in my eyes. “Let’s just talk about this calmly.”

“Calmly? Calmly? You think I can be calm when my own girlfriend is screwing my father behind my back?” he sneered, grabbing onto my arm tightly.

“I’m not your girlfriend. I broke up with you.”

“Because he seduced you. Admit it. You don’t even want him. He just forced you.” Wyatt came closer again, this time backing me against my car.

“Whoa!”

I heard Ben's voice, and relief flooded me. Tears streamed down my cheeks as I nearly collapsed onto the parking lot. Ben rushed up, pushing Wyatt away. Wyatt stumbled backward and fell into a bush with a thump, and Ben reached for my hand and helped me up. I cried and leaned against my car.

"What happened? Are you okay?" He held me by the shoulders, looking at me. His eyes zeroed in on my cheek, and I assumed it was red from being smacked.

"I'm okay. He's just drunk." I looked at Wyatt, who was prying himself out of the bush.

"Stop making excuses for him, Harper. We need to call the police." Ben reached into his pocket, but I shook my head and held his wrist.

"No, just let his father deal with it, okay? I'll text Owen." I swiped at my eyes, rubbing tears away. I was safe, but I knew I couldn't drive. I was too shaken up. And Wyatt wasn't even done yet. The minute he got on his feet, he swayed toward me again.

"I want you out of my life." Wyatt's words were as slurred as his steps were fumbled. He could barely walk. Whatever he was on, I felt like it wasn't just alcohol. "That means out of my father's life too. You're ruining everything with him." He stumbled forward with his finger pointed at me, and Ben directed him toward his car.

"Time to go home, buddy," he said, walking with him. Wyatt climbed into the car, but Ben reached in and pulled the keys. Wyatt wouldn't be going anywhere like that. Ben even locked the door so he couldn't get out, but it didn't matter. Wyatt passed out the moment he sat down. His loud snores were hard evidence that he'd be in this garage for hours now.

"Let's get you home. Come on," Ben said, taking my hand and leading me away from the scene. "He's got you blocked in."

I followed Ben to his car, terrified of what would have happened if he hadn't seen Wyatt and come running. I was

thankful for him, but I needed to get out of there in case Wyatt wasn't really passed out and he woke up and came back.

While Ben drove, he tried to support me emotionally, but I was too out of it. I managed to send a message to Owen, but the sudden fight-or-flight response had me so incoherent that all I could do was remain stuck in my head on a loop of thoughts about Owen and how I was really destroying his relationship with his son. I couldn't do that to him. I'd never forgive myself. I couldn't be the reason there was a disconnect between Owen and his son.

At home, Ben walked me to my apartment and let me in. Mom was there watching Lily, and due to my emotional state, he explained everything—including how dating Owen was causing this. I heard him whisper things to her, but I didn't know what he said. Lily was feeling cuddly, so I sat on the couch and held her while she told me about her day. Her Nana had painted her fingernails, and they had taken selfies with some cute filters on her phone, apparently. Anything lighthearted and happy was what I needed.

When Ben left, Mom sat next to me with a concerned look. "Dear, I'm worried about you. This guy sounds like a maniac. How can you be dating him?" She pulled Lily out of my arms and kissed her forehead. "Baby, you go play blocks in your room now. Nana has to speak to Mommy for a minute."

I sighed and curled into a ball, letting my shoes drop to the floor. "I'm not dating him, Mom."

"Why would he do that?" She sat back, still just as concerned, but now confused. She hadn't understood something Ben had told her.

"The guy who did that today is my ex-boyfriend. The guy I'm dating is that man's father." I leaned against the back of the couch, holding my knees to my chest, watching her face as the lightbulb came on.

"You're dating your ex-boyfriends father? Do you know how crazy that is? He's not just old. He's really old."

“No, Mom, he’s not that old. I swear. I’m older than Wyatt, and Owen is only—”

“Old enough to be your father. Harper, I’m so worried. That man could have shoved you in his car. He could have hurt you.”

It was good to know the red mark on my face was gone. If it had still been there, she’d have been reporting it to the police. As it was, I hoped Owen had gotten to the parking lot to fish Wyatt out of his car before he woke up. Ben still had his keys, but Wyatt might have had a spare. Who knows?

“Honey, you need to end this. Not only is Wyatt a danger to you and Lily, but imagine how he feels now after you broke up. I’m assuming you broke up with him?” I didn’t respond to her question, so she kept lecturing. “He needs his father, and right now, that relationship is damaged. If you’re in the way, he will only continue to spin out and get worse. If I were you, I’d back off for a while. Give them some space to work out the situation. If it’s meant to be, Owen will come back to you.”

I couldn’t even respond to her. I was crying too hard. She was completely right. I stood and swayed for a moment. “Can you stay and watch Lily for a while? I just need to lie down for a bit.” I moved toward the bedroom without waiting for an answer, and when I collapsed onto my bed, it was into a puddle of tears. I had to break up with Owen to save his relationship with his son. It was the only way.

Owen

I rushed toward the front door. After getting that text from Harper while I was in the middle of an important teleconference, I knew it would have to wait a bit. I had gotten out of the conference about twenty minutes before it was over, but that was after an hour's wait. Wyatt was probably still sleeping in his car, hopefully not being towed away.

I grabbed my keys and my wallet and dashed out the front, only to hear squealing tires and see Wyatt whip around the corner into my front yard and knock over my brass planter. The flowers dumped out of it, and Wyatt's car hissed as steam shot out of the radiator. I looked at the sight and got angry instantly. He was drunk driving again, though I wasn't surprised by that. I was surprised by how drunk he was and that he'd even managed to get to my place from the hospital where Harper had said the altercation had gone down.

"What the heck?" Wyatt hiccupped, climbing out of his car into my flower bed. He stomped on the primrose plant and stepped over the downed planter. "Why did you put that in your driveway?"

"That's not my driveway. That's my yard. Are you drunk again?" I marched over to where he stood in my yard, swaying. This man needed some help or he was going to end up killing someone, and I was that help. There was no one else who was going to step in and do what was necessary. I put my

arm around his waist and snatched his keys out of his hand. The key chain was a bit empty, which meant this was his spare set. I wondered how many spare sets he had.

“Let go of me, you bastard,” Wyatt snapped, pushing me away, but I held him forcefully. He was too drunk to put up too much of a fight. I led him into the house and up the stairs, pulling his dirty boots off before tossing him into bed. “You can’t just keep me here.”

“No, I’m not keeping you here, but you’re not driving anywhere either.” I dangled the keys in front of him, and he swiped at them but missed. “Sleep it off, Wyatt. We need to talk.”

“You can’t do this to me.”

“I’m not doing anything to you, Wyatt. When you show up at my house drunk and run over my things, you have done something to me. Now, we can speak about this when you wake up.” I walked out and shut the door, heading straight for the stairs. I’d deal with the car later. For the moment, I wanted to get to Harper—who had not returned my messages—and make sure she was alright. This thing with Wyatt was still escalating.

I climbed into my car and started it, pulling out onto the street, just as a call from the hospital rang through. It was Becky from HR.

“Dr. Thorpe, do you have a second?”

Using hands-free, I spoke to her while I drove toward Harper’s apartment. “Yes.” I really didn’t want to deal with this, but it had to be done.

“Dr. Thorpe, the security staff alerted us to the fact that a car registered in your son’s name was involved in an altercation this morning. Dr. Ben Wilks called in a domestic in the parking garage. He said a nurse was involved but did not name her. He said your son was aggressive and hostile toward her and that he escorted her off the property. We wanted to let you know that we may have to pursue legal action against your son if the woman comes forward.”

I clenched my jaw. Harper's text had said nothing like that, just that Wyatt was at the hospital passed out in his car and may need my help. I figured I'd find him sleeping it off, not this. "Thank you for the information. I'm handling Wyatt now. Let me know if the nurse comes forward." If there was a reason Harper hadn't said anything, I wanted to respect her privacy.

The woman on the line hung up, and I drove to Harper's place. I wasn't sure if Wyatt would actually sleep, but at least he wasn't behind the wheel anymore. I was torn in two. I wanted to give all of my heart to Harper, but this nagging feeling that I was failing my son kept eating away at my soul. I knew he was an adult making his own choices now, but he was my son, and he was hurting. I felt responsible for that. I wanted to fix it.

By the time I got to Harper's, the feeling of obligation toward Wyatt had faded and the desire to love and protect Harper had taken over. She had to be rattled again, maybe enough to push me away forever. If she did, I wouldn't blame her, though I prayed she wouldn't. I made my way up to her door and knocked, but there was no answer.

"Harper, it's me, Owen." I waited, but despite the hushed voices on the other side of the door, no one answered. "Harper, I hear you in there. I'm sorry if you're upset with me. I know you must be scared."

I leaned my forehead against the door and waited. I heard more hushed voices but still nothing, so I knocked again. "If you don't want to speak to me, it's okay. I'll just go." I waited longer, thinking she was just going to let me walk away, but the door creaked open and Harper's mom stood there.

"Miriam, I'm not here to cause trouble. I'm here to make sure Harper is okay."

The look on her face told me she wasn't exactly happy about my being here, but I wasn't here to please her. I knew we had a very tricky situation with Wyatt, and I just wanted to do something to make that better. I had even considered asking

Harper to move in with me so she was under my direct supervision in case this nonsense kept happening. I didn't know if she'd go for it, though, and there was a risk that Wyatt would end up at my place too. That would be messy.

"I don't think it's wise for you to be here." Miriam had a stern look. Clearly, she was only looking out for her daughter the way I would for my son. I couldn't fault her for that.

"Mom, it's okay. I told you." Harper's fingers wrapped around the door, and she pulled it open against her mother's wishes. "You can go home. Owen is here now." Harper had been crying. Her eyes were puffy. Mascara streaks down her face looked like they'd been there all day. Miriam was upset, but she did as Harper asked.

She kissed Harper on the cheek and picked up her purse. "If you need anything, you call me. You and Lily can come stay at my place for a while if you want."

"Thanks, Mom," Harper said as the woman left, giving me the stink eye as she passed.

"She's upset with me. I can see that, but let me explain," I started, but Harper draped her arms around my neck and covered my mouth with hers. I kissed her deeply, using my foot to shut the door as I pulled her against my body. I missed her so much, and the worry I'd felt for the past hour and a half just washed away the minute she was in my arms.

"Owen, today was awful. I'm emotional, and I just want to feel close to you. Make love to me?" Harper asked, backing away. She took my hand and pulled me away from the door, and I followed her. I would really have liked to talk, to get her take on what happened. I wanted to help Wyatt as much as I wanted to smack him for being a fool. But that could wait. He was sleeping it off, and Harper was my priority. Whatever she wanted, she got.

"Lily is sleeping, so we need to be quiet."

"Understood," I told her, following her to the bedroom.

Harper

I led Owen to my bedroom, knowing this would be the last time we had sex. I loved him so deeply, but I couldn't keep coming between him and his son. My plan was to put distance between us to allow the situation time to settle and maybe for them to work things out. But I wanted him one last time, selfishly.

“God, I love you, Harper. I was so worried about you.”

The room was dark when we walked in, casting only moonlit shadows on the walls. My bed was unmade, sheets tousled from my restless night tossing and turning. I didn't bother turning on the lights. We didn't need them. Owen and I knew each other's bodies well enough to find our way in the dark.

“You don't have to worry about me anymore. I'm safe,” I told him, my heart breaking. I knew this was the last time, but he didn't. My safety would come in the form of distance, though I would walk through fire for him. I felt like that was what I was doing—walking away from him across a bed of hot coals, just to make sure he didn't lose his son.

Owen guided me down onto the bed, his mouth traveling over my neck and chest as he stripped off his clothes. I pushed him onto the bed, straddling him as he looked up at me with a mix of desire and sadness in his eyes. I took off my shirt and revealed my bare chest to him. Owen wrapped his arms around me, pulling me close. We kissed, long and deep, our tongues

exploring each other's mouths. Our bodies pressed together, desperate for one last moment of passion.

We continued kissing as he reached down to remove my yoga pants and panties. His touch was gentle yet urgent, a desperate need for a moment of intimacy. I felt his hardness against my thigh and knew he wanted me just as much as I wanted him.

He reached over the side of the bed and pulled a condom out of his pocket, laying it on the bedside table. I moved down his body as I kicked off my yoga pants. Owen took off his boxer briefs, and I saw his girthy cock standing at attention. It was hot to see him so hard for me, but that was nothing compared to what he would feel in the next few seconds.

I kissed down across his abs and dropped lower, taking him into my mouth. He moaned deeply, and I couldn't help but smile. Feeling someone as sexy and handsome as Owen's throbbing cock in my mouth filled me with an indescribable sense of power. I loved knowing I turned Owen on so much he could barely contain himself.

Rising up, I grabbed the condom off the table and knelt above him, pulling off my panties before rolling the condom down his shaft. His hands grabbed my breasts before maneuvering me over him. He braced his arms on either side of me and we stared into each other's eyes. "You are the best thing that ever happened to me," he whispered, and I had to blink back tears. He was the same for me too, but saying goodbye meant saving his family. I had to do it.

Owen slid inside me as I lowered myself onto him, both of us moaning at how good it felt to finally be connected again. We moved together slowly, prolonging every second as long as possible. Our bodies moved in unison. we'd been doing this for so long that our rhythm was almost intuitive. Each moan and sigh from me spurred him on to give more and more pleasure.

He rolled us over and reached his hands around my backside, gripping me, his fingers digging into my flesh. I had never seen him quite like this, so focused and driven to please

me. He pulled me into him, thrusting even harder. I knew he was close and wanted to please me right back. This was going to be hard to say goodbye to.

I rocked my hips back and forth, letting him touch every inch of me as I ran my hands across his fit body. “Harder, Owen! Harder! I want you to come inside me!” I tossed my head back as goosebumps covered my skin and I felt the beginnings of an orgasm starting in my toes.

My moans were turning into whimpers of pleasure as the tip of his cock hit across the sweetest spot deep inside me, over and over. Owen’s grunts told me he was close too as his thrusts became guttural and primal.

He lifted one of my legs over his shoulder and threw his head back in pleasure, thrusting as deeply into me as possible. I convulsed around his shaft. My body shuddered with an intense orgasm as Owen whispered, “Come for me, Harper.” I had never heard him sound quite so desperate or needy for anything before. It sent shivers down my spine.

I collapsed down on top of him, panting from exertion but still completely satisfied from our lovemaking session. It was more than I could have hoped for in terms of passion, though that didn’t make telling him goodbye any easier.

“It was amazing,” he whispered softly in my ear, “but I’m not done.” He never pulled out, continuing to slide in and out of me. I whimpered each time his head touched that spot inside me.

“Owen,” I whispered, “that was already so amazing.”

He pushed me off him and onto my back and placed himself between my legs. He moved down, kissing my stomach and moving closer toward my hips. I sucked in a deep breath as he kissed his way down my left thigh before moving to the other and kissing that one too.

“Owen,” I said again, but he was focused on my hips as he urged me to spread my legs further apart. The closer to my center he moved, the more nervous I felt. My entire body

shook when his lips neared the spot that had ached for him this whole time.

Moving over me, Owen kissed up and down my thighs. He was teasing me, driving me completely insane with lust. I was desperate for that familiar feeling of his tongue on my clit, but he was taking his sweet time with it. He ran two fingers across my slit first, spreading my wetness all over before dipping them slowly inside me.

He drew a figure-eight around my clit with his thumb as he gently pushed a finger inside me. “You’re really wet,” he said softly, though there wasn’t an ounce of surprise in his voice.

“It’s all for you, Owen,” I replied and moaned at his touch. My need for him was so great it could hardly be contained inside me anymore. He could tease me all day if needed.

He plunged deeper into me and added another finger, working them in and out of me as he pumped faster. His thumb worked magic on my soft folds.

Owen leaned forward to place his tongue on my clit, flicking it back and forth across the sensitive spot in less than a second. I moaned loudly, then sucked in a breath to contain the noise and not wake Lily.

I felt my insides tense up as Owen continued to work his magic. I pushed hard against his hand and enjoyed every second the orgasm ripped through my muscles, releasing all the stress and tension that had filled me up inside. He rode it out with me, not letting up with his movements as I came down from the momentous high.

I grabbed his hair and pulled him up, kissing him aggressively. I was ready for round two already—I needed more of him filling me up, more of his hands and lips on me. “You’re amazing,” I said, breathing heavily into his ear as he moved up over my breasts and stomach again with kisses. He stopped between my tits again and flicked at my nipple before licking it slowly. My hips bucked up to meet his hard cock.

“That again?” he asked with a sly smile before moving back up to kiss me and whispering in my ear, “I just wanted a

sample.”

“Ooh,” I whispered back in surprise, “that’s so nice.”

Owen laughed softly and dug his fingertips into my sides playfully, tickling me as we kissed. I was groaning with pleasure under the pressure of his fingers on my skin before he stopped and kissed my neck again softly.

“You are my everything, Harper,” he whispered as he slid into me again, meeting me in a new rhythm. I cried, not because I was overwhelmed with emotion during orgasm but because saying goodbye was going to hurt so badly. He didn’t know why I was crying, though, because I smiled through it. I wrapped my legs around him and raised my hips in time with his thrusts as he rocked into me, harder and deeper than ever. Our bodies moved perfectly in sync with one another as if nothing could stop us.

“Harder, Owen,” I moaned urgently, willing myself not to cry any more. I didn’t want to tell him that this would be the last time I’d be with him. The more of him I had, the better. We made love slowly, savoring every last moment of contact. The sex was deep and passionate, our love pouring out the way only two people who truly loved each other could. As I tried to memorize every sensation upon my body, my brain remembered the words he whispered to me just over twenty-four hours ago.

“I love you so much,” I moaned.

We thrust against each other, trying to reach that pinnacle of pleasure at the same time, holding on to one another as we did so. As I felt Owen erupt inside me, his dick throbbing and pulsing as he filled the condom, I kissed him hard. I was spent, no more climax left for me except to feel the last vestiges of this relationship as they fluttered away on the winds of change.

Owen lay beside me, and I lay there in tears. I didn’t stop them now. This was ripping my heart in two. The faster I got it over with, the better. I sat up, dangling my legs from the side of the bed as I watched Owen walk to the bathroom to dispose of the condom. When he came back and grabbed his boxers, I cleared my throat.

“Something wrong?” he asked, putting his boxers on. I was silent for a moment, but I knew I had to do this. Walking away from someone I still loved was the hardest thing I’d ever had to do.

“Owen, I can’t be with you.”

He froze in place and looked at me. He looked confused. Though it was dark in my room. It could have been anger too. “What are you talking about? We love each other.”

“Owen, I don’t think I can love you the way you need.”

He walked over and sat down beside me. “Is it Wyatt?”

I refused to tell him the real reason. If he knew I was doing this so he didn’t lose Wyatt, he would just refuse to go along with it. I knew he loved me a lot.

“It’s because of Lily.”

“But I love Lily,” he protested. “Harper, this doesn’t make sense. We’re so good for each other, and you said you loved me.”

“I might have been wrong. I’m not trying to hurt you. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt you. This” —I gestured to the bed— “was saying goodbye. I can’t do this, Owen. Not like this.” My heart was breaking, and all I wanted was to stop and just cling to him.

“I understand,” he said, standing. He collected his things, dressed quickly, then stood in front of me. “I’m not sure why you made this choice, but I respect it. And I love you. I will always love you. There will never be a time that I stop loving you. If you change your mind, you know how to find me.”

Owen leaned down and kissed me long and hard. I tasted my juices on his tongue, probably for the last time. And when he walked out, I curled up into a ball and cried myself to sleep. I prayed this was the right thing because if it was the wrong thing and I had just lost the best thing that had ever happened to me for no reason, I didn’t think I’d make it.

Owen

I stood on the front stoop for at least twenty minutes with a heavy heart. I knew Harper was pushing me away because of Wyatt. I didn't know if it was because she feared him coming after her again or if she thought I'd be better off without her, but I knew she wasn't truly just breaking up with me. We were doing great, and we'd confessed our love to each other only days ago. After months of being together and finally deciding it was worth it, why break up now?

Locking up after myself as I entered, I resolved to not give up fighting for her, but if space was what she needed, I had to give it to her. I made my way up the steps and stripped down to my boxers and climbed into bed. It was late—or early, I should say. The sun wasn't up yet, and neither was Wyatt, so I had to try to sleep. I didn't bother with showering. At least my skin would smell like hers for a few more hours.

I lay down and pulled the covers over myself and shut my eyes, but I couldn't sleep. No matter what position I lay in, I couldn't get comfortable. This whole thing had Wyatt written all over it. I wondered if he had told her she had to break up with me, if he scared her into it? Even if he had, her decision was made. I wasn't upset with her—hurt a little, yes, but not upset. If I wanted to fix what was going wrong with Harper, I had to fix what was going wrong with Wyatt, and that could be a chore.

Besides, he was still sleeping.

Despite lying there for nearly an hour, sleep refused to come. I had too much on my mind, and even the exhaustion of being up for nearly twenty-four hours straight couldn't help me shut down. So I got out of bed and threw some shorts on. I knew it would hit me later and I'd crash hard, so I took my phone from the pocket of my pants and headed downstairs to the kitchen.

I headed straight for the coffee maker and snagged a cup of brew, blueberry muffin. It was Wyatt's favorite. And while I didn't want to have a confrontation, I did want to talk to him. I hoped the scent would rouse him and he'd come downstairs and sit with me a bit. While I waited, I called the hospital to let them know I wouldn't be in. I needed time to process and probably take a nap.

The phone rang through and Chelsea picked up. "Hudson, floor three, this is Dr. Marshal," she said in a professional tone.

"Hey, Chels, it's Owen. I won't be in today. A family thing came up." I hated lying to her, but it wasn't a complete lie. This was definitely a family matter. I couldn't do my job if I wasn't on top of my game, though, and I had a week's worth of paid time off to burn.

"You sound tired. Is everything okay? Is it Wyatt?" Chelsea's voice was hushed, like she was trying to hide her questions from people around her. As a friend, she'd hear the details later, but for now, all she needed to know was that I wouldn't be in.

"We can chat about it later, okay? For now, just keep on top of my rounds for me? I have no surgeries scheduled and the calendar is already set. Things should go smoothly, but I'll keep my ringer on in case of an emergency." I heard movement upstairs and knew Wyatt was awake. "I have to go, okay? Just let me know if you need anything." As chief resident, Chelsea could handle things. "Oh, and you take the lead on all the residents today, too."

"Sure thing, Owen. I'll make sure everything runs smoothly, and I'll be here if you need to talk."

“Bye, Chels.” Just as I said goodbye, Wyatt rounded the corner at the bottom of the stairs and walked into the kitchen. His hair was messy, his clothes wrinkled. He yawned and stretched, and when he turned to look at me, he looked confused. “Good morning,” I told him, sipping my coffee. “There are blueberry K-cups in the cupboard if you want some coffee.” I tried to keep my tone even and calm, but I was anything but. I wanted to tear into him already, but I forced myself to stay calm. Shouting would do no good. Besides, Harper had been the one who made the decision to break up, not Wyatt. I had to fix things, not break them further.

Wyatt grunted and moved toward the coffee machine, and I took a deep, cleansing breath. I wasn’t sure where to start with him, but I knew I shouldn’t bring up Harper. My concern for Wyatt was that he got sober and beat this addiction, and Harper was a hurdle in his path to that healing, simply because he was emotionally attached to something that wasn’t going to happen for him.

“Sleep okay?” I asked, taking another sip of my coffee. I watched him pull out a mug and make his own cup of Joe before he turned and leaned on the counter with the steaming beverage in hand.

“I slept.” He looked confused as he sucked his hot coffee through his front teeth. “What am I doing here?”

The question struck me as odd, though Wyatt had been known to black out and forget entire days or nights. “You don’t remember?” I asked.

“I think I remember you telling me to go upstairs to sleep, but that’s about it.” He glanced at the front door. “Did I knock over a planter outside?”

I nodded. I was frustrated with that, but I kept my expression calm. “You don’t remember anything else?”

“Nah, why? Did something happen?”

I held my tongue. If he didn’t remember confronting Harper, then I wasn’t about to tell him. I set my mug on the bar and glanced up at the clock. I should have been at work,

maybe seeing Harper in the hallway as I headed out for rounds, but here I was, being forced to confront my adult son about his drinking habits.

“No, nothing.” He would find out sooner or later, but for now, my goal was to keep him calm. “You know, I’m worried about you, Wyatt. You were drinking and driving again last night. It’s very scary to a father to know his son takes that sort of risk. And imagine if you hit someone else.”

Wyatt’s face fell in shame, the first genuine show of remorse I’d seen on his face in months, years, maybe. He didn’t look back up at me, so I knew he was feeling guilty and maybe even upset with himself. His head hung there, eyes staring at the travertine tile, and I knew if I said the wrong thing, he’d blow up again.

“What did I do this time?” he asked calmly, and I knew I couldn’t lie.

“You nearly ran Harper over with your car. The hospital security caught it on tape and called me. She told me too.” I said nothing else, hoping his brain would stitch together the fabric of a memory which would speak for itself. He sighed deeply and slowly looked up into my eyes.

“You know I didn’t mean to do that. I care about her. I don’t want to hurt her. I just drink too much and then I lose my mind.”

The way he leaned on the cupboard, like it was the only thing holding him up, I felt sorry for him. He wasn’t a twenty-something maniac. He was my son, the little boy I raised, who had a very broken heart.

“I know, kid, but you have the power to stop this. All you have to do is get help with your drinking.” I picked up my mug and took a drink as I watched his features contort. I knew his others-centered contempt was about to flare up, even though he knew it was his own fault. He’d done this his whole life. If there was any way to blame someone else by any stretch of his imagination, he would do it.

“Well, if you hadn’t slept with my girlfriend, I wouldn’t be spinning out.” He set his coffee mug down and it sloshed onto the counter. Then he drew the back of his hand across his mouth and scowled at me.

“I didn’t sleep with her until after she had broken up with you.”

“But you thought about it. Admit it. You actually hoped she’d break up with me.” He stared at me, hands now turned to fists.

“I had thoughts about her, yes. But I never hoped she would break up with you. I hoped you’d get your act together because she is a very precious woman. She deserves better than the way you treated her.” He looked defensive, though my words seemed to steal some of his thunder, so I continued. “And if you must know, she broke up with me too.”

Wyatt looked up in surprise, but the anger was still there. He just stared at me for a moment, probably unsure how to take what I’d just said. When he broke the silence, I was surprised to hear what he said. “I’m sorry to hear that. She really is amazing.”

“Now, can I help you with the drinking thing? I really worry about you.” I stood, carrying my empty mug to the sink, and he shook his head.

“I don’t need my father parenting me anymore. Okay? I’m fine. Just stay out of my way and let me fix things with Harper, and things will go back the way they are supposed to be.”

“Things haven’t been the way they’re supposed to be in a long time, Wyatt. You need help.” I rinsed the mug and set it in the sink. My heart still went out to him, even when he was like this.

“I told you I don’t need help.”

“What about when you run your car off the road or kill someone?”

Wyatt glared at me and stormed out, slamming the front door. The only small consolation I had was that his car’s

radiator was done. If he wanted to drive, he was going to overheat the car and blow the head. Then he'd be driving nowhere.

I listened to his tires squeal on the pavement and knew he was gone. I had to help him even if he didn't want help. I pulled out my phone and called his office, knowing I'd get his boss. When the man answered, I felt years of stress weighing on my chest.

"Hey, Tom, it's Owen Thorpe."

"Yeah, Owen, it's great to hear from you. What can I do for you?" Tom was an old friend, back from the days of marriage and country club life. Back when Helen wasn't the monster she later became in our marriage.

"Listen, Tom, I need some help with Wyatt. His drinking is out of control again."

"Yeah, I noticed him drinking on the job a few times. Speaking of, he's not at work yet. Any bead on where he is?" I heard papers rustling in the background, and my jaw tensed. I shouldn't have to inform Wyatt's boss about his tardiness.

"He just left my house. He passed out here last night. Not sure if he's on the way to work or what." I took a deep breath. "What can I do to help him? Legally, I mean, if he refuses to grow up and he just keeps doing this, drinking and driving and such."

Tom sighed heavily. "That's a tough one, Owen. As a father, I know how concerned you are, but he's an adult. The only thing you can do is to report his drunken driving or public intoxication. He has to do the rest."

I knew in my gut that was the answer, but I wished it weren't. There was nothing I could do but wait for Wyatt to crash and burn—hopefully not literally. I ended the call with Tom, but the worry only got worse. I needed a nap or I was going to snap.

Harper

The smell of peanuts turned my stomach—again. It seemed like this entire baseball game, I’d felt sicker and sicker. Each time I smelled something strongly, I felt like I’d vomit. Lily, however, was having a grand time. She and Emma, Tori’s six-year-old daughter, were hitting it off, which was more than I could say for Ben and Tori. They were cordial, but I could tell Ben wasn’t really into it.

“Are you sure I don’t feel warm?” I asked for the third time, and Ben rested the back of his hand on my forehead.

“I’m sure. You’re not warm, Harper. Just enjoy the game. I’m sorry you’re feeling sick.” He had to half-shout to speak over the roaring crowd as the first baseman caught a ball and tagged the runner out. The game was moving quickly, ten to eight in the bottom of the sixth. It was almost time for the seventh inning stretch, which would feature a few of the mascots out on the field. Lily loved watching them.

“This is so much fun. Thanks for inviting me and Emma.” Tori leaned forward and looked past Ben in my direction. She was gorgeous, just not Ben’s type, apparently.

“Thanks for coming,” I told her. I was eager to be making another good friend, which was likely all that would come of this baseball game since Ben wasn’t interested. I had to give him credit, though. He was being a true gentleman, even though he made it clear to Tori that he wasn’t really planning to get into a relationship. He treated Emma and Lily like his

own kids, buying them popcorn and pretzels. When the Dippin' Dots cart rolled past, he got them each a dish of the multicolored ice cream treat. They were in love, and I was happy Lily was having a good time.

It was more than I could say for myself. With thoughts of Owen hitting me left and right, all I could do was mope and feel nauseous. I hoped I wasn't coming down with something that would later spread to Lily.

"Thanks, Ben, for the extra ticket. Harper told me you are a pediatrician? I can see you're great with kids." Tori munched on popcorn, and even from two seats away, her food sounds made me want to gag. I didn't know why I was so sensitive. I blamed the heat.

"Yeah, I'm a pediatric specialist, so not just a run-of-the-mill pediatric doctor. You're a physical therapist?" he asked, finally breaking into some conversation with her. I was content enough to watch the girls who sat to my left and let Ben and Tori chat. The girls were in the midst of a popcorn fight, throwing pieces at each other while giggling. They were happy, and I just let them have their fun.

The announcer came over the loudspeaker, letting the crowd know the kissing cam was making its rounds. I looked up at the big screen to see a cute couple who looked to be in their fifties. He smiled and took off his hat, puckering up to the lips of his beautiful bride. She blushed and took his hat and held it in front of their faces while he kissed her. The next unsuspecting couple was a teenager next to a cute little brunette. I thought for a second they could be siblings, but he laid one on her hot and heavy as the crowd went wild.

When the camera changed again, I froze. It was zoomed in on me and Ben. People around us started pointing and touching my shoulder. I panicked. Ben looked at me with cheeks tinted pink, and I instinctively scooped Lily up and placed her on my lap. "Give Uncle Benny a hug!" I told her over the din of the crowd, and she giggled and threw her arms around him. He laughed and kissed her on the cheek and winked at me, and the entire stadium laughed and roared. Lily

was the hit of the day, and I was an emotional wreck. When the camera panned away, I was fighting tears.

“Can you watch Lily? I’ll be right back. Just need to pee.” I stood and plopped her on Ben’s lap without asking again and squeezed past Tori and the couple on the end of the row. I barely made it to the bathroom before I broke down.

That kissing cam was supposed to be a fun thing, not a reason for tears, but here I was having a mental breakdown. I wanted Owen. I wanted his kisses on the kissing cam. I wanted his arms around me. I wanted his smiles and baseball games with him. I wanted love and marriage, and family, and babies.

I locked myself in a bathroom stall and sat on the toilet and sobbed. It wasn’t supposed to happen this way. I was supposed to be happy. Sneaking into Owen’s room that night was meant to give me back my power, not leave me gutted and heartbroken. Yet, here I was, melting at the sight of someone else kissing, wishing it was me. And Ben? How awkward was that? My best friend didn’t even know how wrecked I was about this, and I didn’t feel like I could tell him because he would just tell me he told me so.

My heart was hurting so badly, I didn’t know if I could go through with it. The idea of being a wedge between Owen and Wyatt ate at me, but not as much as the feeling of being away from Owen. I pulled my phone out and typed a huge message.

Harper 4:14 PM Owen, I made a huge mistake. I can’t do this. I need you. I said I couldn’t be with you, that I didn’t love you like that because I don’t want to come between you and Wyatt. It hurt so badly when Wyatt would talk badly about Lily, and I couldn’t imagine separating you from your son. But I need you. You’re my everything, the only thing I really want in life other than Lily. Please say you forgive me, that we can work this out.

My thumb hovered over the *Send* button as I stared down at my phone screen. I was sobbing, wishing Owen were here right now to hold me and comfort me, but the longer I stared at the message, the more I knew I could never send it. I couldn’t come between father and son.

“Hey! Come out of there. Other people need the toilet too.” A very angry woman banged on the door, and I jolted to my feet. I locked my phone, deciding I could never send the message, then slipped out.

“I’m sorry,” I told her, swiping at my eyes. She had a flash of remorse and then sympathy. Her brows drew together, and she frowned.

“God, I’m sorry, honey,” she said. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re the kissing cam lady.” She cocked her head and offered more compassion. “He’s not right for you?”

“He’s more like a brother. I came here to forget the man I just broke up with. that’s why I couldn’t kiss that man.” I sniffled and wiped my eyes again, then shoved my phone in my pocket. I walked out before anyone else questioned me and tried to make my face look as okay as it could before I got back to my seat.

The minute I sat down, Ben squeezed my hand and said, “It’s going to be okay, Harper. You’ll see. One day at a time.” He winked out the side of his eye, but there was no smile. It was like he knew, and that was all that I needed.

Ben was right. Lily seemed fine. If she could move on, so could I. And that’s what I had to do now—move on.

Owen

The gavel came down on the judge's bench, and Wyatt scowled hard. He wouldn't dare say anything to the judge, but I was certain the moment we walked out of the courtroom, he would let loose on me.

"Now," the judge said, finishing his statement, "your license has been revoked for six months pending your citations being paid. You have nearly five thousand dollars of fines due to the state and county. You can reduce these by going to traffic school, upon which time your license may be reinstated. That school runs for approximately one month, thus reducing your sentence by five months if you attend all the classes. I understand, Mr. Thorpe, that you voluntarily agreed to the rehab treatment facility after your last DUI arrest?"

Wyatt rolled his eyes. "I was sort of drunk when they coerced me into it."

"Your Honor, the man willingly signed the papers in an attempt to leave the station more quickly. We did no coercing at all. His father can attest to this." The detective who had gotten Wyatt to sign the agreement stood next to the prosecutor.

This hearing never had to happen. It wouldn't have happened if Wyatt had just done the damn rehab. In fact, none of this would have happened and I would still be with Harper.

For two weeks now, she'd ghosted me on every platform. The one brief interaction we had at work was strictly

professional, the way it should have been, but I saw the pain in her eyes. I wanted to go to her and comfort her, but the most I could do was send her a good morning text message every single day.

“Mr. Thorpe, Senior?” asked the judge.

I stood and addressed him. “Yes, sir. The detective is correct. Wyatt signed the rehab agreement of his own accord.” I knew he’d be furious, but I wasn’t going to lie to a judge for him.

“Then, Mr. Thorpe, Junior, we have nothing left to discuss. You are to hand over your license to the bailiff, and you may attend the traffic school at your leisure. The fines must be paid before you can get your license back. This is a very serious offense, son. You are lucky you haven’t killed someone by now.”

Wyatt said nothing, glaring at the judge as the gavel came down again to dismiss the session of court. Wyatt had a few choice words for his public defender, and then I followed him into the hallway. He was livid, understandably, but he had only himself to blame.

“Let’s go downstairs and pay those fines,” he barked, carrying the paperwork from his lawyer.

“You have the money for that?” I asked, putting the onus back on him. He stopped and looked at me with confusion.

“No, you always do this.”

“I have to stop bailing you out, Wyatt. You need to grow up and take responsibility for your actions. You’re going to hurt someone. You’d be better off to just serve the entire six-month suspension and get clean.” I stopped, refusing to move. The crowd from the courtroom filed out, shuffling past us into the wide hallway. Wyatt had to move aside for another traffic offender to come out. This one was in a wheelchair, his drunken driving charge one that came with worse consequences than Wyatt’s.

“But you always do this.”

“No. Not this time,” I told him sternly. “You have to do this on your own. My bailing you out teaches you nothing. You have to learn the hard way.”

“God, I hate you. You can’t even help me?” He leaned close, and I could smell the beer on his breath. He reeked of it. I didn’t understand how his lawyer could let him go to court like this. This was way out of my league of responsibility. It was about time the courts cracked down on him, and I wasn’t going to help cushion the blow this time.

“I’m sorry, Wyatt. You have a problem. You need help. This is the only way I know to help.” It broke my heart to be so cold to my son, but I didn’t know what else to do. This had nothing to do with Harper or how she left me. It was purely about getting him help.

“You know what? Maybe Harper was never the problem. Maybe my father is just a huge jerk.” He shook his head.

“Wyatt, please go to rehab. Please go back and beg that detective for the deal. I’ll pay every cent of the bill. You need help.” I took a step toward him, but he shied away.

“Screw you, and screw your help. I don’t need you.” He stormed off, and I was left watching him walk away, wondering if it was the last time I’d see him alive. If he went off the deep end and got drunk again, I wasn’t sure what he’d do.

“It’ll be okay,” said a friendly voice. I looked up and saw Tom standing there. “He’ll get the help he needs. He just has to hit rock bottom.” I had no idea Tom was in the courthouse today, but I was glad I wasn’t the only one seeing this.

“Thanks. I need to go, Tom,” I told him, frowning. I walked out and got in my car feeling hopeless. Nothing with Harper would ever happen if Wyatt was still going off the deep end. I slowly started my car and put it in gear. I needed to see her, to ask her if there was any chance we could have anything in the future. If there was nothing for us, then I didn’t know what I had left to motivate me. She hadn’t responded to any of my messages, and I just needed that sliver of hope.

I drove to her apartment and parked, seeing her car outside. I sat there trying to work up the courage to go up and knock on her door when a car pulled up. A guy got out, someone I recognized but couldn't place. He walked around the car and opened the back door, and I watched him pull Lily out of his back seat. My heart leapt into my throat. He cradled her as if he knew her, like he cared for her, and Harper climbed out of the passenger seat.

He put his arm around Harper while carrying Lily on his chest and walked them to the building. She had her head on his shoulder, and she didn't look so good, like she was sad or ill. I wanted to leap out of my car and confront them. It didn't look at all like she was hurting and missing me. It looked like she had moved on.

Then I finally placed the face. That was a pediatrician Harper worked with regularly. She was his nurse. That's where I had seen him. Had she been seeing him this whole time too? Did she dump me to be with him?

My head spun and my heart raced. I was upset, to say the least, but I wasn't about to confront her the way Wyatt would. I needed to think about this logically. I needed to calm down. There had to be an explanation for this. Harper loved me, right? Or was that in my head?

Harper

The bar was loud, too loud, but the company was good. Tori sat across from me sipping her Mai Tai while her friend Jordan made googly eyes at some man across the bar. I'd been approached several times, but I decided I was not going to do the whole rebound thing again. Not this time. Owen wasn't someone I could rebound from. He was part of me. He was a part of me I never wanted to let go of, and the thought of moving on from him hurt so badly, even more than a month later. He still sent me good morning texts every morning, but I'd trained myself not to read them. Thirty-six notifications on my phone I had yet to check. I wondered how high the number would get.

"You're stuck in your head again!" Tori shouted over the music, and I forced a smile. She was right. I'd been stuck in my head for days now, so it was no surprise that I struggled with enjoying the night.

"Sorry, it's loud in here." The music faded between songs, but I did have the thought to ask the bartender to turn it down a smidge. I was certain everyone in the place would benefit from it. Instead, I sipped my diet soda and tried to enjoy the evening. I had been out with Tori a few times after the baseball game. She and Ben hadn't hit it off, but that didn't mean I couldn't be friends with her. It was good to get out of the house.

“It was nice of Ben to watch your daughter. It’s a shame he’s not ready to date. He’s so amazing.” Tori gushed about Ben again, the third time tonight. We had lunch together a few times, and the more she got to know him, the more she liked him, but he just wasn’t ready. What wasn’t to like, anyway? Ben was incredibly attractive, patient, and kind, and he was a hopeless romantic too.

“Yeah, it’s too bad. You two would have been great together.” I set my drink down and noticed the ladies’ drinks were getting empty again. As designated driver, I kept the refills coming for them, and it was almost that time again.

“God, Tori, I have to pee,” Jordan whined. The more she drank, the less I liked her, but she was Tori’s friend, not mine. Tori rolled her eyes.

“Fine, I’ll go with you. Harper, you want to get another round?” Tori asked, sliding off her seat. She glanced around the room and said, “Unless some cute guy out there happens to buy us a round.”

I chuckled. “Go, I’ll get the drinks.” I watched them sashay off toward the bathrooms and sighed. I was tired, and being the designated driver wasn’t as much fun as it used to be. I just wanted to go home and cuddle Lily and maybe watch a movie with Ben. The bar wasn’t my scene. But I was their ride, so I put on my happy face and walked up to the bar. While I was waiting for the bartender to notice me standing there, I scanned the faces of the people seated around the horseshoe-shaped bar.

A man sat with his head down, broad shoulders slumped. His hair had streaks of gray at the temples, reminding me of Owen. I sighed and looked down at my hand, cash ready to tip the barkeep. Everyone reminded me of Owen so much that I didn’t even want to leave the house, yet here I was, in a bar of all places, thinking of him.

“What can I get you?” the bartender asked, approaching me. I looked up at him, but my forced smile wouldn’t come.

“Same as last time. Mai Tai and a sex on the beach.” I slid the cash toward him, and he took it and walked away, and

when I glanced over to where the man had been slumped on the bar, he was gone. I felt like his posture perfectly matched how my heart felt.

I was startled when I sensed someone coming up behind me and sitting on the bar stool. I turned abruptly to see the same man, same brown faded polo, same gray streaks at the temples. His eyes were puffy and sunken in, his beard unkempt. He looked tired and sad, and it cut me to my core when I recognized him.

“Owen?” I had to blink my eyes a few times for it to really register that this haggard-looking man was the man I loved.

“Harper,” he said, reaching out to take my hand. I didn’t pull away, but I wasn’t comfortable. I didn’t want to send the wrong signals.

“Yeah, it’s me. What on earth are you doing here? You don’t drink like this.” I glanced at the bartender who was busily making the drinks, then at the bathroom door. If Tori saw me with him, I’d never hear the end of the questions.

“Just needed a distraction.” When he spoke, I did not smell the stench of alcohol like I expected. That was a good thing. “I’m just having soda. I’m not like Wyatt, okay?”

I pulled my hand away as the music faded. We didn’t have to speak so loudly, but my heart was screaming. He looked awful, the way I felt inside, and I could only assume that it was because he was as torn up about things as I was. I knew it would be difficult, but I hadn’t meant to do this to him. It was about Wyatt, saving their relationship, not ruining Owen. My heart hurt worse now, just seeing him like this.

“You look like you haven’t eaten. Are you doing okay?”

He shrugged and turned to face the bar, planting his elbows in front of himself as the bartender delivered the drinks. His eyes swept the room after seeing them, then he looked back at me. “I’m okay.”

“How’s Wyatt? Is he doing better?” I knew it was a very sensitive subject, but I had to know. It was the only reason I

had put so much space between us. My sacrifice had to be for something.

“He’s not good.” Owen’s head hung. “Still drinking a lot. He barely speaks to me now. His license is suspended and he took a leave of absence from work. Last time we spoke, uh . . . last week sometime, he was still talking about you. He knows he screwed up.”

I saw Tori leaving the bathroom, followed by Jordan, and I tensed. I wanted to stay here with him, talk, catch up. I wanted nothing more than to go home with him and never leave his arms again, but if things still weren’t good with Wyatt, there was no way we would make it. Not to mention the fact that it would drive them further apart.

“Look, Owen, I’m really sorry, I . . .”

His eyes brimmed with tears, and he turned and cupped my cheek. “You don’t respond to my messages.”

“I . . .”

“And I miss you so much, Harper.” He leaned forward, and I fawned, melting as his lips pressed against mine. Sparks flew, igniting a raging fire in my chest. I wanted him, needed him, but he was off limits. It was dangerous and risky. I pulled away, but he caught my wrist and looked me in the eye. “Tell me you don’t miss me and I’ll let go. Tell me you don’t love me anymore, Harper.”

I couldn’t. I’d never outright lie to him about that. He didn’t deserve that. When I broke it off saying it was about Lily, it’s because I feared for Lily’s safety—and mine—if Wyatt came after me again. Now I stood trembling, ready to cave in and run back to him because he was everything I wanted in life and so much more, but my heart stopped me.

“Owen, I’m with someone else.” The lie marched off my tongue like an assassin going out to make its kill. He shrank back and frowned. My words sliced through his heart, tearing him to pieces, and all I could do was sit and watch it happen. I wasn’t seeing anyone. I’d never see anyone again. I wanted him, not someone else, but I had no way of making him see

that he needed to focus on his son now. “I’m sorry,” I whimpered, reaching for him, but he stood and backed away. I couldn’t breathe. It was like the pain I’d inflicted on him was multiplied and worsened as he stared at me with horror and pain.

“I should go,” he mumbled and dropped a few dollars on the bar before turning. “Good luck, Harper.”

I watched him walk away, stunned and aching, and Tori walked up and picked up the drinks. “Who’s that? He’d be cute if he cleaned himself up.” She was too buzzed to notice I was on the verge of tears.

“I’m going to pee. I’ll be back,” I told her, leaving her with the drinks. I found myself locked in a bathroom stall sobbing again, only this time, there was no woman banging on the door demanding that I leave.

What had I done? I had hurt the person I loved most in this entire world next to my daughter, and I felt like a monster.

Owen

I parked in front of the house and shut the engine off, not really wanting to go inside. I saw a light on in the guestroom where Wyatt slept when he stayed over. It meant he was here, though his car was in the city impound after being towed off a street in front of a bar a few weeks ago. When I looked up at the window, I saw a silhouette of someone moving around, then another person. It was definitely Wyatt and some guest he had, a woman I assumed when I watched him peel a shirt off over her head. I looked away.

My heart was so heavy after seeing Harper at that bar, knowing she was with someone else. I didn't see the man there. That was probably a good thing. I may have just ruined things for her by kissing her in front of him, but hopefully, he didn't see. I didn't want to hinder her chances at happiness, even if that happiness wasn't with me. And I didn't want to pressure her, either. I resolved to stop sending her good morning texts because she was seeing someone else, but that didn't mean I was going to stop trying.

I had poured every ounce of emotional energy I had into helping Wyatt recover. He'd do good for a few days, then he'd go on a bender. I was exhausted and mentally drained, but I kept trying. This, however, this blow to my ego, Harper dating someone else, might just be the thing that took it out of me. What was the point in fighting if she had moved on? And why had she moved on so quickly?

I waited a while longer, almost nodding off in the car, when I decided Wyatt and his friend were probably done with their escapade. When I walked in, the house was quiet. All of the downstairs lights were off, so I flipped one on so I could see my way to the stairs. As I mounted the first few steps, Wyatt appeared at the top of the staircase. He swayed where he stood, revealing his drunken state. I wasn't surprised.

"You're home? I thought you went out."

"Do you always make it a habit of coming into my home to have sex with random women when I'm gone?" I continued climbing, and he scowled at me.

"What's your problem? You're usually chill about this stuff. I thought you wanted me around." Wyatt leaned against the wall as I got to the top step. I could smell the Hennessy on his breath and knew I didn't want to be around him if he kept drinking it.

"I want you around, Wyatt. I just want you sober." I rubbed my tired eyes and sighed.

"Like you never had a little fun in your life."

I looked at him, bare-chested and disheveled hair. I had never in my life stooped so low as to using my parents' house as a hookup location. I wondered if he even had an apartment anymore, given that he hadn't been working.

"I'm going to bed."

"Seriously, Dad, what's your problem?" Wyatt sounded aggressive, and I didn't want to argue. It was the strong whiskey. I was certain.

"I saw her, okay? And it messed me up, and I just want to sleep." I walked away, not even caring how he reacted. Nothing I'd said or done for more than a month had made a difference. I'd lost my son to alcohol and the woman of my dreams because of that. How could anything make that better? It was completely out of my control because humans have self-will. They can choose what they want, and Harper chose someone else, and Wyatt continued to choose alcohol.

It was time for me to choose me.

I locked myself in my room and put on some music so I didn't have to hear Wyatt, then I started the hot water in my shower and stripped off. Stepping beneath the flow, I prayed the steam would melt away my emotions, but it didn't. All I could think about was Harper, how it felt kissing her. How close she was tonight, and how much I wanted her in my arms. I would do anything to protect her and make her feel like the happiest woman alive, but I was being stonewalled.

I turned, leaning my forearm against the shower wall and then resting my forehead on that. Thoughts of her plagued me, teasing me and arousing me. Memories of her hands on me, her lips touching mine, her breasts crushed against my chest. I wanted her, and my dick swelled just imagining how it would feel to have her again, to hold her and tell her I loved her. I wanted to marry her, keep her forever.

I touched myself, letting the water stream over my body. I needed release to get rid of these thoughts of Harper that teased me. The way her lips felt tonight ignited a lust inside me I couldn't forget. I missed the way she felt around me, her tight pussy gripping my cock, so I stroked myself, trying to remember every sensation.

I pictured her there, kneeling in front of me with her mouth open, waiting for me to come so she could swallow every drop of cum I shot into her. I wanted her lips around me so badly, to feel the way her tongue glided along my shaft as she sucked hard and stroked me, full of my cock, licking and sucking me, until I exploded in her mouth. I stroked harder, my arousal growing stronger by the second.

I thought of her on top, riding me like a captive stallion. Out of nowhere, a vague image of Harper's body atop mine, rubbing her pussy all over my body as we kissed. It was so vivid in my mind. I lathered more soap across my cock, stroking harder and feeling close to coming.

She was there in my mind, taunting me. Her tits smeared across my chest, covered in my cum, slipping against my skin. Stroking faster, I pictured her kneeling on the bed, facing away from me, her smooth ass full and round, wet from being spanked by my hand. My cock wanted her more than anything

in the world, so I was imagining her in every position I could think of.

I gripped my cock tighter, shafting myself over and over again as I panted, getting closer to the edge. I thought of how good it felt when she had pulled on my hair while we made love. Pent up sexual energy was building inside me, so I imagined her back on top of me between the sheets with our clothes off, kissing and licking me feverishly, making passionate love to each other. A soft tingling emanated from my balls, and I knew what was coming soon.

When it did, there was no holding back. The cum blew out of me like a dam bursting. A feeling of exhilaration came over me. My legs weakened and my knees buckled as stiff waves burst forth in short trails into the water. As I caught my breath, I closed my eyes and replayed the fantasy of Harper on top of me, sucking my throbbing shaft until I came down her throat in one long, thick stream. Slowly, the aftermath subsided, and I washed off the remaining soap from myself, shivering a bit from the sudden coldness that prickled my skin.

Then I felt ashamed. Harper didn't deserve my lustful fantasies. She meant more to me than just some imagination. She made me want her like no one else. In the end, masturbation was all I could let myself enjoy because I couldn't have her now. Not anymore.

I washed myself and the wall of the shower, then I shut off the water and dried off. I didn't feel any better at all, but at least my sexual frustration was slightly relieved. I put on some boxers and climbed into bed ready to sleep it off. I prayed that in the morning, Wyatt would be sober and I could talk to him about going to rehab again. I had to give it one last shot. After that, I wasn't sure what else I could even do.

Harper

I glanced at the clock on my phone as I pushed the cart down the aisle. I still needed to get cereal and milk, some juice for Lily, and a new bottle of children's fever reliever. Lily was feeling much better, but I was out and I didn't want her to come down with something and not have what I needed. The store was packed, people loading up on supplies for the weekend. With a festival in town, most of the women wore bikini tops and short shorts, while the men dressed in cut offs and had cases of beer under each arm and in each hand.

Oh, the days of partying until I dropped. But life was better now with Lily, fewer hangovers and less drama, at least. The worst thing I had to deal with was the occasional call from her father asking how she was, but that happened about once a year. I was very content to be a single mother and save myself the trouble.

I turned a corner toward the drink row and nearly ran into Sierra, a fellow nurse at Hudson. She had two bottles of wine and a huge smile. "Harper! You're going to Alive Fest too?" Her grin was gorgeous, but I was about to ruin that.

"Uh, no. I have a toddler at home who needs me to bring juice and crackers." I nodded at the cart full of groceries, and she snickered. No doubt, she was already buzzed and ready to party.

"That's a shame. I heard that the band Righteous Indignation was planning to hang with the crowd tonight. You

know their lead singer is pretty chill. We smoked together last year at—”

“Sierra, I really don’t have time to talk.” I tapped my foot as her head bobbed knowingly.

“Yeah, I get that. Kids are such a hassle. You have to literally do everything for them, and then they don’t even thank you. They just grow up and get married and move away.” She sighed and shifted a wine bottle from one hand to the other. “Too bad you can’t get a sitter and come hang out.”

People like Sierra never get it. I wasn’t interested, but I played along, hoping it would get me out of the conversation faster and on my way. Mom had places to go, and I needed to get home to Lily. “Yeah, it’s a shame. I have to go be a mom now, so I should let you get off to the festival. Have a good time. Can’t wait to hear the stories.” I started pushing the cart, and to my surprise, she just said goodbye and walked away.

With the last few things I needed, I headed to the checkout and lined my items up on the belt. The cashier rang me up and bagged my groceries, and I was finally on my way. Another quick glance at my phone told me I had only delayed by another five minutes, but Mom expected me twenty minutes ago. She would be upset, but I had to have groceries. As I pushed the cart across the parking lot, I reached into my pocket and pulled out my key fob, disarming my car. With a push of a button, the trunk popped open, and I stopped behind it, unloading my groceries as quickly as possible.

“Hey,” I heard, and I froze. Slowly, I turned to see Wyatt swaying toward me. His eyes were glazed over, barely open. He carried a large bottle of some sort of liquor, and I could already tell this wasn’t going to be pleasant.

“Hi, Wyatt,” I mumbled as I put the last few things in the trunk and shut it. I tried to keep the empty cart between myself and him, but he pushed it out of the way.

“Harper, you drive fast,” he slurred, taking a few steps closer. He leaned in, and I gagged at the stench of alcohol.

“What do you mean, I drive fast? Have you been following me? How much have you had to drink?” I took a step back, but he pursued me, leaning his head down closer to mine.

I glanced around the parking lot frantically. I had places to go, and now he had me terrified.

“Yeah, I went to meet you at the hospital, but you were driving, and so I followed you here.” He could barely stand, leaning on my trunk for support as he took another step closer.

“Wyatt, I’m in a hurry. Mom has Lily, and I have to get home to her.” I thought I’d gotten rid of this problem when I broke up with Owen.

“No, you need to talk to me. We’re not really done, Harper.” He grabbed my wrist, and I whimpered.

“You’re hurting me.” I tried to pry his fingers off my wrist, but he was too strong. “Please, I need to go home.” I was shaking, wishing he’d just get help and leave me alone. It was such a mistake getting involved with him to begin with.

“Hey, are you okay?” A man’s voice caught my attention, and I looked over my shoulder at him. He moved toward me looking concerned.

“I was just telling my ex-boyfriend here that I need to get home to my daughter.” The tone I used hopefully conveyed that I was not happy and that I wasn’t wanting a scene. His eyebrows rose as he looked at Wyatt.

“Sir, how about I talk to you for a second? Do you know anything about cars?”

Wyatt knew nothing about cars, but his ego was so big I knew the man would be successful in luring him away from me. There was nothing he loved more than to be the center of attention. “Yeah, a little,” he slurred.

“Can you come look at my car? I think I need a jumpstart.”

The man nodded at me as Wyatt moved in his direction, and I almost cried. I was so relieved. I didn’t even bother looking down at my phone again. I just climbed in and locked the door. Wyatt had pushed the cart far enough away from my

vehicle that I could back out, so I did. I left the cart and drove toward the parking lot exit. Traffic was backed up, so I had to sit and wait a bit, glancing at the time. I thought about texting Mom, but cars started to move, so I opted for just hurrying home.

My hands were still shaking when I turned down Hickory street, nervously glancing at my rearview mirror. I noticed a car a few car lengths back, swerving and weaving through traffic. My heart sank. It was Owen's car. Wyatt had taken his own father's car to come and find me. For a moment, I considered driving straight to the police station, but Mom was waiting. I hated to disappoint her, so I just drove faster.

It didn't matter if I turned down odd streets or drove in excess of the speed limit. Wyatt pursued me. He took risks, driving through red lights and running stop signs, and I was getting more scared by the second. When he was directly behind me on a four-lane road, I panicked and sped up, but he tried to pass me. Horns honked at him and other drivers swerved to miss him as he cut me off. He slammed on his brakes, and I had to swing out around him to not cause an accident.

Terrified, I pulled my phone out with shaking hands and dialed 9-1-1 while I drove. I wasn't about to stop. He'd be on me in minutes, and I had no idea what he would do. So I broke the law and used my phone while driving. The call barely connected when Wyatt sped up again and tried to cut me off, but this time, the rear of his car clipped the front corner of my car and my car spun out. My head slammed against the window and I was tossed around like a rag doll.

The last thing I remembered was the sound of my horn going off before everything went black.

Owen

“**T**here you go, Mrs. Graham. These burns are going to heal slowly, but with consistent application of the ointment prescribed, your scarring should be minimal.” I stood and tucked the tablet under my arm. “I’ll get the nurse to finish the paperwork, and we’ll send you home.”

“Thank you, Dr. Thorpe. I appreciate it.” She smiled at me, still nursing the badly burned skin on her arm. She was lucky the grease fire only burned her arms. As I walked out of the ER exam room, I thought about how fortunate she was that her entire house hadn’t burned down.

I met Chelsea at the nurse’s station where she was reporting in on a trauma surgery. She leaned over the desk, talking softly so as not to share personal information too loudly with the crowded ER, and I waited for her to see me. When she straightened and turned, she nearly ran into me.

“Oh, Owen, what are you doing down here?” She hugged her tablet to her chest and pulled her hair net off. “This is your day off.”

“Yeah, well, Phil wanted the weekend off, and I need something to do or I’m going to drive myself crazy. I’ve been picking up extra shifts, helping out where I can to stay busy.” Phil, head of the ER, took his wife boating this weekend, and rather than sit around moping because I missed Harper, I volunteered to run the ER for him.

“Yeah, but a world-class surgeon running the ER?” She snickered.

“I’m not quite world-class, but thanks. And yeah, it’s where I got my start—trauma surgery unit.” I nodded at an exam room. “Want to help me with a toddler who has a piece of crayon stuck in his ear?” I didn’t need the help, but Chelsea was great with kids, so I figured I’d give her a shot.

“Nope, that’s all you. After pulling that bullet out of that teenager, I’m done for the day. My heart just can’t take any more.” She patted my arm. “Good luck.”

She walked away, and I held my tablet up, scanning the child’s chart to be sure I knew what I was doing when I went into the room. The alarm sounded, indicating a bus pulling up, and when it sounded again, I knew we had a double. Before the medics got the back opened up, the driver circled around and started barking stats. I moved toward the door, knowing whatever this was probably outranked the child with something in his ear.

“Need O2, STAT. Middle-aged woman with lacerations to her face and arms, possible broken sternum, broken radius, possible concussion. Pupils are not reactive, patient has been in and out of consciousness.” I walked right up and took his tablet, airdropping the files to mine quickly.

“And the second bus?” I asked, handing it back.

“Second victim of a car accident. Drunken driver, no major injuries. He just needs a few stitches and to sober up before PD picks him up.” The driver went to the back of the bus and opened it, and I stood reading the chart of the woman I knew needed my help first. With three other doctors in the ER right now, someone else would pick up the child and the drunk driver. After my dealings with my own son, I had no interest in seeing whoever caused this. My heart went out to this poor woman before I even saw her.

“Take her to trauma one. I’ll be there in a second,” I shouted, turning my back for a second. I didn’t see Chelsea anywhere, so I pulled out my phone and paged her. If surgery

was needed, she was the one I wanted on it. I couldn't be a surgeon right now, not when I had an emergency room to run.

After the page was sent, I turned back and saw the medics wheeling the gurney into trauma one, so I followed them. I saw the blood on the sheets before anything else. The woman was cut badly, and I'd have to stitch her up for sure. Her hair was strewn over her face, matted with the sticky red fluid, but when she sat up to vomit over the side of the bed, my heart froze.

“Oh, God,” I mumbled. “Harper . . .”

I glanced over my shoulder as the second bus backed up to the door. I knew it was my son. I just knew it. For a split second, I was frozen to the floor, heart pounding, unsure what to do. Legally, I could treat her—we weren't together anymore. But physically, I felt my anxiety skyrocketing. I couldn't lose her. When I had that thought, my brain kicked into gear and I went to work.

“Need vitals, STAT. Let's order a CT scan and X-rays. I need to make sure there is no severe head trauma.” I gave orders to the nurses surrounding the gurney as the medics backed out, their job done.

“Sir, we need a pregnancy test and her medical records to make sure she's not allergic to anything.” The charge nurse used scissors to cut up the leg of Harper's pants, starting to strip her naked. We had to make sure nothing else was broken or bleeding. I almost told them to skip the pregnancy test because I didn't think for a second that she was pregnant, but I remembered that night more than a week ago at the bar where she told me she was seeing someone else.

“You're right. I'll have Ken pull up the records. Run the test then get her to X-ray immediately. Meanwhile, keep her hooked up. Let's pump some fluids. She has a lot of blood loss. I'm going to check on the male patient and be right back.”

I stepped out, overcome by emotion. My hands shook as I walked toward exam room five. One of the drivers walked in carrying a large plastic bag with a few things in it. I

recognized it immediately as Harper's purse and keys. "Sir, this is the female victim's things. You should be able to get an ID out of the purse." I didn't tell him I didn't need an ID, but I thanked him and walked straight to the desk.

"Ken, we need full medical on Harper Black, birthdate April 20, 1996." I tapped my finger on the desk, and he looked up at me, typing away on his keyboard.

"Sending to your tablet now," he said, punching a few more keys. I felt the bag of Harper's things vibrate and knew it was her phone. For any other patient I'd have ignored it and let the nurses deal with it, but when I looked into the bag and saw her mother's face on the caller ID, I knew I had to answer. I picked it up and swiped right.

"Miriam, this is Dr. Thorpe."

"Oh . . ." She sounded stunned. "Owen, I thought Harper broke up with you."

Telling a parent their child was injured was always the hardest thing to do. "Today I'm Dr. Thorpe, not Owen, okay?"

"Oh, God," she muttered. "What happened?"

"Harper was involved in a car accident with a drunk driver. She's in the ER right now. I don't have details, but it looks like a few broken bones, possibly a concussion. I'm taking really good care of her. Do you have Lily, or do you know who does?"

"She's with me." Miriam sounded like a ghost. "Should I come down there?"

"Your place is with Lily right now. keep her calm and happy. I'll take care of Harper and update you as soon as we know anything. Okay?"

"Yes, go . . . take care of her."

She hung up, and I put the phone back in the bag and turned it over to Ken. "Send that chart to Becky. She needs it to get started on the imaging."

When I passed the exam room where they'd taken Wyatt, I wasn't even a bit surprised. My gut told me it was him before I

even saw him, and this was exactly what I needed to force him into rehab. I was furious with him, so angry, in fact, that I couldn't even go in the room. I stopped the hospital deputy mid-stride and said, "Ray, you need to go in there and cuff my son. He caused this accident, and if he has a chance, he will get up and walk out. PD will come take him, but as operating director of the ER, I'm asking you to take care of this."

Ray's eyes widened. "Your son?"

"Yeah."

"God, Owen, that's horrible. You're right. I'll babysit him until PD gets here."

"Owen!" I heard Chelsea's voice and spun around. "You paged?"

"Yes, we may need surgery." My throat clenched, my breath catching. "It's Harper."

She blanched and followed me toward the room. The nurses were preparing to wheel Harper's gurney out of the room, but I saw her stirring as I approached. "Uh, Chels, give me a sec?" I asked, and she nodded.

"Sir, she's pregnant, so we have to be careful with the X-rays. I'm going to limit the CT to the head only unless you think her vitals indicate internal bleeding." Becky was busy adding a bag of fluids to the IV port as she spoke, and I looked up at Harper's vitals.

"You're right, Becky. Now, can I have a second with the patient?" She gave me a strange look, then waved the others out. As soon as the curtain was shut around us, Harper moaned and blinked her eyes several times.

"Owen, what's going on?" Her voice was weak and shaky.

"You were in an accident. We need to do some imaging, Harper. You might have broken bones and a head injury." My knees felt weak. "Did you know you're pregnant?"

Her head bobbed as she looked up at me, dazed. "I'm what?" she asked, pressing a hand to her head.

“Harper, you’re pregnant.” I moved closer, reaching for her hand. “Is it mine? Did you know?”

She shook her head, acting confused. I couldn’t blame her. She had just suffered something very painful and traumatic, all at the hands of my son. When she leaned over the edge of the bed to vomit again, I knew I was getting nowhere with her.

“Owen, I’m . . .” She started sobbing and continued vomiting, and her alarms started going off for her heart rate getting out of control. I took a step back, realizing I was an idiot for confronting her right now. Becky rushed back in and pushed past me.

“Alright, little lady, let’s get you to X-ray.” She turned to me. “Excuse me, Doc.”

I backed out in shock. As Becky and two other nurses wheeled Harper past me, my chest tightened. I bumped into Chelsea, who was looking at a tablet. She mumbled something about a stent to drain fluid, and that’s when panic hit me. My world felt like it was falling apart. Everything was happening so quickly.

And then I saw him. The man who had been carrying Lily that day. Dr. Ben Wilks. He had a smile on his face as he strolled up to the desk where Ken sat.

“You,” I snapped, moving toward him. “What are you doing here?”

I could have choked him. If he was dating Harper, why wasn’t he with her? Why hadn’t he been protecting her? It was irrational and I was furious, and I had no clue how to control myself.

“Whoa!” he said, holding his hands up defensively.

“Yo, Doc, he’s here for his check,” Ken said, waving a white envelope in the air.

It made me calm down, but I was still enraged. How could this guy smile when Harper was lying there in pain? Unless he didn’t know . . .

“Dr. Thorpe, is something wrong?” Ben asked, cocking his head.

“Exam room three,” I said, not even thinking twice. “Child with something in his ear. Go take care of it. I have a trauma patient.”

I turned and walked away, catching a glimpse of Chelsea’s worried expression. I was losing it. I needed a moment away from here to think. Why wouldn’t Harper tell me she was pregnant? How could she hide that from me? Given the HCG levels on her chart, she was well into her second month too, which meant she either cheated on me or it was mine.

Oh, God. I was going to be a father, if something horrible didn’t happen to her.

Harper

I awakened again to the clicking and beeping sounds of the machines in the room, and again, for a moment, I was confused. I looked around, this time not in an emergency exam room but a hospital room. Ben sat by my side with his head down. He looked to be nodding off or praying, but he wasn't the praying type that I knew. I looked down at my arms, now clean. The blood that had caked them the last time I woke up was gone now, but the IV remained.

I cleared my throat, and Ben looked at me, eyebrows high. "Hey, girl, how are you? My gosh, I was worried about you." His hand shot out and captured mine. He cradled it gently. His normally bright blue eyes were a steely gray, evidence that he truly was worried. I didn't speak because he jumped in and did it for me. "I called your mom. I guess someone called her earlier. She knows what's happening. She canceled her plans and is staying with Lily until she can come visit. When I'm done here, I'll get Lily and take her to my place so your mom can come up here. I was just here and I couldn't leave you alone."

I forced a smile. My head hurt so badly it was difficult, but with Ben I never needed to fake anything, so the wince that followed was genuine. "Ouch," I mumbled.

"Hey, just relax, okay? You have a broken rib and a break in your arm. A concussion, but it's not super serious. It was a

nasty accident. Your car is probably totaled.” He brushed his thumb over my hand and moved the chair closer.

I didn’t care about my car. In fact, I didn’t care about anything right now. Everything in the past twelve hours was a huge blur—Wyatt approaching me, the car wreck, seeing Owen. God, Owen . . . Did I dream that he told me I was pregnant? Was that real?

“Uh . . .” I cleared my throat again. “Ben, was Owen here?” I studied his face intently. I saw a flash of anger and then worry. He looked discouraged and concerned, his brow knit. “Tell me.”

“Yeah, Harper. He’s here. For whatever reason, he was in charge of the ER when you came in. He’s not right in the head. He went off on me without warning or cause.” Ben shook his head. “I think you need to stay away from him.”

“Did he come into my room?” My heart started racing. If Owen really was here, then it probably wasn’t a dream. I pulled my hand away from Ben’s unconsciously and placed it on my stomach. Was I really pregnant? Did Ben know?

“Yeah, he was in your room quite a bit. He was leading the ER. He’s not on duty anymore, but I’m in here. I don’t think he will come in with me in here. He is really angry with me for some reason.”

I glanced at the open door, confused. Why would Owen be angry with Ben? “I don’t understand.” I tried to make sense of it, but movement in the hall caught my eye. A police officer walked past my door, then came back and knocked on the frame.

“Ms. Black? I have a few questions.” He leaned into the door and waited.

“Yeah, okay,” I mumbled. Ben stood as if he was going to leave, but I reached for him. “Stay?” I asked, and he took my hand.

“I’m here.”

The officer walked in carrying a small device that looked like a tape recorder. “Mind if I record our conversation?” He

waved it in the air in front of me, and I nodded.

“That’s fine.”

“Ma’am, I need to ask you to give your statement. Do you feel up to doing that?” He pressed a button on the machine and held it as he moved closer, stopping by the foot of my bed.

“Sure. What do you need to know?” I tried to sit up, but my arm hurt so badly I couldn’t put weight on it. I assumed I’d be getting a cast soon.

“Just start from the beginning and tell me everything you remember.”

I was nervous as I started telling the story, but I didn’t start earlier today when I got off work. I started months ago when Wyatt and I were dating. I told the officer about his abuse and my tolerance and our inevitable breakup. I told him about Wyatt’s stalking of me, showing up at the hospital, then at my house. I told him how Wyatt kept a key to my place, then how he harassed me in the parking lot outside the grocery store. And by the time I got to the accident, I was sobbing.

“Alright, ma’am, I have what I need. If we have any further questions, we’ll stop back by.” The kind officer tipped his hat before excusing himself, but I was a wreck. I just wanted all of this to be over and I wanted to go home to be with Lily now.

“Are you okay?” Ben asked, squeezing my hand. He offered such a look of compassion that it made me cry harder. Life had gotten so overwhelming to the point that I didn’t know if I was alright anymore. I didn’t know what alright felt like.

“Is now a good time?” A familiar voice made both me and Ben turn. Owen stood in the doorway with a tablet in hand, a serious expression on his face. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you’re with your boyfriend. I’ll come back.” Owen took a step backward, and I looked up at Ben, confused.

Ben laughed and said, “Wait. You think we’re dating? Is that why you snapped at me?”

Owen's brow furrowed, and he halted in the doorway. He looked at me with narrowed eyes and I smiled at him. "Ben is my good friend, Owen. We're not dating. Why did you think we were dating?"

"I saw him outside your apartment, carrying Lily . . ." He tucked the tablet under his arm and folded his hands in front of himself.

That day had been a rough one for me, and when Ben took us home, Lily fell asleep. I had no idea Owen had been there watching. Maybe he was waiting for me to get home to try to talk to me or something. I felt bad for his making that wrong assumption.

"Look, I'll go to your place and take Lily and send your mom over." Ben leaned down and kissed the top of my head. "You rest, okay?" He turned to Owen. "Take care of our patient, Doc," he said, patting Owen on the shoulder as he passed out the door into the hallway.

Owen hovered in the hallway hesitantly, peering at me. My eyes dropped. I wasn't sure how to even have this conversation. If not for the accident caused by his son, I likely wouldn't have known I was pregnant until I really started showing. With PCOS, my cycles were way off. I often didn't have a period for a few months. It was as much a total shock as it was a pleasant surprise. I just wasn't sure how Owen saw it. And with Wyatt—well, that complicated everything.

I sat as straight as I could without a good arm to prop myself up. Owen tiptoed forward, pulling the doctor's stool closer. He perched on it but said nothing for a moment. It was intense. I knew what he needed to know, and I couldn't hide anything from him. I hadn't hidden anything from him. How could I hide something I didn't know?

"So . . . you didn't know?" He seemed calm, at least.

"No, I had no idea. I have PCOS. You probably saw that on my chart." I licked my lips nervously, ready for any question he may have.

"Would you have told me?"

“Owen, of course I’d have told you. I didn’t know.”

He passed the tablet from one arm to the other, shifting in the seat. Then he bit his lip and looked down. “And is it mine? You said you were with someone else.”

My heart sank. I had lied to him on purpose, and I had to admit that. “I’m sorry, Owen. I was never seeing anyone else. I could never. My heart belongs to you. Even when other guys hit on me, I couldn’t do it. I love you. Of course this baby is yours.”

His lip quivered as emotion filled his voice. When he spoke, his voice cracked. “So I’m going to be a father again?”

My eyes brimmed with tears as I nodded at him. I could imagine for a man with an adult son, having a baby would be quite a shock, but he didn’t seem upset by it at all. If anything, he seemed happy. He covered his mouth, then ran a hand through his hair. For a second, he looked away, then back at me. I could tell he was wrestling.

“So, what does that mean for us?” There was so much hope in his eyes. I said the only thing I could think of.

“I guess you’re stuck with me.” I sighed. My stomach was churning again, probably from the excitement, maybe a little morning sickness, or just the concussion. “Owen, I’m really sorry. The only reason I broke up with you was because I didn’t want to be the cause of division between you and Wyatt. I thought it was the right thing. Can you ever forgive me?”

He leaned toward me, taking my hand, but my stomach really lurched. I found myself coughing, then dry heaving. He took a bedpan and held it out, and I threw up. My stomach heaved until I felt like my eyeballs would pop out, and he gave me tissues to clean myself up with.

“We’ll talk about this later, okay?” he said, setting the pan to the side. “Right now, you need to rest.” He leaned down and kissed my forehead, cupping both cheeks. “I love you, Harper, and I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life with you.”

If I wasn’t mistaken, he had tears in his eyes as he backed away, but my head hurt too badly to think about it. I lay back

and closed my eyes. Maybe once this pain wore off, we'd be able to have a decent discussion about it.

Owen

I pulled up outside the rehab facility, this time with a fully sober son ready to check himself in on his own. He looked tired and defeated, the way an addict does when they actually confront their addiction and know they need help. I felt a gut-wrenching sadness that it came to this, though I was proud of him for admitting this step was necessary.

“Wyatt, I want you to know I’m with you every step of the way.” I patted his knee as he stared out the window at the door. No one was expecting us this time, no orderlies or nurses coming out to escort him in. After the past three weeks of torturing himself waiting for trial, he made the decision to come here.

“You know I’m not doing this to try to get out of anything. I deserve everything they throw at me. I’m doing this because I need help. I’m really struggling.” He raked a hand over his face and looked at me. His eyes were bloodshot, evidence of not sleeping well. “And when I get out, I need to apologize to Harper.”

It was a pivotal moment for him and one I needed to tread carefully around. He knew Harper and I were back together, and he knew about the baby too. It was a horrible conversation that led to more arguing and drinking, but thankfully, he hadn’t done anything stupid that night.

“I’m sure she’ll appreciate that.”

Silence fell over the car for a few minutes. I waited because I knew this couldn't be easy for him. He had to be very torn about giving up his crutch. I wasn't an addict, but I could imagine how it felt to lose the safety net you've had your whole life, or at least your whole adult life. It made me appreciate even more how hard he was trying.

"Dad, I don't think I ever truly loved her." He stared at the front door of the rehab building as he spoke. I didn't want to interrupt him. "I don't think I know what love is, honestly. She just made me feel like I was special, like she cared. When she broke up with me, I went nuts. I felt the same way I did when Mom left, like it was all my fault and that I was a horrible person. I had to prove to her that I was good, that I'm someone." His head sank, and I gripped his shoulder.

"Son, your mother leaving was not your fault. She just wasn't emotionally capable of loving either of us. She hurt us both very deeply, and I'm sorry you've carried that pain for this long."

His hand reached for the door handle and he pulled it. "I'm going to fix this, Dad." Wyatt looked back over his shoulder and said, "When I saw how badly I hurt Harper, I knew I was fucked up. Now, I need your support to get better."

"You have it, Son. I'm here every step of the way."

I watched as he climbed out of the car, shutting the door behind himself and heading toward the building. He never looked back once, another sign that he was ready for it this time. I'd seen patients who dealt with addiction in my past and knew he could end up relapsing or struggling for years. It wasn't going to be an easy road for him, but if he continued trying, he'd make it.

When he was safely inside the building, I headed out. I'd been staying at Harper's place while she recovered. She needed round the clock care, but Miriam was unable to stay with her constantly, so it became my second home. I slept on the couch, making sure Lily was cared for while Harper slept off the severe concussion. And since brain rest was my direct order, I also made sure she had no excessive lights, noise,

technology, or other things that would stimulate too much brain activity while her body healed.

I let myself in, and Miriam held a finger to her lips as she shuffled to the door. I was glad after everything that Harper's mom didn't hate me. It turned out she thought I was pretty good for Harper and encouraged us to try to make it work, even despite the age difference.

"Owen, I laid Lily down a few minutes ago. She's resting now. Harper still needs her medicine, but she hasn't called for it yet." Miriam threw her sweater around her shoulders and picked up her purse. "If you need anything you just call me. I have bridge club in the morning, though, so I'll be going to bed as soon as I get home."

"Thanks, I'll take good care of them." I stepped aside and let her walk out past me. "Miriam, I really appreciate your support in all of this."

"Oh, well, you know a mother's job is never finished." She waved a hand in the air, feigning being flattered.

"I mean with my relationship with your daughter. I know you weren't the most excited about it to begin with." I turned to face her, hand on the doorknob as she pulled her keys from her purse.

"Well, Dr. Thorpe, you're right. I was worried you were a predator and would just hurt her. But you have been the best thing that ever happened to her and Lily, and how could I ever discourage my baby from leaning into that sort of love? Thank you for caring for her so well. I know she is in the best of hands, and I can't wait to plan a wedding in the near future." She leaned her head down, raising an eyebrow and eyeing me. "So when you're ready, I have all the time in the world to help pick table settings and floral arrangements."

Her grin was priceless. I chuckled and nodded. "Deal," I told her, though when I proposed officially, it would truly be Harper's decision who helped with the planning. "Goodnight."

"See you tomorrow," she said, winking. She walked down the hallway, and I shut and locked the door. I was bushed,

ready to crash on the couch and doze off until Harper needed me, but before I even got the spare pillow and blanket out of the coat closet where I stored them away, my phone buzzed. I pulled it out and looked at the message from Harper.

Harper 8:49 PM Mom gone?

Owen 8:49 PM Yep. Need something?

Harper 8:50 PM Yes. Could you come help me with something?

I thought about stopping in the kitchen for a glass of water and her medicine, but if she needed my help, it was possible that she needed me quickly, so I walked straight to the bedroom. The baby monitor crackled, Lily's soft snores resounding in the dark room, and when I turned on the small lamp on the dresser, I noticed the most beautiful sight I'd ever seen. Harper lay spreadeagle on the bed, propped on one elbow, completely naked.

I grinned at her. "What's that you need help with?" I asked her, walking toward the bed.

"Well, I have this major need. I think it's something you can fix, but I need to be sure. Also, I know it will help release some tension and frustration." Her fingers rubbed her clit in a circular motion, round and round before dipping between her soft folds. I kicked off my shoes and undid my belt.

"That sounds like something I might be able to help with. But do you think you're up for it?" I left my belt hanging open as I unbuttoned the top few buttons of my shirt and pulled it over my head, tossing it to the ground.

"Yeah, I'm feeling up for it." She turned to her side and shrugged one shoulder. "If you think you're not too old to get it up."

I chuckled at her joke. We'd been back and forth playfully for the past two weeks about a man my age having another child. I couldn't wait, honestly, but I knew it would be challenging. Her banter only made her sexier.

"Oh, you don't have to worry about this old man getting it up. You just prepare yourself for the ride of your life." I

pushed my slacks down over my hips and let them drop to the floor. As I stepped out of them, she scooted back on the bed, folding the covers down. “I think I can handle it.”

Harper tapped the bed next to her. “Come here.”

I climbed onto the bed and crawled over to her. She reached up and tugged on my boxers, pulling them down as I grabbed her hips and kissed her stomach.

“Did you miss me?” she asked me. I grinned as I kicked my boxers off and climbed over her.

“Miss you? Baby, I can’t stand the thought of being away from you.” I brushed her hair away from her face. “I’ve been thinking about this for weeks.”

“Me too.” She lifted her head and captured my lips with hers, and we began kissing, slow and passionate, as I buried my face in her neck, breathing her in. She spread her legs and reached for me, pulling me in. I sank into her wetness, my cock continuing to harden at her entrance. Each time I was inside her, it was better than the last. The slow, passionate kisses became more heated and desperate. I moved, thrusting into her slowly at first, and then sped up, plunging into her harder, deeper.

“Oh, God, that feels so good.” She panted, her teeth sinking into her bottom lip. The sight of her in ecstasy was almost as erotic as the feel of her around my dick.

“Mmm. This feels amazing.” I squeezed her breast, pinching her nipple and twisting it. “But I want to make you feel really good.”

Despite how amazing it felt to be in her without protection, I pulled out. She groaned at the loss. “What’s wrong?” She was panting, and the lust was still heavy in her eyes. I liked seeing her like that.

“I want you to feel really good,” I repeated. “I want to taste you.”

I lay back on the bed, and she straddled my head, lowering herself onto my mouth. I ran my tongue over her clit, flicking it as my hand twisted her nipple. The combination of feeling

her wetness and hearing her breathy moans, along with the soft touch of my fingertips on her breast, made me throb. I couldn't wait to bury myself in her again. She rode my tongue as I thrust up into her, her movements in rhythm with mine. Her body shook and her moans were getting louder. I slid my hands up her thighs, holding her ass, and sucked on her clit, rubbing it with my tongue. She came hard, calling out my name.

“God, Owen . . .”

It took a great deal of self-control to hold back, to make her come first, but the way she moaned and spasmed drove me wild. When she calmed and collapsed on the bed next to me, it was my turn.

Harper

I lay down next to him, my body still tingling and pulsing from the climax. Owen wiped his mouth clean with the back of his hand and rose up, hovering over me. His hand slipped between my thighs, spreading them, gently caressing my moist valley. I took a deep breath and felt shivers run up and down my spine. I looked at his face, his beautiful smile and comforting eyes. I could see the love he felt for me, the love I felt for him. I could see his thoughts, his longing for me, his desire.

“I missed you so much,” I whispered before his lips brushed over mine. His finger massaged my tender nub, making me twitch. It had been weeks since we’d been together, and the emotion of the reunion had me on the verge of tears. I loved this man more than anyone else my whole life.

“I missed you too. I never stopped thinking of you. You were always on my mind. I never gave up hope, and I never gave up trying to make things different with Wyatt. Harper, I love you so much.” He claimed my lips again, his other hand playing with my hair.

“I love you too, Owen. I thought I’d never see you again or feel your touch. I thought I’d never kiss your lips again, never see your smile. My heart ached for you.”

He kissed me again, and I could feel his erection against my thigh. I let out a gasp as his hand massaged my clit, his tongue exploring my mouth. His head moved down to my

neck, his breath sending shivers through me. His lips brushed over my collarbone, then my breasts. He sucked on my nipple, his tongue flicking it in a way that had me moaning in pleasure.

I arched my back, trying to get more of him. I needed him inside me. I needed to feel the warmth of his body on mine, for him to make me feel whole again. I needed to show him that I loved him too, that I wanted him forever.

“I want you, Owen,” I whispered to him, my voice faltering. “I need you.”

He nodded, rising up and positioning himself at my entrance. He smiled, his eyes twinkling. “I need you too, Harper.”

He pushed into me slowly, letting out a groan. He pulled out and pushed back in, a little faster this time. I moaned as his length filled me up, his tip hitting my sweet spot. He slid in again, deeper this time. I could still taste my own juices on his lips. “I love you,” I repeated again and again, wishing I could say it enough to get the message across.

He smiled and kissed me. I let out a long sigh as he pulled out and then drove back in, slowly and gently. He knew I was aching for him, and he didn't want to hurt me. I loved him even more for that.

I shuddered at the pleasure of his body inside mine. I loved the sensation of his cock filling me up. He was so big, and he was doing it so slowly, I could feel every inch. I could feel his every movement. I moved my hips to meet his thrusts, and he let out a groan of pleasure. I felt something else inside me, something more than the physical pleasure of his cock. I felt his love for me, almost as if it were a physical thing. It was a tangible piece of him that he was giving me, filling me with.

Loud moans escaped my lips as he continued to thrust into me. I could feel the heat in my body rising to a boiling point. My fingers scratched into his back as I arched my back, digging my nails into his skin.

He stared into my eyes, his hand grasping my chin. He looked at me with a burning intensity. "I'm so in love with you, Harper. I'll never leave you again. I swear it, I'll never let you go."

"I'm so close," I panted, his thumb circling my clit as he slid in and out of me. This sensation of him inside me without a condom was exquisite. I never wanted another condom in my life. I wanted to feel his skin on mine, in me.

"You deserve to feel amazing," he said, slowing his thrusts. His dick teased my entrance, and I clenched around him eagerly, desiring him to fill me again, but his thumb worked wonders on my clit. I could feel a fire burning inside my core and spreading outward. Every nerve in my body was on fire. I was burning for him, for his love, for his touch. I was a moth to his flame. I couldn't get enough of him.

"I'm coming," I grunted, feeling the spasms begin in my gut and wrack my whole body in tremors. I shook, moaning in pleasure, my back arching off the bed. He thrust into me a few more times, but I could tell it was taking everything he had to not come as well. Owen leaned down and kissed me as I came, the orgasm washing over me in waves.

Before my body even calmed down, I felt his heat rush into me, filling me. His thrusts slowed, but his kisses continued until he rolled off me, panting. We both came down from our high, his sweat mixing with mine. He lay down next to me, and I cuddled into his arms. I felt so safe, so protected in his arms. I'd never felt like this with anyone else.

"Listen," he said, still catching his breath, "I was going to do this properly, with a ring and a big dinner or something, but I can't wait. I need to ask you something."

I pushed some hair out of my face, knowing in my heart what he was going to ask. And I knew my answer to the question too, one I was confident in. "Okay. What do you need to ask?"

He licked his lips and pulled me against his body tightly. "Marry me?"

His question was blunt, only the two words, but they were enough. Tears welled up in my eyes. I wasn't prepared for the rush of emotion. It snuck up on me. I nodded, letting the tears flow, and wrapped my arms around his neck. I didn't need a fancy proposal, and a ring could come later. All I needed was him.

"Yes, Owen." I kissed him over and over, lavishing him with my tears. "Yes, I will marry you."

"I don't ever want to live a day without you, not even a single second. You are my world." He brushed tears off my cheeks and then kissed more of them away.

I lay there in his arms for a while, savoring the moment. We'd been through so much already in just the few short months we'd been together. Now that Wyatt was off to rehab, I felt like things would get better. I looked up at him and said, "And you think Wyatt will be okay with all of this?"

Owen nodded. "Yeah. I really do. He seemed to understand that none of this was personal. He said some things . . . I know he's working toward getting better now."

I curled into his chest, thankful Wyatt was getting help now. He deserved a happy ending for his life too, even if it wasn't with me. Life had a way of working out. I just hoped he stuck to the program this time.

"So we have to decide when to have a wedding, and where. And oh, Mom will want to help." I played with his chest hair, twirling it around my finger.

"And you should move in with me. I'll have to childproof everything. Gosh, that's going to be a task." He chuckled. "Wow, we have a lot of changes to make."

I sighed contentedly. "Yes, we do, but we'll do it together."

We lay there talking for at least an hour, well into the night, and when I was exhausted, I turned over and let him spoon me. This could be my life for the next fifty years, and I already loved it.

Owen

Harper and I stood beside the orderly, waiting for Wyatt to finish his last counseling session of his stint in rehab.

For the past month he barely spoke to me, though that was part of the process of getting clean. He did call last week to apologize for his part in making life difficult over the past few years. He said it was also part of the healing journey to make amends as much as he could. I appreciated that and the fact that he stayed in rehab the entire period this time.

“You think he’s going to stick with it this time?” Harper asked, squeezing my hand. I shrugged. There was no way of knowing whether Wyatt would stay sober or relapse. Given enough time, I worried he would fail, but with the right counseling and open communication, I hoped he would really gain victory over his addiction this time.

“I hope so,” I told her, letting go of her hand in favor of hugging her to my side. Her belly had begun to bulge a little, showing the signs of her pregnancy. It was a very happy thing for me, but I felt hesitant to act too pleased with it when Wyatt walked out. He knew, but there was no hiding the evidence to soften the blow of things. I had no way of knowing how he’d react to seeing it firsthand.

“I just hope that he can see how happy we are together and how much we love each other,” Harper said, resting her head on my shoulder.

“I’m sure he eventually will,” I said, kissing the top of her head. “It might take some time, but he’ll come around.”

We waited in silence for a few more minutes until the door to the counselor’s office opened and Wyatt emerged. He looked better than he had in a long time, his eyes clear and his shoulders squared. Harper and I exchanged a glance before walking toward him.

“Hey, Dad,” he said, his voice rough. I hugged him tightly, feeling the tears prick at my eyes. It had been too long since I’d had my son back in my arms.

“I’m proud of you, Son,” I said, pulling away to look him in the eye. “You’ve done a great job.”

Wyatt nodded, his eyes flickering over to Harper’s stomach. “Congratulations,” he said, his voice reserved. I could tell it was hard for him to accept the fact that I was with Harper and expecting a baby with her. He kept his gaze averted as we made plans for picking up some of his things from storage and bringing him back to our house so he could get settled in. Harper, now living with me, had been gracious enough to offer him the extra bedroom, and while I knew it wouldn’t always be easy living together again after so long apart, I hoped that we could make it work.

“Thanks,” Harper said, smiling at him. “We’re really excited.”

Wyatt nodded again before turning to me. “I’m ready to start over, Dad. I’m sorry for everything.” He turned again to Harper, and his chin dropped. “I’m really sorry. I . . .”

“It’s okay,” Harper said in a low, calm voice. It had to be difficult for her too.

“I know you are,” I said, putting a hand on his shoulder. “And we’ll take it one day at a time. But for now, let’s go celebrate your success.”

We walked out of the rehab center, Wyatt slinging his arm around my shoulders and Harper holding my other hand. It wasn’t perfect, but it was a start. And that was all we could hope for. We drove back home slowly and in silence until

Harper broke it by asking Wyatt how he was feeling now that he was out of rehab. He sighed deeply before responding.

“I feel good, Harper. I really do. I know it’s going to be a challenge, but I’m ready to face it head-on this time,” Wyatt said, his voice cracking slightly. “I don’t want to go back to that dark place again.”

Harper smiled softly at him. “We’re here for you, Wyatt. We’ll support you every step of the way.”

Wyatt nodded, gratitude written all over his face. “Thanks, guys. I mean it. I couldn’t have made it this far without you.”

I could feel the tension in the air slowly dissipating as we made our way back to the house. When we arrived, I could see that Harper had gone to great lengths to make Wyatt feel welcome. The guest room was clean and tidy, with fresh sheets and a new comforter. Wyatt’s belongings were neatly stacked in a corner of the room.

After settling in, we sat down for dinner together. The conversation was light, but there was an underlying current of tension. I could tell that Wyatt was still struggling to come to terms with the fact that I was with Harper now and that she was carrying my child. That, too, would take time to really work on, but if we all committed to handling things like adults, I was certain we would navigate the situation well.

“Would you like some more peas?” Harper asked Lily, who had already finished two helpings.

“Nope, want pancakes!” Lily said, clapping. “Owen make pancakes?”

“No, sweetheart, no pancakes tonight.” Harper grinned and spooned more peas onto her plate, and I turned my attention to Wyatt.

“So, did you talk to your boss? Is there work for you even with your license under review?” I speared a piece of porkchop with my fork and took a bite. Wyatt’s license to practice law had been revoked for the time being, but he still remained positive about it.

“Yeah, I can do paralegal work for a while, but I’m going to fight the BAR, prove that I’ve done my rehab and that therapy worked.” He sipped his glass of water and watched Harper caring for Lily. “I feel like a different person,” Wyatt said, his voice still raspy but with a hint of hopefulness. “I know it’s going to be a long road, but I’m ready to face it. And I have you guys to help me.” He looked over at me and Harper, a genuine smile on his face. I could see the gratitude in his eyes, and it made me feel proud to be his father.

“Looks like it’s time for a bath,” Harper said, watching Lily take her peas and push them off her plate. She’d barely touched the pork chop, but at least she’d eaten vegetables.

“Want some help?” I asked, ready to go at a moment’s notice, but Harper shook her head.

“Nope, you stay and catch up with Wyatt. She’ll be out like a light.” She stood and used a napkin to wipe Lily’s hands before lifting her out of her booster seat.

“It was really nice of you to put Lily’s bed in your room. Thanks for letting me stay in her room for a few weeks.” Wyatt dragged the napkin across his face and dropped it on his empty plate. We all had to make sacrifices to help him get on his feet, and I was grateful that even after everything, Harper was willing to care for him. She had no obligation to show him any kindness or compassion, but she had, and that was a testament to her personality.

“You’re welcome, Wyatt. I told you. We’re here to help.” She walked off with Lily on her hip, and when she was gone, I approached the difficult topic we needed to discuss.

“Wyatt, I know things may be awkward around here with me and Harper being together. If you want me to get you set up in your own place, I will pay the first three months’ rent. It would give you time to get on your feet, at least.” I took the last bite of my food and set my fork on my plate.

“Nah, it’s okay. I think it feels odd because I dated her at one point, but I have let that go. You two are actually perfect for each other. I’m still not fond of kids, but I guess having a little brother or sister means I have to get comfortable fast.”

He forced a smile then said, “I never meant for any of this to happen, Dad, and I’m taking responsibility now. My counselor said with help, I should feel in control and happy for the first time in my life. And that’s what I want. Besides, I met a girl in rehab—not an alcoholic, one of the nurses. She’s sweet and helpful, and I think I’m going to call her and see if she wants to have coffee sometime.”

I grinned at him. It was good seeing him be so positive. “So you don’t mind that we’re getting married, having a baby? You know, life stuff?” I raised an eyebrow, testing him.

“Yeah, it’s weird, but it’s whatever. I have to focus on my recovery now. No time to dwell on the past.” He pushed his chair back and picked up his plate as he stood. “Now, you go help take care of Lily. I’m going to do the dishes.”

“One thing before you go . . .” I rose too, standing behind my chair. He looked up at me in expectation.

“Yeah, Dad?”

“I want you to consider being my best man. You’re the only one I would even think about asking. You don’t have to answer right away, but think about it.” I leaned on the back of my chair, gripping the wood, nervous about what he’d say.

“Yeah, I’ll think about it. But the bachelor party will be dry. Hope you understand.” He grinned at me, and I sighed with relief.

“Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

With a wink, he was out of the room, and my heart was finally at ease. Things really do work out for the best in the end.

EPILOGUE

Harper

The pain was excruciating, worse than with Lily. I had asked for an epidural, but the anesthesiologist had been in surgery with another patient, so things were delayed. Now, it was time to push, and I felt every single thing—the contractions, the way the baby moved. I screamed and squeezed Owen’s hand so hard I thought I’d break it.

He never faltered, though, even as my nails dug into his skin. His brown eyes were wide with fear yet still glowed with a quiet strength that seemed to come from somewhere beyond himself. He knew just what to say to keep me going, to make me believe I could do this.

“God, this hurts,” I whimpered.

“You got this, baby,” Owen cooed, wiping sweat off my forehead.

“Push, Harper!” said the doctor sternly.

As the seconds ticked by, the pain became more intense, and I felt like my body was going to give out. I took a deep breath and pushed with all my might. My vision blurred as tears streamed down my face. The pain was unbearable, but I couldn’t give up. I had to keep pushing. I couldn’t disappoint Owen, who had been my rock through this entire journey. I took a deep breath and mustered all my strength to push. The agony was unbearable, but I knew it would be worth it. I closed my eyes and focused on the image of holding my baby in my arms.

A wave of heat washed over me as the baby's head started to crown. I screamed again, but this time, it was more of a battle cry. I could sense the end was near. I tucked my chin to my chest and strained, focusing on the breathing techniques I had learned in child birthing classes.

"You're doing great, Harper," Owen encouraged. "Just a little more." He wiped my forehead again with a cool rag and then kissed it. His presence was encouraging, though I could have done without being touched so much. It made me irritable, but I tried not to snap at him too much.

I pushed with all my might, and suddenly, the baby slipped out of me. I collapsed back on the bed, panting and covered in sweat.

The room was silent for a moment, save for the sharp intake of breath as the doctor held up a tiny, slimy baby, a perfect little boy. Though his eyes were closed, he already seemed to be looking at us, his parents, with recognition and affection.

Owen and I looked at each other in disbelief. After all the waiting and anticipation, here he was—the child we had hoped and dreamed of for so long. The relief and joy of finally seeing him in the room with us was overwhelming, and I forgot about the pain for a moment. Owen gently touched the newborn's small foot, marveling at its perfection.

"It's a boy," the doctor announced, holding him up for us to see.

Tears streamed down my face as Owen placed our son on my chest. The pain was still there, but it was fading away, replaced by a sense of euphoria. "He's beautiful," he whispered, his voice full of emotion. I couldn't agree more. He was perfect, with a head full of dark hair and tiny, delicate features. He looked up at me with big, bright eyes, and I knew in that moment that my life had changed forever.

"He's so big," I whispered, cradling his body.

Owen leaned over and kissed me on the forehead. "You were amazing," he said.

Tears streamed down my face as I repositioned the baby so I could sit up straighter. He was small and delicate, his skin still wrinkled and covered in vernix. But to me, he was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. I held him to my chest, feeling his warmth and the gentle rise and fall of his breathing.

“Hi, little one,” I whispered, kissing the top of his head. “I’m your mommy.”

As Owen and I gazed at our son, I knew that everything had changed. Our lives were no longer just about us. They were about this little person we had brought into the world. I felt a sense of responsibility, but also of joy and wonder.

“Would Dad like to cut the umbilical cord?” The doctor applied two clamps to the cord and handed Owen a pair of scissors. He glanced at me nervously, but I nodded.

Owen and I both held our breath as he slowly snipped the umbilical cord. It felt like a moment of great significance, like we were marking the transition from our son being a part of me to becoming his own person. I couldn’t help but feel a twinge of sadness as well as excitement for this new life that we had created together.

I looked down at my son with admiration and awe. Our little miracle had arrived after nine months of anticipation, and it was truly an incredible experience for us both. We were so grateful for this precious gift that we had been given.

As the doctor and nurses continued their work, cleaning and weighing the baby, Owen and I just stared at him, taking in every detail. I couldn’t believe that I had just given birth to a little human being and that he was now here with us, in the real world. It was both terrifying and exhilarating, and I knew that there would be many challenges ahead, but I was ready to face them all with Owen by my side.

As the minutes passed, the room was filled with the sounds of our son’s cries and the gentle murmurs of the medical staff. But for me and Owen, there was only our son and the love that flowed between us as we held him close. The pain of labor was forgotten, replaced by the sheer joy of this new life we had brought into the world. And as we sat there, soaking in the

moment, I knew that our lives would never be the same, but we wouldn't have it any other way.

I grew tired, my eyes so heavy I could hardly stay awake, so when the rush of activity subsided, Owen sat in the rocking chair holding our son as I dozed off. I slept for a few hours before being awakened to the laughter and mewling of my mother, happy to meet her new grandson. My eyes fluttered open, and I watched her rocking him.

"Oh, Harper, he's so wonderful. You did so good," she said, grinning at me. As my mother cooed over my son, I couldn't help but think about how much my life had changed in just a few short hours. I was now a mother of two, and the responsibility felt overwhelming at times. But as I looked down at my baby, I knew it was worth it. There was nothing more precious than this little life that Owen and I had created together.

"So now it's just a wedding to plan, huh?" Mom asked after cuddling the baby for a while.

"Yes, well, we have six weeks left for that. But first, we name the baby." I looked up at Owen, and he nodded.

"Yes, we have to give this little guy a name. We had a few picked out, but I think the one that fits best is Owen Charles Thorpe." Owen beamed with pride. We hadn't settled on a middle name, though we both agreed we wanted to name our son after his father if we had a boy. Charles was my grandfather's name, a man who I always had a fondness for. Mom teared up at the mention of her father's name.

"You're naming him after Great-Pop?" She blinked, and a tear escaped.

"It seems only fitting," I said, reaching for a tissue. I felt my own tears welling up. "Now, no boo-hooing over this. You have the rest of his life to tell him stories about Great-Pop. Did you finish the alterations for Lily's flower girl dress?" I snagged a few more tissues, handing them to Owen. He carried them to Mom, and she blew her nose.

“I did, and with the material I trimmed from the hemline, I made a bow for her hair. It will be so cute.” Mom was so proud of her grandchildren, and it was so sweet to see her rocking the baby. We sat and talked about wedding plans for another hour. I was grateful she was so helpful because with the pregnancy and now a newborn, I knew I didn’t have it in me.

As the day wore on, visitors came and went, bringing gifts and well wishes. Wyatt came, bringing a balloon and some flowers, but it wasn’t until late in the evening, when the room was quiet and everyone had left, that Owen and I were able to truly connect with our son. We sat in the darkness, the only sounds the soft whir of the machines and the gentle breathing of our baby.

“He’s so perfect,” Owen whispered, stroking the baby’s tiny hand.

I nodded, tears streaming down my face. “I can’t believe he’s really ours,” I said.

Owen leaned over and kissed me gently on the lips. “We did it, Harper,” he said. “We made this beautiful little boy together.”

I smiled, feeling a sense of pride and contentment that I had never experienced before. “I love you,” I said, reaching for his hand.

“I love you too,” he replied, squeezing my hand tightly.

As we sat there, watching our son sleep, I knew that our lives had changed forever. But I also knew that we were ready for whatever challenges lay ahead. Together, as a family, we could conquer anything.

EXTENDED EPILOGUE

Ben

I sat on the lawn chair watching Lily splash in the splash pad while Harper's mother applied yet another coat of sunscreen to her pasty white skin. It was my pleasure to watch Lily for Harper and Owen while they went on their honeymoon, though I was glad Owen Jr. was too young to be away from Harper. I didn't know how I'd handle an infant for two weeks alone. But Lily was a joy to be around. Her infectious laughter and boundless energy had me smiling ear to ear. I couldn't help but feel a pang of sadness that I wasn't a father myself. I'd always imagined having a little girl of my own, but things just never seemed to work out with any of the women I'd dated.

As I watched Lily run around and play in the water, I couldn't help but think how lucky I was to have her in my life. She was such a vibrant and curious little girl, always eager to explore and learn new things.

I smiled as she ran past me, her wet hair sticking to her face in little strands. She looked up at me and grinned, her bright blue eyes sparkling with excitement.

"Hey, Uncle Ben!" she shouted.

"Lily, baby, you need to walk. The ground is slippery. You're going to fall and get hurt." I'd been reminding her all afternoon, but a five-year-old's energy never ends. She shook her head and her pigtails bobbed, and then she was gone, this time more of a fast walk than running.

I chuckled to myself, enjoying the carefree atmosphere of the water park. It was nice to take a break from the stress of work and just enjoy the simple pleasures of life. The weather was perfect for this too, which made me want to jump in and enjoy the water.

As the afternoon wore on, Lily grew tired and started to slow down. I scooped her up in my arms and carried her over to where Harper's mother was sitting.

"Hey, Maw-maw, I think Lily's ready for a nap," I said as Lily snuggled up against my chest.

Harper's mother nodded, taking Lily from me and holding her close. She wrapped a towel around Lily's shoulders and kissed her water-slicked forehead. "Thanks for taking us out today, Ben," she said, her voice soft and warm. "It's been a long time since I've been able to relax like this. And I think Lily loved the water."

I smiled, feeling a sense of satisfaction wash over me. It was good to know that I could make a difference in someone's life, even if it was just for an afternoon at a waterpark. I hadn't spent much time with Miriam, but with Harper out of town, I'd gotten to know her mother a little better. It was no surprise that the woman was so caring and compassionate. Harper must have gotten her good manners and warm heart from her.

"Oh, my God!"

I heard the shout and turned to see a young boy lying on the ground. His eyes were closed and a crowd was beginning to gather. I had been worried about Lily slipping and falling all day. I had seen a few other children fall, which resulted in cuts and bruises, but this boy appeared unconscious.

"Look, watch Lily for a second, Miriam. I'll be right back." I hurried over to the quickly growing crowd and pushed my way to the center. "Back up, people, I'm a doctor," I ordered, physically moving a young child who obstructed my path. I knelt down beside the boy, wishing I had my stethoscope.

He was pale, his face calm, but he was knocked out. I checked the boy's pulse and breathing, relieved to find that he had a steady heartbeat and was still breathing. I took a closer look at the boy's head and noticed a sizable bump on the back of his head. I knew then that he must have hit his head hard on the ground when he fell. He looked to be about seven or eight years old.

Without thinking, I pulled out my phone and dialed 9-1-1. The line rang through and a dispatcher answered. "Nine-one-one, what is your emergency?"

"Yes, my name is Dr. Ben Wilks. I'm at the Ocean Spray water park on Fifth Avenue." I looked up as a few lifeguards approached. "We need an ambulance. Young boy fell and hit his head. He's got a strong pulse, but he's out cold. I don't have a way to check his pupils. Pulse is fast, color is a little pale."

"Yes, sir. We're sending one now. Is this your child?"

"No, ma'am, I am just a bystander. We will locate the mother and have her here when the bus gets here."

"Thank you, sir," she said, and I hung up. I held my fingers to the boy's wrist, keeping tabs on his pulse. As long as he was breathing and his heart was beating, there was nothing more I could do here.

I looked around and saw that a woman was frantically trying to get through the crowd, screaming the boy's name. "That's my son!" she cried. "What happened to him?"

My heart stopped. It was Georgia Lane—tall, blonde, and already ruining me for any other woman. I forgot for a second where I was and what I was doing, even as she dropped to her knees beside me and touched his face lightly. Georgia and I had history. She was the one who got away, and I was left pining for her for years.

"I . . . uh . . ."

"Ben, what's happening?" she asked frantically. I hadn't even seen her here today. Where had she come from? My mind raced with a hundred questions until she snapped her

fingers in front of my face, and my professional bedside manner kicked into high gear.

“He fell and hit his head pretty hard,” I explained, trying to comfort her. “But he’s breathing and has a steady pulse. We need to get him to a hospital as soon as possible.”

Just then, the boy started to stir. He groaned and slowly opened his eyes. “Mom?” he muttered, looking around in confusion. She looked away from me to her son, and I felt relief wash over me.

“It’s okay, honey,” the woman said, tears streaming down her face. “We’re going to get you some help.”

“Hey, little man, you fell and hit your head. I need you to lie real still for me, okay? We’re going to get you checked out.” I kept my two fingers pressed on his wrist and counted the beats as the second hand on my watch ticked by the seconds, but I was distracted, hungry to speak to Georgia.

As the paramedics arrived to take over, I stood up and turned to Georgia. She was still staring at her son, her face etched with worry and fear. My heart ached for her, and I wanted nothing more than to hold her and tell her everything would be okay.

“Georgia,” I said softly, trying to get her attention. She looked up at me, her eyes filled with tears. “Are you okay?”

She shook her head, and I could see the panic rising in her eyes. “I can’t lose him, Ben,” she whispered. “He’s all I have left.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I did the only thing I could think of. I reached out and took her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. “He’s going to be okay,” I said, hoping it was true. “You got to him in time. He’s going to be okay.”

She looked at me, her eyes searching mine for reassurance. I could see the hope and fear in them, and I wanted to do everything in my power to ease her worries.

“I’m going to go with you to the hospital,” I said firmly. “I want to make sure everything’s okay.” She nodded, clinging to my hand like a lifeline.

When the bus arrived, I had to leave Georgia alone for a moment while I spoke with Miriam. She sat on the edge of her seat, cradling a sleeping little girl, and I pulled my keys from my pocket.

“I’m going to need you to keep her for the rest of this afternoon. I have to go to the hospital with this family.” I found it hard to say how I felt except to tell Miriam the truth. “I dated this woman once. I care about her. I want to ride along and make sure her son gets the best care possible.”

“You go. I’ve got Lily.” She shooed me with her hand, and I headed back to where the EMTs were loading the young boy into the back of the ambulance.

Georgia looked up at me, her eyes wide with a mix of fear and relief. I recognized that look from the past, and my heart skipped a beat. “Thank you,” she said softly, her voice filled with emotion.

I nodded, feeling a sense of pride in what I had done. But I couldn’t help but feel a sense of longing as I looked at Georgia. It was as if no time had passed since we had last seen each other. I wanted to reach out and touch her, to tell her everything that had been on my mind for years. But I knew now was not the time or place. She left me in a bad way, but I still loved her. It was as if fate had intervened to give me a second chance with her, and I wasn’t letting this moment slip past me.

I followed her into the ambulance and sat on the bench next to her. Her hands shook as she watched over what the medic was doing for her son. For me it was all routine. They put an IV in, started a saline drip, took his heart rate and blood pressure, and radioed in to the hospital.

“Ma’am, how old is your son?” the medic asked with her tablet in hand to record the data.

“Eight. He’s eight years old,” Georgia replied, and just like that, the spell was broken. I started examining this boy lying on the gurney in front of me silently. Georgia had left me almost nine years ago. In my head, I counted back the years, then the months. Something was going on here.

I looked at his face, a little red with sunburn but otherwise intact. He had no scratches, bumps, or bruises, but he also didn't look like me—at least not that I could tell. He looked like a miniature male version of his mother. I glanced at Georgia. She didn't seem nervous to have me by her side. I didn't know if she'd really gotten over me that fast and this was someone else's child or if she had a dark secret that was about to slam into me like a Mac truck. Right now, she seemed to only care about whether her child was okay, which was the response any caring mother should have.

But as far as I knew, I wasn't a parent. I sat here wondering who this kid's father was with my head spinning. Had she lied to me?

“Your son's name?” the EMT asked.

“Charles Benjamin Lane,” Georgia said, and she bit her lip, shifting away from me slightly as the ambulance bounced on the road.

My heart wrenched. I felt like life was about to change suddenly, and I wasn't sure how to feel about it.

[Ben and Georgia's story continues here.](#)

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