



the older woman

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

K. C. CROWNE

THE OLDER WOMAN


AN AGE GAP HOLIDAY ROMANCE

K.C. CROWNE

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DESCRIPTION

An enigmatic doctor.

His disgruntled nurse.

A wicked blizzard.

And only one bed in sight.

What could possibly go wrong?

I never expected to find myself trekking through a blizzard...

All to deliver “vital documents” to the elusive Dr. Grump’s remote cabin.

When I finally arrive I find a smoldering man,

Nearly a decade younger - with the petulance of an old grouch!

Now I’m snowed in with the impossibly handsome man child,

In a tiny one-bedroom cottage in the middle of nowhere.

But unlike the below freezing weather, his icy stare starts to melt....

And I wonder: Are the rumors about his cold-heart actually true?

Or is there more to this mysterious man than meets the eye?

Readers note: This is full-length standalone, small town holiday, doctor, boss, reverse age-gap romance. You’ll need a cool glass of water because the HEAT level is scorching. K.C. Crowne is an Amazon Top 8 Bestseller and International Bestselling Author.

CHAPTER 1

W *hat a total dick!*

I couldn't believe I'd gone out in that snowstorm just because Doctor Scrooge had said so.

Who in their right mind asks someone to drive in a blizzard?

The Devil himself, Dr. Antonio Montivais.

By thirty-two, he was a sensation in Cardiothoracic surgery.

His bedside manner, on the other hand, felt more like a cold winter's touch than the cozy warmth of a fireplace.

In the OR, his artistry was next-level, making the most complex surgeries look like he was conducting surgical symphonies. Every motion was executed with precision and grace - something he was lacking in the personality department.

Nurses were captivated, hanging onto his every word, drawn not just to his surgical prowess but also his striking Spanish features and charming accent.

All nurses, that is, except for yours truly.

With jet-black hair, a jawline that seemed carved from stone, and skin kissed by the Mediterranean sun, he looked as if he'd jumped out of a classic romantic novel.

The man didn't just wear his looks; he exuded confidence from every pore.

While I admired doctors with inherent talent, it's hard to respect those dripping with unchecked pride.

In my eyes, his striking appearance and remarkable skills were overshadowed by an overbearing ego that made him challenging to endure - and that was on a good day.

He had a habit of cutting all RN staff members off mid-sentence, yet, mystifyingly, I seemed to be his favorite target.

And the worst part? He didn't even know my fucking name!

The wind howled with fury, as if nature itself resented Dr. Montivais for the ordeal he was subjecting me to.

Beside me, Sadie trotted with her tail wagging in blissful ignorance. It's remarkable how dogs maintain their calm, even when their owners are on the brink of unraveling.

Lugging the hefty files, my arms threatened to buckle as I navigated across the parking lot to my car.

Sadie, my service dog and ever the enthusiast, bounded into the passenger seat the moment I swung the door open.

"You know, Sadie," I sighed, "I could really learn from your impeccable knack for not giving a fuck."

In response, Sadie offered a knowing bark, essentially saying, 'Time's a-wasting, Mom. Let's roll!'

With a grunt, I managed to heave the box into the back seat.

I was on a mission.

Proving myself and showcasing my dedication was the only ticket to make Dr. Montivais even consider me for that coveted OR management role I'd been chasing relentlessly.

Sadie, sensing my rising frustration, nudged me gently. When I looked over, she woofed in a tone that clearly said, 'Chill, Mom. Maybe it's time for a snack break?'

I sighed. Sometimes, I felt like Sadie was the parent in our relationship. Once I started the car and had the heat going, I

rummaged in my medical bag for my glucometer. With practiced ease, I pricked my finger.

Sadie's soulful eyes watched me intently as I waited for the result. There was something comforting about her gaze. It was like she was telling me she had my back, through snowstorms, finger pricks, and asshole doctors.

The glucometer beeped, and I glanced at it. Remarkably, despite the stress I was under, my levels remained stable.

I turned the glucometer toward Sadie, showing her the results as if she could read them. She was probably the only one in my life who understood me at more core.

"See, all good," I told her.

She gave me a satisfied woof.

Her work here was done.

I rummaged in my glove compartment and grabbed one of the many emergency protein bars I stashed there just in case before steeling myself for the frosty expedition that awaited me.

I ripped the wrapper open and took a bite.

As the car warmed up and the couple of bites settled in my stomach, I realized that I wasn't just battling the snowstorm; I was battling my own indignation and frustration.

This was not how I had envisioned proving my worth for the OR management position. But if Dr. Scrooge wanted his stupid files in a blizzard, I'd have to suck it up and put on my big girl panties.

The snowflakes descended in a cascade of white, and I could hardly believe how thick it was coming down.

It was as if someone up in the sky had decided to shake a giant snow globe over Denver.

I cast a glance toward the heavens. "Any time you want to give it a rest," I mumbled.

Sadie, deciding there wasn't anything left for her to do at the moment, curled up on the passenger seat. Once settled, she

was a picture of stoic composure. It was like she was prepared for a polar expedition.

“Whatever you’re taking, my friend, I have some too.”

I wished some of her canine poise would rub off on me.

I settled into the driver’s seat and shivered, despite the heat blasting and the adrenaline coursing through my veins.

My coat felt like a straitjacket, and my gloves had seemed to morph into woolen ovens. I stripped them off as the car warmed, becoming almost like a sanctuary, a bubble of warmth in a winter wonderland gone mad.

I punched the cabin’s address into my phone and my heart did a tiny little somersault.

One hour, one minute away.

“Happy birthday to me,” I said to myself, my eyes on the slate-gray sky above.

The irony was palpable. On my fortieth birthday, I found myself navigating a snowstorm to deliver files to a mountain cabin, all for a man with an ego so vast it might as well have had its own orbit.

Sadie trotted back toward me, her mission accomplished. I couldn’t help but smile at her. She was my rock, my confidante, my partner in crime.

I’d brave a thousand snowstorms for her.

We clambered back into the car, and I took a deep breath. “Let’s get this shit show on the road.”

The SUV’s tires crunched through the snow as we started our ascent out of the parking lot and toward the mountains.

The landscape transformed into a canvas of whites and grays, with trees heavily blanketed in snow.

I held the steering wheel tightly, my green eyes zeroing in on the road before me.

As snowflakes persistently descended, an inner resolve took shape.

This day wouldn't merely be about paperwork and blizzards.

It would be the defining moment where I'd demonstrate to Dr. Antonio Montivais that Jude Langdon was a force to be reckoned with.

So help me.

CHAPTER 2

“YOU ARROGANT SON OF A...”

The mental image of my grandmother’s scandalized face, if she overheard my muffled grumblings, almost made me chuckle. But even that couldn’t yank me out of my incredibly foul mood.

My heart raced as the perilous drive heightened my anxiety levels to their peak.

Straining to see through the windshield, the wipers seemed almost defiant, doing a poor job against the snow’s onslaught.

Why had I procrastinated on replacing them? Now, they seemed more a partner to the snow than to me, turning my vision into a foggy haze.

The GPS, once so sure of a breezy one-hour journey, mocked me as the drive prolonged into a draining two hours. And still, another daunting ten miles awaited.

I felt the cold seep in, my fingers white from the vice-like grip on the wheel, tension evident in every tightened muscle.

Navigating my SUV further from Denver’s lively pulse, the cacophony of city life began to fade. In its place, nature’s grandeur emerged. The road meandered between majestic, snow-draped mountains and expansive forests, their trees stretching skyward as if seeking the divine.

I had to take a deep breath, bringing myself back to the present.

As I ascended, snowflakes danced with greater fervor, creating a mesmerizing spectacle.

The alternating vistas of frosted pines and jagged peaks inspired awe.

A cocktail of trepidation and thrill surged within as I navigated the snow-laden path to a hidden cabin. Set deep within the woods, it was a world away from the city's ceaseless beat.

For all the day's unpredicted hurdles, the allure of the landscape was irresistible.

Next to me, Sadie, my oasis of serenity, emitted a concerned whine.

She felt my apprehension.

Always in tune. My dearest Sadie.

"Rrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr." A sudden jolt.

The SUV gave a treacherous lurch sideways, and my heart did a wild gymnastic routine in my chest. I wrestled with the steering wheel, muttering every prayer and forgotten promise to the universe.

Once the tires caught grip, I let out a breath I didn't know I'd been holding.

Dr. Montivais, there better be a full-blown orchestra of appreciation playing in that goddamn cabin when I walk in, I fumed internally.

I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the rearview mirror.

If looks could kill, the good doctor would soon be a forever frozen ice statue courtesy of my frosty expression.

The snow danced in wild, theatrical twirls as I tackled the final bends of the drive. Up ahead, the warm glow of the cabin's lights beckoned like a beacon in a snow globe world.

I nudged the car as close to the porch as it would go.

Bracing myself, I wrestled into my coat and jammed my fingers into gloves.

Lifting my eyes to the cabin, I was momentarily disarmed by its rustic allure.

Nestled in a snowy clearing, it was flanked by chattering pines, their branches heavy with winter's decoration.

The cabin, reminiscent of a scene from a Hallmark holiday card, had an aged wooden facade that hinted at tales of yesteryears, while a stone chimney promised cozy fireside moments inside. And those windows, simple yet heartwarming, showcased lanterns that painted the snowstorm with touches of golden luminescence.

I could see the flickering shadows of flames through the glass, conjuring images of cozy evenings wrapped in blankets with a hot drink in hand.

For a fleeting moment, the small porch, with its simple bench and an old pair of snowshoes hanging beside the door, whispered of simpler times. It was a place that felt remote and snug, a sanctuary from the storm.

As I opened my door and braced myself against the cold, I felt a flicker of anticipation mixed with anxiety. This was not my intended destination for the night, but there was something undeniably appealing about this tiny haven in the midst of the wilderness.

With the box cradled in my arms like an unwieldy infant, I stepped toward the cabin. The cold slapped my face like an insult, and the snow tried to make itself comfortable inside my boots. I trudged toward the porch, each step feeling like a marathon.

A sudden shout pierced through the howling wind. Dr. Montivais was standing on the porch yelling something about me not being allowed to park there.

The audacity of this man!

I had just traversed the Arctic tundra to deliver his box of files, and he had the nerve to fuss over where I parked?

Fury bubbled inside me like a cauldron, and I stomped through the near calf-deep snow toward him, my boots leaving deep imprints behind.

For a brief moment, as I neared the porch, I couldn't help but notice how striking he looked despite the circumstances. The loose sweatpants did little to hide his well-toned legs, and the long sleeve tee, though probably not the wisest choice for the weather, clung to his upper body like a second skin.

His biceps and chest were on full display, making it abundantly clear that he was no stranger to a gym. On any other occasion, I might have let my gaze linger on his jet-black hair that hung loose over his forehead or the rugged jawline that could give any Hollywood star a run for their money.

He was younger than me—nearly a decade to be exact. But thanks to the age-defying genes passed down from Grandma, most wouldn't be able to tell.

Frankly, given the way the doctor chose to speak to me, I wouldn't be surprised if he pegged me as his junior.

When he spoke again, he called me the wrong name just like he always did. "Judy!" he shouted over the wind.

I was absolutely livid. I reached the cover of the porch, my fingers tightening around the edges of the heavy box, and before I knew what I was doing, I let it drop—right on his foot. It was a total accident, but one I was happy to make.

"Here are your precious files! Enjoy your weekend!" I spat, sarcasm dripping from every word. I turned on my heel, my coat flaring behind me like the cape of an avenging hero and stormed back toward my SUV.

I stomped my way back, contemplating giving him the middle finger as my parting gesture.

But fate wasn't done messing with me yet.

As I tried to back out, my tires spun helplessly against the snow, kicking up white powder but not gaining any traction.

My heart sank.

The engine roared, but my SUV was going nowhere. In the passenger seat, Sadie was whimpering, her nose pressing against the window, sensing my despair.

I let go of the gas, letting my head fall forward against the steering wheel.

I was stranded in a snowstorm, in the middle of nowhere, with an egocentric doctor who couldn't even remember my name.

What a perfect end to a perfectly rotten day.

Just as I was contemplating the hopelessness of my situation, there was a knock on the window. I looked up to see the devil himself peering through the glass with a smirk.

Reluctantly, I rolled down the window just enough to hear him shout "You're stuck!" over the wind.

Thank you Captain Obvious.

As if I hadn't already figured that out myself.

The urge to pepper spray him bubbled up, but I restrained myself, instead shooting him a scowl. "Thanks for that groundbreaking insight," I retorted. "Got any other gems of wisdom to enlighten me with?"

He rolled his eyes and gestured dramatically toward the cabin. "I'd highly advise you to come inside and wait out the storm. I can see you're itching to bolt, but it looks like Mother Nature has RSVP'd 'no' to your getaway plan."

Part of me wanted to unleash a snarky retort, but my car's pathetic attempts to defy gravity and the skin-biting cold made their own compelling argument.

Honestly, it felt like I had been cast as the unwilling lead in a cheesy rom-com. Maybe one where two polar opposites get snowed in together? Perfect.

With an exaggerated exhale, I yanked open the car door and stepped out. Calling out to Sadie, she joyfully trotted over.

Doc's eyes nearly popped out seeing my hulking black lab. "Did you bring a bear?" he exclaimed, poorly hiding his

surprise.

“First of all, she’s a dog. Secondly, she’s coming in,” I declared with a smirk, daring him to object.

His jaw tightened, but he managed to keep his composure, remarking, “Fine. But if she decides my couch is her new favorite snack, you and I will have words.”

“She has better taste than that,” I quipped.

He made a half-hearted attempt to offer me his hand as I approached the steps, but I brushed it away. “I’m perfectly capable, thanks,” I remarked icily, marching up the stairs with Sadie close behind.

The warm embrace of the cabin greeted me instantly as I stepped inside. Sadie, sensing the cozy spot, immediately sprawled out beside the fireplace. Dr. Montivais watched with a barely concealed grimace before facing me.

“Suppose I should thank you for the files,” he muttered, his tone contrasting sharply with the cheery surroundings, the words sounding like they were dragged out of him.

“It wasn’t a favor for you,” I shot back, my eyes narrowing.

A momentary silence settled, punctuated only by the comforting crackle of the fire.

He cleared his throat. “You could make an effort to be a tad less prickly.”

I raised an eyebrow, gesturing around the room. “And you might consider getting into the holiday spirit a bit. Or at least not being such a monumental jerk.”

A smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth. “Touché.”

CHAPTER 3

TONY

M*an, this one's got fire!*

There I was, in my glorious, isolated cabin in the woods, with Jude, not Judy, as she had so graciously pointed out. And by “graciously,” I meant she looked like she wanted to wring my neck.

I was Dr. Tony Montivais, the guy everyone wanted a piece of, and here was this woman, who, though clearly infuriated by my mere existence, was making my boring night somewhat interesting.

When she bent down to wipe her dog's paws on the mat, I couldn't help but check her out. It wasn't every day that a lady ended up stranded in my cabin during a blizzard. I figured it was my duty as a man to appreciate the view, which, admittedly, was pretty damn fine. There was something about the way her clothes hugged her body that was unexpectedly enticing. I could have been a gentleman, but where was the fun in that?

“So, Jude, huh? I always thought it was Judy.” I smirked, knowing full well that calling her by the wrong name would get under her skin.

She shot me a look that could kill and I couldn't help but chuckle.

However, her choice of attire was somewhat... uninspiring. She wore gray slacks that were too loose, and a white button-up under a chunky sweater. My mom would have

rocked that outfit—back in the 80s. I shared that thought with Jude because, well, I had to.

“My mom would love your outfit.”

She wasn't amused, and the daggers she fired in my direction made it clear that another comment like that might result in my balls getting yanked off and tossed into the roaring fire.

The tension was palpable. Part of it was annoyance, but there was something else, the kind of something that makes your heart race just a tad too fast.

It was then that I realized I hadn't really noticed her before at the hospital, which was odd considering how damn gorgeous she was. There was something about her that was making it difficult for me to keep up my usual cool and collected demeanor.

As she settled in by the fireplace with her dog, I couldn't help but watch her. I knew I should have been concerned about my files, but for some reason, all I could focus on was the mysterious woman in my living room.

I decided then and there that maybe the evening's unexpected turn of events might not be so bad after all. If nothing else, it was bound to be entertaining.

“Can I get you something to drink, Judy?” I winced as soon as I said the word, realizing that I'd messed up her name yet again.

She glared at me and reinforced her name, almost as if she thought I was stupid. “It's Jude, like the saint, not Judy, like the puppet,” she snapped, her hands open before the fire.

I let out a low chuckle. “Ah, like the Beatles song, then?” I said, raising an eyebrow.

Jude rolled her eyes so hard I thought they might get stuck. “Wow, you must be a real hit at parties with lines like that,” she responded with enough sarcasm to peel paint off the walls.

My eyes couldn't help but wander the room as I noticed her checking out my humble abode. It made me self-conscious

for a moment. It was one room—kitchen, living room, bedroom—all in one. The only existing doors were for the bathroom and a broom closet. But hell, it was cozy, and doors were overrated.

Truth be told, I was crazy about my little cabin. My small, sturdy refuge was swathed in an ambiance that married rustic charm and masculine minimalism. A crackling fireplace dominated the far wall, its flickering flames throwing a golden glow upon worn leather armchairs, thick, plush rugs, and polished wood surfaces. Bookshelves lined one wall, each laden with colorful spines.

The sturdy wooden table near the window was a testament to countless late nights spent poring over charts. The scent of burning wood mingled with the smell of aged leather and pine, cocooning me in familiarity and the tranquility of solitude. There was a magic to it, a silent strength that could soothe the stormiest of souls, and this humble cabin had long been my sanctuary.

But now, that sanctuary had been intruded upon by a certain cranky nurse.

She suddenly pointed a finger at me, as if realizing something. “You don’t happen to have a truck that could get my SUV out, do you?”

“I don’t. And the plows won’t be out until the snow stops.”

Her expression softened for a second, perhaps realizing the madness of her journey. Then, curiosity taking over, I decided to prod a bit more. “Seriously, what were you thinking? Coming all the way up here in the middle of a blizzard?”

She folded her arms, lips pressed tightly together. “I was thinking that someone needed these files badly enough to send a nurse on an emergency delivery mission. Real pain in my ass, but I thought it might be urgent.” She glanced over at the box she had dropped on my foot earlier.

Ah, so that had been my fault. I ran a hand through my hair. “Well, I must say, your dedication to your job is... impressive,” I replied, trying not to grin too widely.

Jude's eyes narrowed as if measuring whether she could take me in a battle of wits. It was going to be an interesting evening.

“So tell me,” she said, pointing in my direction again, “What’s so important that you needed these files during Snowmageddon?”

I spread my hands in front of me. “A man’s got to have his secrets.”

Her jaw dropped open just a bit and I couldn’t help but laugh.

Still chuckling, I told her, “Looks like we’re stuck with each other. At least until this storm blows over.”

She rolled her eyes again. “Lucky me.”

I was about to make another snide comment when she started talking again.

“Seriously, what were you thinking, calling Sally and insisting you needed these files for the weekend? Is someone’s life on the line or what?”

I frowned for a moment, then burst into laughter, shaking my head. The absurdity of the situation was starting to hit me.

Her face contorted in confusion. “What?” she demanded, eyes narrowing.

I caught my breath, still chuckling. “I swear, if I’d known the snow was going to be this bad, I wouldn’t have bothered. The timing just couldn’t be worse.” I said, holding up my hands. “I genuinely apologize for dragging you into this inconvenience. Seriously.”

“Inconvenience!” she exclaimed, her eyes ablaze. Damn, she was beautiful when she was angry. My mind had wandered for a split second, and I couldn’t help but imagine how she might have looked in other intense moments. I bet she was even more beautiful when she was in the throes of passion.

I snapped back to reality as I watched her glance around the cabin, almost as if she was looking for something. “Why

isn't your place decorated for Christmas? Not feeling the holiday spirit, Scrooge?" she changed the subject.

"This isn't exactly my permanent abode, Jude. It's my getaway spot," I responded, raising an eyebrow. "Besides, I wasn't expecting guests."

She huffed an exasperated sigh, but there was a tiny smile playing at her lips. "Well, since we're stuck here, maybe we should make the most of it," she said, her tone a little lighter.

"Oh?" I responded, crossing my arms and leaning against the doorframe. "What did you have in mind?"

She started looking around the cabin again, a mischievous glint in her eye. I could tell she was hatching a plan.

Maybe being snowed in with Jude wasn't such a bad thing after all.

Her dog, Sadie, suddenly whimpered and pressed against her leg, nudging Jude with her snout. She bent down, patting the dog's head and murmuring a soothing, "good girl," while throwing me an apologetic glance.

"Damn," she muttered under her breath, and before I knew what was happening, she was heading for the door.

I reached out and caught her arm, stopping her. "Hey, where are you going?"

"I need my bag from the car," she said, an edge to her voice.

I laughed. "In this storm? Don't worry, no one's going to steal it."

She pursed her lips, her cheeks flushed. "I'm diabetic. Sadie just signaled that I need to check my glucose levels, and my kit is in the bag outside."

I glanced down at the dog, who had moved back to Jude's side, pressing against her leg. There was something about the loyalty and intelligence in Sadie's eyes that struck a chord within me. I was truly in awe at how much this creature cared about her owner.

“That’s impressive,” I found myself saying. “Here, give me your keys. I’ll get it for you.”

She hesitated, looking me over as if trying to figure out whether or not I could be trusted. I raised an eyebrow and rolled my eyes. “Come on, I may be an asshole, but I’m not a complete dick.”

She snorted, a hint of amusement dancing in her eyes. “We’ll see about that.”

I couldn’t help but laugh again, a genuine, good ‘ol belly laugh, the kind I hadn’t had in a long time. She had this spirit that kept catching me off guard, and it was invigorating.

I stepped outside into the biting cold, and as I trudged through the snow to get her bag, I realized that there was an electrifying energy between us, like the static before a storm. It was tense, but not the hostile kind, something more primal and instinctive.

While I was out fetching her bag, my shoulders dusted with snow, our eyes met, and for a split second, I felt like we were the only two people in the world.

CHAPTER 4

As Tony stepped out into the frigid cold, I found myself observing him through the frosty windows of the cabin. His movements were fluid and confident, each stride filled with a sureness that stirred something deep within me. The sight of him—powerful, masculine, grappling with the unrelenting blizzard—was unnervingly attractive.

Snowflakes swirled around him, dusting his broad shoulders with a layer of white as he trudged through the snow-covered ground. His tall frame cut a strong silhouette against the monochrome landscape. The falling snow seemed to spotlight him, his body language radiating a raw energy.

His laughter earlier had been infectious, breaking through the layers of my annoyance and surprising me with its genuine warmth. His concern over my diabetes was a far cry from the arrogant, insensitive man he'd first appeared to be. It was disarming, to say the least, and it added a new layer of complexity to my feelings toward him.

Suddenly, I found myself contemplating the man beyond the cocky remarks and unabashed flirtations. Tony was undoubtedly a handsome man with a charisma that was as intriguing as it was infuriating. But it was his unanticipated moments of kindness that left me reeling.

There was also something about his accent that, when he spoke, sent an unexpected shiver down my spine. It was subtly husky, oozing a sexy charm that felt completely at odds with the man's abrasive demeanor, the tone of his words hinting at

his Spanish heritage. I had to admit, it was more appealing than I wanted it to be.

My attention was drawn downward as Sadie whimpered again, pressing her furry body against my leg. I bent to stroke her head, offering soothing words of promise. “It’s okay, girl. We’re about to fix it,” I murmured to her. My hands were slightly shaky, a telltale sign of my dropping blood sugar, so Sadie’s warning was a welcome one.

Shaking off the unfamiliar surge of attraction, I shifted my gaze back to Sadie. But even as I tried to focus on my faithful service dog, my mind kept drifting back to the enigmatic man braving the snowstorm for my sake. As the realization dawned on me, I found myself wondering what else this unexpected night had in store.

Tony reappeared, his fingers crimson from the cold as he carried my bag. A sly grin spread across my face as I spotted his bare hands.

“Really, Tony?” I teased, crossing my arms over my chest. “Skipping out on gloves in this weather? Ever heard of frostbite?”

A smirk crossed his face, a spark dancing in his eyes as he extended the bag toward me. “And here I thought I was the rugged, mountain man type,” he retorted, his tone dripping with playful sarcasm.

“Just saying, you might find it hard to be the whiz surgeon over at Pitt Medical with no fingers.”

“A man of my talents? I’d make do.” He flashed me another cocky grin.

I chuckled, accepting the bag, our fingers brushing in the exchange. An unexpected jolt of electricity coursed through me, the heat of his touch seeping into my skin, stirring something within me.

I quickly pulled my hand back. “Anyway...”

Tony flashed me a grin. He seemed to know exactly what was going on, what was happening in the air between us.

He then dusted the snow off his jacket, the crisp flakes landing on the cabin floor and quickly melting into non-existence. The muscles of his back moved with grace under his shirt as he shrugged off his coat, leaving it to hang on a hook by the door. As he bent down to untie his boots, I found my eyes drifting over his form. His broad shoulders, his strong arms, the way his shirt pulled taut against his lean torso—everything about him screamed raw masculinity. His movements were fluid and powerful, like a predator in the wild. It was unexpectedly mesmerizing.

I looked away, biting my lip, but my eyes betrayed me, darting back to him again. His physique was undeniably attractive, each muscle toned from years of staunch discipline. A warmth spread through me despite the raging storm outside, an unexpected, tantalizing heat that I was finding hard to ignore.

He took the seat across from me, his gaze never leaving mine as I rummaged through the bag for my glucometer. He watched in silence as I pricked my finger, dabbed a droplet of blood onto the test strip, and waited for the reading.

My blood sugar was lower than I would've liked. I glanced at my watch—it was still a bit early for my insulin shot, but given the circumstances, it was better to be safe than sorry. I reached into the bag again, retrieving the insulin pen.

“You just gonna sit there and watch me?” I asked, shooting him a challenging look.

“Does it bother you?” he replied, his voice smooth and steady.

I met his gaze and shrugged. “No, I’m just not used to having an audience while I do this.” I pulled up my shirt just enough to reveal my stomach, my fingers nimbly preparing the insulin pen.

Tony’s gaze never wavered. His eyes reflected not just professional interest but also something else that sent my heart racing. As I pressed the pen against my skin and felt the familiar pinch, I couldn’t shake off the strange mixture of tension and anticipation that filled the room.

Tony's brows quirked up in surprise as he watched me. "That's a unique method. Most of the people that I know with diabetes prefer injecting into their arms or thighs. Stomach shots aren't a favorite."

I shrugged, feeling a little self-conscious. "That's just how my doctor taught me when I was a teenager. He said it was the quickest way to get the insulin into my system," I explained. There was an odd silence, and I felt the temperature in the room rise slightly, or maybe it was just my body reacting to the unexpected intimacy of the situation.

His eyes met mine, a teasing grin on his lips, his expression glinting with a spark of humor that caused a flutter in my stomach. "I must admit, it's quite brave of you."

His comment drew a startled laugh from me. His humor—light and unexpectedly comforting—eased the tension that had started to build. The fact that he had noticed my fortitude, veiled it with humor but still acknowledged it, somehow made me feel seen. His words, simple yet impactful, ignited an unfamiliar warmth within me, replacing the dull ache of self-consciousness with a flush of pride.

I shrugged, offering him a smirk. "Well, someone's got to be the tough one around here." The banter between us, light and full of undercurrents that I wasn't entirely prepared to acknowledge yet, had a strange charm to it, creating an atmosphere that was as cozy as it was charged with an unspoken understanding.

"What is it the kids say?" he asked, his words dripping with that impossibly sexy accent. "You must be 'built different'."

I laughed. "Something like that, I suppose."

As if sensing that her job was done, Sadie ambled over to the fireplace, her movements slow and sure. She circled the spot three times before settling down. A pang of worry gnawed at me; I wanted to ask for a blanket for Sadie, but Tony hadn't exactly shown any affection toward her yet.

To my surprise, Tony seemed to read my thoughts, or maybe he was just attuned to the needs of his unexpected guests. He rose from his chair and retrieved a throw from the couch, an unexpected chivalrous act that took me off guard. Nudging Sadie gently with his foot so she'd get up, he spread the blanket on the floor where she'd chosen to rest. Sadie, in her typical fashion, circled the spot three times again before collapsing onto the blanket. Within seconds, the soft rhythm of her snoring filled the room.

For the second time that night, Tony's actions surprised me. I felt an inexplicable draw to this man, a pull that was as strong as it was confusing. The cabin was small, but it wasn't the confined space that was amplifying my awareness of Tony; it was something far more dangerous. It was desire.

I caught Tony smiling as he looked at Sadie sleeping. The grin that danced on his face made my heart flutter in my chest, and in that moment, I finally understood why every female nurse and intern in our department practically swooned at the mere sight of him. Even dressed in those casual joggers and long sleeve tee, he was still a devastatingly sexy man.

The combination of his rugged charm, his unexpected tenderness, and that irresistible accent had my senses spiraling. I was beginning to feel things that I hadn't felt in a long time. There was undeniable electricity between us, a sensation that was both tantalizing and dangerous.

I tore my gaze away from him, reminding myself that he was technically my boss. There was an invisible line drawn there, a boundary that needed to be respected. But as my eyes lingered on the play of firelight across his strong jaw and ridiculously handsome face, the way his biceps flexed as he moved about, I realized there was an urge to cross that line.

I gave myself a mental shake. I couldn't. I *shouldn't*.

While Sadie continued to snooze and the cozy warmth from the fire enveloped the cabin, Tony got up from his chair and headed into the kitchen. He turned his attention to me, cradling a glass of amber liquid in his hand.

“How about a drink?” he asked, his eyes twinkling as he nodded his head toward the glass in his hand. “Hot whiskey. *Mi abuelita’s* recipe—honey, a bit of ginger, and a few other secret ingredients that she’d kill me if I revealed. Perfect for a cold and snowy night such as this.”

The idea was undeniably tempting. The warmth of the whiskey coupled with the enchanting atmosphere of the cabin sounded like the perfect combination. My eyes fell on the glass once again, then shifted back to his inviting face. But a small voice of caution echoed at the back of my mind.

Tony, with his irresistible accent and captivating charm, was still my boss. It was challenging enough already to maintain my boundaries, and alcohol would only lower my inhibitions. There was a line that I couldn’t cross, but with each passing minute, that line was getting blurrier. I was treading dangerous territory.

I smiled and shook my head, injecting as much confidence into my voice as I could muster. “I think I’ll pass. I want to be sharp in case I’m able to get back on the road.”

He chuckled. “Your faith in the storm easing up is admirable. But I understand. A bit of tea, then?”

“Sounds perfect.”

He flashed me another sly smile, that impossibly sexy little grin that warmed me more than any whiskey could. I smiled back, allowing the comfortable silence to fall between us, while dangerous thoughts whispered in my mind.

CHAPTER 5

The whiskey in my glass was dwindling, the amber liquid reflecting the dance of the flames from the fireplace. As I moved to freshen up my drink, I caught myself sneaking glances at Jude from the corner of my eye. I took in her casual pose, the firelight illuminating her face, and the calm composure of her expression. There was an undeniable pull about her, a vibrant energy that I found impossible to ignore.

A tumbler and a bottle in my hands, I poured another measure of the fiery liquid, the clinking of the ice cubes breaking the silence in the cabin. The scent of aged whiskey filled the air, embracing the space like a cozy blanket.

The cabin was quiet, save for the comforting crackle of the fire and Sadie's soft snores. As I watched Jude across the room, I realized that I should have been paying more attention to this vivacious woman all along. I typically didn't mingle with OR nurses who didn't work directly with me. She spent her days in the clutches of the ortho docs. I knew her reputation as a responsible and capable nurse, which was why I'd requested she be the one to deliver the files. Now I found myself wanting to know more about her.

As if sensing my stare, Jude turned to look at me, a playful spark lighting up her eyes. "Enjoying the view, doctor?" she teased, a half-smile playing on her lips.

A rush of heat surged through me, stronger than the whiskey. I grinned back at her, lifting my glass in a silent salute. Rather than address her comment about how she'd completely busted me leering at her, I changed tracks.

“I understand you applied for the OR management position,” I said, more to myself than her.

Her eyes became two pools of mystery and intellect that held me captive. She nodded, a hint of resignation in her sigh as she leaned back in her chair, the big, ceramic mug of tea cradled in her slender hands.

“Agreed to doing this trip to accomplish a little ass kissing,” she declared, her tone light yet bitter. “Might as well admit it.”

A surprised laugh escaped from me. It wasn't the reply I had anticipated. It was honest, blunt, and utterly Jude. The words, laced with her unique blend of sass and vulnerability, made her even more attractive. Here was a woman who wasn't afraid to say what she felt, a woman who commanded attention and respect.

I took another sip of my whiskey, my eyes never leaving her. I hadn't expected to feel this way, hadn't anticipated this pull toward her. But as the evening rolled on, I found myself becoming increasingly intrigued. There was something so refreshingly real about her, something that drew me in, wanting more. In between sips of whiskey, I turned the conversation back to the elephant in the room. “Ass kissing isn't a prerequisite for the position,” I began, catching her off guard. “You actually have to be able to manage people.”

“I wouldn't be putting myself in the running if I wasn't already damn good at that,” she replied, total confidence in her voice. “Just ask anyone on my team.”

“But are you sure you're ready to take on the whole OR?” I asked. It wasn't a question meant to belittle her, but rather to test the waters, to see what she was made of.

Her eyes narrowed at me, her lips tightening into a thin line. “What's that supposed to mean?” she snapped back, her feisty spirit flaring up again.

“No offense, Jude,” I said, raising my hands in a gesture of peace, “But you can't be more than thirty. That's not a lot of

years on the job to be experienced enough to manage a whole operating room.”

The cabin fell silent, the crackling of the fire and the rhythmic breathing of the dog again the only sounds. Jude stared at me, her eyes boring into mine, the light from the flames reflecting in their depth. And then, without warning, she threw her head back and burst into loud, hearty laughter.

My eyes traced the line of her throat, exposed and vulnerable, her laughter like a melodious symphony playing in the quiet cabin. My gaze dropped lower, lingering on the perky breasts that bounced subtly with her laughter.

A grin tugged at the corners of my lips, despite the fact that she was laughing at my expense. There was something infectious about her laugh, it was genuine and not forced.

“What’s so funny?” I asked, genuinely curious, as I watched her beautiful face light up with pure joy. I had never seen anyone laugh like that before, with such unabashed delight. It was enchanting.

“I actually turned forty today” she casually confessed, still chuckling from her earlier burst of laughter.

Surprised, I blinked at her, my whiskey momentarily forgotten. “You’re kidding?”

She shook her head, her long hair swishing around her shoulders. “Nope. My mom is sixty-five, but people still think she’s forty and mistake us for sisters all the time. Good genes, I guess.”

I eyed her skeptically, my gaze sweeping over her youthful features. “You’re pulling my leg.”

Without a word, she stood and walked over to where I was. She whipped out her phone, her fingers dancing across the screen before turning it toward me. On the screen was a photo of a couple who could pass for being in their early forties. A woman with bright, vibrant eyes just like Jude’s, and a man with the same type of youthful features. They were standing in front of a beautiful house, their arms wrapped around each other, their smiles wide and full of love.

“These are my parents,” she said, a hint of pride creeping into her voice.

I couldn’t hide my surprise. They looked so young. “Where do they live?”

She pulled her phone back, sliding it into her pocket. “Oregon,” she said, meeting my gaze with a smile. I didn’t know what to make of it, but I couldn’t deny that I was utterly fascinated by this woman, her age just one of many surprises she seemed to have in store.

The close proximity was a trap, but I welcomed it. My eyes fell on her lips, curved in a soft smile. She sucked in a sharp breath, then spun away quickly, the sudden distance between us like a punch to the gut.

“Your mother is a very lovely woman,” I said, striving to steady my voice.

“Thank you,” she replied, just above a whisper. “You know, I can’t believe you get service all the way out here.”

“Well, it’s hit or miss, really. You just got lucky,” I confessed, stepping toward the window to push aside the curtain, revealing the snow falling with increasing intensity.

Jude sidled up beside me, her proximity once again igniting a strange fluttering in my stomach. I took an inconspicuous sniff, my senses filling with her warm scent—something soft and sweet that reminded me of home.

Suddenly, a loud growl punctuated the silence, and it took me a moment to realize it was her stomach. She blushed and pressed a hand against her belly, but it only added to her charm. It didn’t detract from the aura of casual, effortless allure she exuded. Instead, it felt real, human, and it endeared her to me more than I’d have liked to admit.

“I take it you’re hungry,” I teased, pulling my eyes from the snowy spectacle outside to glance at her. The blush creeping up her cheeks was absolutely adorable.

“Just a little,” she responded.

“How about I make us something to eat then? Unless you’re scared my cooking will send you running back into the blizzard.”

She gave me a skeptical look, trying to suppress a smile, but failing miserably. “Are you saying you can cook, Dr. Montivais?”

“Better than most,” I boasted, puffing out my chest slightly, watching as her eyes twinkled with skepticism.

“Well, then,” she replied, a mischievous grin on her lips. “Let’s see what you’ve got.”

The banter, lighthearted and full of underlying tension, made the small cabin feel alive, vibrant. Despite the snowstorm raging outside, the atmosphere inside was becoming warmer with every passing second. Somehow, Jude’s presence had transformed my solitary refuge into something exciting, and I found myself anticipating what would happen next. It was clear to both of us that something was brewing, but for now, we’d leave it simmering, dancing on the edge of the unknown.

CHAPTER 6

Tony was close, too close, and the smell of mountain air and pine that clung to him had my senses on the brink of combustion. His aftershave, subtly spicy and undeniably masculine, intermingled with the warm scent of whiskey, creating an intoxicating blend. If it wasn't for the grumble of my stomach, I would have found myself lost in the enchanting scents he exuded.

But my body had betrayed me. At the most inopportune moment, my stomach growled, loud enough for both of us to hear. Heat rushed to my cheeks as I blushed, embarrassment coursing through me. But Tony merely grinned, that playful smile of his making another appearance as he winked at me.

"It is nearly past dinnertime," he assured me, his voice low and soothing.

I forced a chuckle, trying to recover my shattered composure. I looked out the window again, allowing the serene view of the falling snow to calm my frazzled nerves. The steady rhythm of the snowflakes fluttering against the windowpane provided a comforting melody, harmonizing with the fire that was snapping and popping in the hearth.

Tony moved away, the absence of his warmth and scent making me feel suddenly cold. I chanced a glance at him, catching him rummaging through the refrigerator. When he straightened up, he held two prime cuts of steak in his hand.

"I was planning to cook steak on the iron skillet tonight," he informed me "You do eat meat, right?"

His question pulled me out of my thoughts. I stared at him for a moment, caught off guard by the domesticity of the scene. The overhead light cast a soft glow on his features, accentuating the sharp planes of his face and the deep chestnut of his hair. He looked nothing like the intense surgeon I was used to back at the hospital. In the cabin he seemed more relaxed, more open, more himself.

“Yes,” I replied. “I do eat meat.”

“Good.” He nodded, looking pleased. He moved to the sink to wash his hands, his movements confident and relaxed.

I watched him, admiring the lines of his muscular form. The man certainly knew how to fill out a shirt. I couldn’t help but imagine what he’d look like out of it, hastily dismissing the thought as soon as it formed.

Still shaking off my inappropriate thoughts, I turned my attention back to the picturesque view outside. The snowflakes continued their graceful descent, cloaking the world around us in a blanket of white. I found my mood mirroring the serenity of the scene outside, my heart rate returning to normal, the blush fading from my cheeks.

As the sounds and smells of sizzling meat filled the cabin, my stomach growled again, louder. I chuckled, my earlier embarrassment long forgotten. Turning around, I saw Tony grinning at me from the stove. He looked sexy cooking, and more than a little amused.

“Sounds like I’d better hurry up,” he teased, his eyes sparkling with laughter.

“Yes,” I admitted, returning his grin. “You’d better.”

Dinner in a remote cabin with a man I’d hardly spoken to before now, amidst a raging blizzard was not how I’d pictured my night. But as I watched Tony maneuvering around the kitchen with surprising ease, the warmth of the cabin wrapping around me like a comforting blanket, the idea became more enticing. Perhaps my birthday wouldn’t turn out to be a complete shitshow after all.

“I must say, I’m surprised,” I confessed, leaning against the counter. “You don’t strike me as the type of man that cooks.”

Tony shot me a quick glance, his brows furrowing in a mock hurt expression. “And why is that?” he asked, the corners of his mouth curling in amusement.

“Because you’re... you,” I said, gesturing toward him. “You’re this intense, hyper-focused surgeon who doesn’t appear to have interest in anything else. You keep people at a distance. I don’t know, you just don’t come across as a man that knows his way around the kitchen, is all.”

His amused smile faded, replaced by a thoughtful gaze. He took in my words, seemingly considering them. But just when I thought I might have made him uncomfortable, his grin returned, full force. “You’re right, I’m not your typical cook, or your typical man,” he admitted. “But I can fend for myself. And Sadie, too. I’m sure she would enjoy a bite to eat.”

As if on cue, Sadie lifted her head, her ears pricking up at the sound of her name. Tony reached into the fridge and pulled out a cooked chicken breast, waving it in front of her. She gave a quiet woof, her tail thumping against the floor, before settling back down.

“That’s Sadie’s way of saying thank you,” I translated for him, smiling at the sight of my usually standoffish dog warming up to Tony.

“Consider it a truce,” he chuckled, placing the chicken breast on the counter.

“Do you need any help?” I offered, feeling slightly useless as I watched him busy himself in the kitchen.

He shook his head, dismissing my offer with a wave of his hand. “You’re a guest,” he said, placing another skillet on the stove. “Unexpected, but still a guest. My mother raised me to treat guests with honor.”

A warm, tender feeling welled up within me at his words. It was endearing, the way he mentioned his mother and his

upbringing. I found myself being drawn in by his casual charm and surprisingly domestic skills.

Tony, the brilliant, distant doctor who hardly ever smiled, was proving to be so much more than what he presented at the hospital. Here, in his sanctuary, he was warm, hospitable, and... human. And for the first time since I'd known him, I found myself genuinely wanting to know more about him—the man behind the surgeon's mask.

As he moved around the kitchen with practiced ease, I became more intrigued, envisioning a younger version of him in a completely different setting. "Where did you grow up?" I asked, breaking up the sound of steak sizzling and utensils clattering.

"Spain. Madrid, to be precise," he replied without missing a beat, and something akin to nostalgia flickered in his eyes. "My parents still live there."

"Spain?" The mention of such an exotic location had me raising my eyebrows. I knew he was of Spanish descent, but I hadn't realized he actually grew up there.

"Yeah," he chuckled, his gaze distant as if lost in memories. "They own a small winery outside of the city, it's been in the family for generations. I spent a good chunk of my childhood picking grapes and watching my father make wine."

The way he spoke of his past, his home, was so different from the stoic doctor I was used to. There was a sweet softness to him that I had never seen before. It was nice.

He reached for a wine bottle on the rack, cradling it in his hands. The label was faded but still legible, signaling an older vintage. "I think we should enjoy some of this tonight," he suggested, his eyes meeting mine.

I found myself blushing at his implication. "Oh, that's not necessary. I don't want you to waste it on me. I'm not much of a wine drinker," I admitted, suddenly feeling quite bashful.

His grin widened, his eyes sparkling with mischief. "There's nothing quite like a good red wine, especially when you're trapped in a cabin during a snowstorm... with a

beautiful woman,” he said, his voice dropping to a lower, flirtatious tone. “And besides, I have a whole case in the wine cellar.”

I could feel my cheeks heating up at his words. “You’re quite the flirt, aren’t you, Dr. Montivais?”

With a wink, he uncorked the bottle and poured us each a glass. “Only when I have a good reason to be,” he retorted, lifting his glass in a toast. “To an unexpected, but hopefully, pleasant evening.” I raised my glass and nodded in return, taking a sip. The rich taste of the wine danced on my tongue, its exquisite flavor drawing a sigh from my lips. He watched me with a captivation that stirred both thrill and disquiet within me.

Heavy with implication and anticipation, his words hung in the air, echoing in the growing warmth of the cabin, a warmth not caused by the fire. There was no denying it any longer; the attraction between us was palpable and tantalizing, like the exquisite wine Tony had just poured. The situation had moved beyond surviving a snowstorm and became more about surviving the storm brewing between the two of us.

Tony presented me with a plate consisting of a perfectly cooked steak and roasted potatoes. The mouthwatering aroma made my stomach growl louder, to my embarrassment. But he just chuckled, his laughter a melodious sound that I was really starting to enjoy.

“Just as hungry as Sadie, aren’t you?” he teased.

I laughed, shaking my head in mock indignation. “I am not that bad,” I defended, trying to keep my voice steady despite the butterflies in my stomach.

“Really? Could have fooled me,” he replied with a mischievous wink.

He walked over to a cupboard, fetching a bowl and setting it aside before cubing the chicken breast he’d taken from the fridge. He filled the bowl for Sadie, setting it, along with a bowl of water, on the floor. Sadie, who was seemingly dozing

off, sprang into action, her tail wagging fervently as she devoured her meal.

Tony returned to his seat, his eyes never leaving mine. He gestured toward my plate with a grin that was pure temptation. “*Que aproveche*, Jude,” he said, his voice a low rumble that sent a shiver down my spine.

Caught off guard, I could only return his smile, my heart pounding in response. His warmth and attentiveness made me feel seen and valued in a way that was entirely new to me, and somewhat unnerving.

As my gaze wandered from the plate of food to Tony, a troubling thought crossed my mind. He was a distraction I didn’t need, especially not when I was aiming for that promotion. A professional relationship was all that we should share. Any dalliance beyond that was not only risky but downright careless.

However, as the evening stretched on, the cozy cabin and the snowfall providing a picture-perfect backdrop, I realized my resistance to temptation was quickly dwindling. He represented an entirely different kind of trouble, and I was teetering on the edge of a decision that could change everything.

As I picked up my cutlery, returning his infectious smile, I knew that for better or worse, this was an evening that I would not forget. And as I glanced back at Tony, his chocolate-colored eyes reflecting the flickering firelight, I couldn’t help but think that maybe, just maybe, some troubles were worth the risk.

CHAPTER 7

As I watched Jude, her cheeks kissed by the warm glow of the fire and blushing from the excellent wine, I found myself wondering if the blush extended beyond what I could see. It was a thought that made me uneasy. After all, she was an employee at the hospital.

Despite our separate roles at Pitt Medical, she was still technically part of my team. And if she bagged the management position she desired, that would put us in closer proximity, raising the stakes of the already simmering tension. But as we shared stories, laughter, and the delicious bottle of wine, I began to see Jude as more than just a colleague, despite my better judgment.

“You know, I think your policy on staff holidays is garbage,” she declared out of nowhere, her voice laced with playfulness.

I nearly choked on my wine. “Oh? Is that so?”

“Definitely. You shouldn’t make us ration our vacation days.”

“And I suppose you have a better system in mind?” I countered, a grin tugging at my lips.

“Of course,” she replied, mirroring my grin with a teasing smirk of her own.

There was no denying it—Jude was vibrant, and full of a fiery spirit that was utterly captivating. She was a woman who wasn’t afraid to express herself, a woman who sparked a sense

of admiration and respect within me. She had a rare combination of wit, tenacity, and boldness that was refreshing.

Despite her being a subordinate, Jude was staking her claim in my mind, causing ripples in my thoughts and stirring emotions I'd thought were long dormant. It was an unexpected, disconcerting revelation. Yet, there was something invigorating and alluring about it. I was enjoying sharing the evening with her, not just as her boss, but as a man who was captivated by her spirit, her opinions, and her infectious laughter. And even though I reminded myself often to be cautious, every bit of banter, every shared laugh, and each opinionated outburst from her were drawing me in, challenging me in ways I hadn't anticipated. And I found myself more than willing to meet that challenge.

Jude raised an eyebrow at me, a playful dare in her gaze as she prepared to continue her line of conversation. "I'm not saying it's bad, just that it could be better."

I leaned back, my arm resting casually on the back of the chair. "Well then, by all means, enlighten me."

She hummed thoughtfully, swirling the last bit of her wine in the glass. "Well, first off, staff should be given more flexibility with their vacation days. It's more about quality over quantity. Maybe offer more three-day weekends instead of long, continuous holidays."

I chuckled. "Why am I not surprised you'd advocate for more time off?"

She grinned, the firelight dancing in her eyes. "Well, it's not like our job is stressful or we're saving lives or anything," she joked, a playful, sarcastic edge to her voice.

Her reply caused my laughter to continue and she watched me with a pleased smile on her face, seemingly content that she'd managed to draw such a response from me.

"We do have a tough job," I admitted, looking her straight in the eye. "You should consider putting that in your management proposal. I might just vote for you."

She looked surprised, then her face smoothed into a smug grin. “Well, thank you, Dr. Montivais. I think that’s one of the few nice things you’ve said to me all evening.”

I couldn’t help but match her grin, shaking my head in mock exasperation. “I compliment you on your sense of humor, and this is how you thank me?”

The air between us was light and playful, the earlier tension now masked behind laughter and silly exchanges. As the snow continued to fall outside, inside the cabin, our conversation was building its own warmth, the crackling fire no competition to the heat of our banter. And as the night drew on, I found myself not wanting it to end, cherishing the company of this witty, opinionated, utterly captivating woman, and yearning for what was yet to come.

As the time became later and the wine bottle emptied, Jude’s eyes flicked to me with a hint of hesitation. “Do you by any chance have something I could sleep in?” she asked, her voice layered with a coyness that made my heart skip a beat.

“Basically men’s clothes around here but let me take a look.”

Rummaging around in my closet, I managed to find a pair of athletic shorts and an old T-shirt. “They’re not exactly high fashion,” I called out to her, holding up the plain attire, “but they’re clean and should be warm enough.”

Her laughter echoed from the bathroom, warming me more than the fire. “Tony, as long as they don’t smell like a locker room, I’m game.”

I chuckled at her comment as I poured the last of the wine into our glasses and waited for her to emerge.

When she did, my mind blanked. The athletic shorts were conspicuously absent, the oversized tee shirt I’d provided hanging on her petite frame like a provocative dress. It reached the middle of her thighs, unveiling an expanse of shapely legs that I hadn’t seen before. Strong desire stirred within me, and my heart fluttered.

Biting back a groan, I stood, hoping to appear casual as I handed her the wine glass. “I see you opted for the ‘less is more’ approach,” I teased, struggling to keep my gaze on her face.

She took a delicate sip of the wine, her eyes twinkling with mischief as she looked up at me through her lashes. “The shorts were a tad too roomy. I didn’t fancy losing them in the middle of the night.”

A snicker escaped me at her response. “I promise you, Jude, that’s a sight I wouldn’t mind one bit,” I confessed. The wine, or maybe the company, was giving me loose lips.

Her blush was beautiful, the pink spreading from her cheeks down her exposed neck, disappearing into the collar of my shirt. “Tony,” she warned, but her eyes were filled with amusement, and I knew then, she was dangerous in the most delightful way.

The room grew heavy with silence, thick with anticipation, and I found my resolve crumbling. The allure of her was just too strong, the curve of her lips too inviting, her eyes glinting with an unexpected boldness. As if pulled by an unseen force, I bent down, capturing her mouth with mine.

Her response was delayed by a heartbeat, a pause that seemed to stretch into an eternity. But then she tilted her head, her lips welcoming mine, her arms winding their way around my neck, pulling me closer. It was as though a switch had been flipped—every fiber of my being suddenly drawn to her.

Her lips were soft, yielding against mine, and the taste of the wine mixed with her unique flavor was intoxicating. It didn’t take long for the kiss to deepen, my hands naturally gravitating to her waist, pulling her flush against me. The small noise of surprise she made was swallowed by our entwined lips, but I felt it—a shiver of response that spiraled down my spine, waking up every nerve in my body.

In that moment, all my coherent thoughts shattered, consumed by the sheer need radiating from me. I had to have her. I needed to feel her, to know her in the most intimate way possible. I needed her in a way I hadn’t needed anyone in a

long time. The realization was as potent as the wine, as electrifying as her touch, and as undeniable as the desire burning in her eyes.

She responded eagerly, meeting my passion with her own, and I pulled her closer, the heat of her body seeping through the thin fabric of the tee shirt she wore. I ran my hands down her sides, feeling the soft curves of her body, and she shivered, pressing herself against me.

The sound of my own heartbeat echoed loudly in my ears as I carried her in my arms toward my bed, never breaking the intense contact of our lips. We moved with a synchronicity that spoke of a deep-rooted connection, a silent understanding that had grown between us during the course of the evening.

As I lowered her onto the mattress, I noticed the way her chest rose and fell heavily, matching the rhythm of my own breathing. The soft glow of the fireplace painted her skin with a warm, inviting hue and my fingers trailed up her bare thighs, inching toward the hem of the oversized shirt.

In response, she reached up and pulled me down to her, her hands finding their way to my hair, tugging gently and eliciting a low groan from deep within me. The slight hitch in her breath told me she liked the sound, emboldening me to explore further.

With one hand, I tugged the shirt up just a bit, revealing the smooth expanse of her stomach. My fingers traced lazy circles around her navel, and she squirmed underneath me, a soft moan escaping her lips. Encouraged by her response, I moved my mouth from hers, planting soft kisses down her neck, my teeth nibbling at her collarbone.

She gasped, arching her back off the bed, and in that moment, the last bit of my control unraveled. I was caught in a whirlwind of desire for her, wanting to pleasure her in every way possible.

Surrendering to the exquisite passion between us, I let my instincts take over, ready to explore the depths of a connection that had blossomed so unexpectedly. I knew then that what happened that night would change everything between us.

There was no turning back. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

CHAPTER 8

JUDE

As Tony's lips moved from mine to my neck, a shiver ran down my spine. I could feel the warmth of his breath against my skin, and the gentle scrape of his teeth against my collarbone sent waves of pleasure throughout my body. My fingers buried themselves in his hair, tugging gently to keep him close.

I felt his hand slowly lifting the hem of the shirt I wore, *his* shirt, exposing the skin of my stomach to the cozy air in the room. His fingers, tracing slow circles around my navel, created sensations that caused me to squirm and gasp. I heard him chuckle softly, and it made me smile.

The hand not tangled in his hair gripped his shoulder tightly as I felt him shift, pushing the shirt up further. I arched my back off the bed to aid him, gasping again as his lips moved from my neck, down to my chest.

It was too much yet not enough all at once. I'd never felt anything like the heat Tony stirred in me. It was a feeling of complete surrender, a thrilling realization that I was on the brink of a precipice I couldn't resist jumping off.

His touch, his scent, the taste of him, all combined to make me dizzy with want. I pulled him closer, pressing my body to his as if I could somehow melt into him. My breath hitched as his hand slipped beneath the fabric, the warmth of his touch lighting me up from the inside.

"Tony," I gasped his name, feeling a primal urge to draw him even closer. His eyes met mine, dark and full of a desire

that matched my own. Under the soft glow of the firelight, I let myself fall, ready to explore this intoxicating connection between us.

As the snow continued to fall outside, forming a cold blanket all around, inside, we found ourselves lost in a heated storm of passion, a connection that promised to change everything. But at that moment, I didn't care about the consequences. All I wanted was Tony.

The shirt was long gone, discarded on the floor as he continued his exploration. I felt his lips trail down my stomach, pausing at the dip of my navel. The sensation caused me to squirm with pleasure, and I felt a grin against my skin. He glanced up at me, a playful twinkle in his eyes.

“Can't keep still, can you?” he teased, the heat of his breath tickling me.

He chuckled, his hands starting to trace their way back up my sides, causing me to shiver anew.

“Maybe if I tie you down, you'll behave,” he suggested, a wicked gleam in his eye.

I arched an eyebrow at him, feigning outrage. “Are you implying I'm not behaving?” I asked, biting back a smile.

He smirked, leaning in to capture my lips with his. “Not in the slightest,” he murmured against my mouth. “You're perfect.”

My heart fluttered at his words, and I pulled him closer, not wanting to waste another moment. His mouth once again devoured mine, our banter forgotten as the storm outside continued to rage, matching the intensity of the passion between us. The rest of the world, our jobs, our responsibilities, everything else faded away as we lost ourselves in each other, caught up in a whirlwind of desire and fiery passion.

His touch was maddening, each caress sending a ripple of pleasure through me. As Tony's lips traveled further down, my mind started to cloud over with yearning.

His hand slipped under the waistband of my panties, a thrill shooting through me as he ventured down. I moaned, squirming a bit at his touch, at the way his dark, gorgeous eyes were locked onto mine.

The man was an expert at teasing, his fingers moving down so slowly that I could make out each millimeter of progression. The sexy little smirk on his face made it clear that he knew just what he was doing.

When he was close to my pussy, I couldn't help myself any longer. I grabbed his thick wrist and guided him down the rest of the way.

“Someone's anxious.”

“Shut up and touch me.”

He chuckled at my command but obeyed all the same. Tony spread my lips, my channel soaking wet. His middle finger gently touched my clit, eliciting another moan from my depths. He made small circles around my most sensitive spot, his lips falling onto my collarbone, my chest, my breasts, and my nipples.

His finger still touching me right where I wanted, Tony moved his hand down a bit more, angling himself to penetrate me. When he finally did, a pair of his fingers gliding inside with liquid smoothness, I couldn't help but arch my back and let out an, “oh, *fuuuck*.”

Tony grinned once more, seeming to love the effect his touch had on me. I felt him curl his fingers inside, his index fingertip pressing against my G-spot as his thumb made those perfect little circles around my clit. I began to buck against his touch, and it wasn't long before the orgasm that had been building ripped through me, my thighs shaking as the pleasure rose and fell.

When it faded, all I wanted was more. Tony's cock, thick and hard and long, was ready for me.

No wonder he's so arrogant, with a package like that, how could he not be?

“How the hell was I able to resist you for even a minute?” he asked as he climbed on top of me, the sight of his cock so close to my pussy making me even more aroused.

“I could ask you the same thing.”

I spread my legs, wrapping them around his hips and drawing him close. His head grazed my lips, the sensation of his manhood against my skin sending a fresh wave of pleasure through my body. When I couldn't take any more waiting, I reached down and wrapped my fingers around his thickness, guiding him toward me.

“Patience is a virtue, you know,” he said with a grin.

“I'm a woman who knows what she wants.”

“And one after my own heart, with that attitude.”

He moved down, his head spreading my lips and pushing into me just a bit. I gasped at the sensation of him spreading me open with his cock, his thickness stretching me in exactly the way I wanted. My mouth opened into a perfect *O* as I watched his cock vanish inside me, inch by glorious inch. I squirmed and moaned as he pushed into me, and by the time he finally bottomed out, I was nearly delirious with pleasure.

He groaned, a primal, guttural sound, as he started to move, his stupidly handsome face tightening in concentration. I watched as he pulled back, his toned, taut muscles tensing and releasing with each powerful thrust into me. I kept my legs open wide, my hands gliding over his solid chest and along the lines of his abs.

It didn't take much of his thrusting before I was on the verge of another orgasm.

“Tony, I—”

He kept his eyes locked on mine, his expression silently saying he knew just how damn good he was making me feel. My orgasm rushed in from the periphery to the forefront, and with one final, glorious thrust of that perfect cock inside of me, I released yet again.

This time, he came along with me. Hot waves of pleasure crashed against my shores, the rest of the world vanishing aside from the two of us. Tony let out one more grunt as he reached the point of no return, and I focused on the sensation of his cock pulsing inside of me, his seed shooting deep into me.

With one final kiss, we crashed onto the bed next to one another.

As we basked in the afterglow of our lovemaking, sleep began to tug at the edges of my consciousness. Just as I was on the verge of surrendering, I felt the mattress shift as Tony rose from the bed. I cracked open an eye to see him reaching for his shorts.

“Sadie probably needs to go outside,” he murmured, his voice a soft caress against the quiet room.

“Such a gentleman, taking care of all the ladies,” I teased, my voice heavy with drowsiness. Tony chuckled, a now familiar sound that sent a delightful shiver through me.

Once he ensured I had everything I needed, he slipped out the door with Sadie, the soft jingle of her collar the only sound breaking the serene quietness. I reveled in the lingering warmth of our shared heat, a lazy smile playing on my lips.

When Tony returned, his body was deliciously cold from the outside. I shivered at the contact, a sharp contrast to our previous entwined warmth. Without a word, he pulled me into his arms, tucking me snugly against his chest.

“You’re freezing!” I squeaked, squirming against his chilly embrace.

“Consider it your punishment for hogging all the blankets,” he teased, wrapping the comforter tighter around us. His heart rhythmically thumped against my ear, a soothing lullaby that quickly eased me into the embrace of sleep.

CHAPTER 9

I awoke to find myself alone in the bed, but the open plan of the cabin allowed me to spot Tony in no time. He was busy at the stove, cooking what smelled like breakfast. Dressed in a flannel shirt and tight jeans, he was an image to behold. The casual attire and bare feet somehow amped up his masculine appeal.

His back muscles flexed subtly with each movement, shifting underneath the fabric of his shirt as he cooked. The jeans hugged his lower body, showing off his firm thighs and, dare I say, pert rear end. A sudden surge of desire hit me. The man was absolutely, unequivocally sexy.

On the floor beside the bed, was the tee shirt he had given me to wear. I pulled it on and contemplated how to sneak toward the bathroom without attracting his attention. The wooden floors, however, had other plans.

“Morning, sleepyhead,” he called out, not even turning from the stove. His voice was like a warm blanket, making me feel strangely at home. I couldn’t help but smirk.

“So much for being stealthy,” I murmured to myself, making my way to the bathroom.

His smile unfurled slowly as he turned from the stove and walked toward me. I couldn’t help but stop as he gazed at me with those rich, brown eyes, that roguish smile on his face. It was a smile full of warmth and a dash of mischief. He leaned down, pressing a soft kiss to my forehead, his flannel shirt brushing against my skin.

“Breakfast will be ready in five,” he said as he walked away, a swagger in his step that was thoroughly appealing. Sadie padded after him, wagging her tail. *Traitor*, I thought with a smile. Always following the food.

I had a feeling he was handing out little tidbits of the bacon he was frying to Sadie. My suspicions were confirmed when I heard the tell-tale sounds of delighted canine munching.

This was not the man I knew from the hospital. That man was self-absorbed—an unapologetic jerk with a god complex. But the man cooking bacon and doting on my dog, was kind, handsome, and an amazing cook. The disparity was jarring.

Heading toward the bathroom, I noticed my clothes were missing from where I’d discarded them last night. Curiosity piqued, I poked my head out and shot him a questioning look. He indicated the laundry area with a tilt of his head.

“Your clothes are in the wash,” he informed me, “I figured you’d want to put on clean clothes.”

Gratitude washed over me. “Thanks, Tony,” I managed to say, still somewhat amazed at his thoughtfulness. “Mind if I use your shower?”

His eyes sparkled with mischief as he nodded, “Go ahead. Make yourself at home.”

Stepping back into the bathroom, I closed the door behind me, my mind a whirl of conflicting impressions.

I was midway through lathering my hair with a surprisingly wonderful shampoo when the bathroom door creaked open. The sudden intrusion startled me, and I whipped around, water cascading off me.

Tony stood there naked, outlined by the steamy haze, a wicked grin on his face. My heart skipped a beat as he stepped into the shower, right behind me. The look in his eyes made the heat from the shower rise ten degrees. I gasped, my heart pounding in my chest.

“Tony!” I spluttered, my voice echoing off the tiles. I instinctively moved to cover myself with my hands, but I

couldn't stop the grin that played at the corners of my mouth.

"You forgot something," he drawled, his voice heavy with humor. He held up the conditioner with a shrug. "Figured you might need this."

"I... you...", I stammered, caught off guard by his casual intrusion and his playful teasing. I snatched the conditioner from him, my cheeks aflame. "You could've just handed it to me, you know?"

"And miss the opportunity to see you all wet and lathered up?" He raised an eyebrow, his gaze shamelessly roaming over me. "I think not."

I huffed, pretending to be annoyed but my heart pounded in exhilaration. "You're impossible, Antonio Montivais."

"That's part of my charm," he replied with a wink.

I couldn't hold back the laughter that escaped. "Won't breakfast get cold?" I asked.

"That's what microwaves are for." Just as I finished rinsing the conditioner from my hair, a warm arm wrapped around my waist from behind, pulling me back into a hard chest. I could feel his heartbeat against my back, steady and sure.

He spun me around and kissed me with an intensity that left me breathless.

"Tony," I managed to gasp when we broke apart for air. He simply smiled, pressing his forehead against mine.

"Are you going to tell me to stop?" he asked.

"Fuck no," I responded without thought. He then placed his hands on my hips, sinking his touch into my curves. I closed my eyes, allowing myself to be taken away by him and wrapped up within his spell. He pulled me close, his cock already stiff and solid as it pressed against my belly.

"Didn't think it was possible for you to look any sexier than you did laying underneath me," he said, leaning forward and planting a kiss on my neck. "But with water dripping down this perfect body..."

I had to admit to myself in that moment that no man had ever made me feel as sexy as he did. Didn't matter that I was getting up there in years, that part of me felt as if my most beautiful days were behind me. There was nothing in his tone that even slightly suggested that.

He placed his hand under my chin, tilted my face up and kissed me. The kiss was exactly what I wanted, what I craved. His tongue found mine, the sounds of our lips dancing together blending with the hush of the running water. I reached down, taking his cock into my hand and stroking it slowly, letting my fingertips tease his most sensitive spots.

Tony groaned at my touch, placing his hand on mine, guiding me to grasp him more firmly, to stroke him with more insistence. I was happy to oblige. I took firm hold of his length, stroking it up and down, moving my hand all the way to the base so I could gently squeeze his balls. Tony closed his eyes to focus, his powerful chest rising and falling as I pleased him.

After a short time, his eyes flashed open, a wild, animal hunger in them. His big, strong hands clamped down onto my hips, and with an effortless motion, he turned me around. Before I knew what was happening, I was bent over before him, my ass pressed against his cock.

“And this right here,” he said, his touch tracing my curves. “This look works pretty damn well for you, too.”

I glanced back over my shoulder, flashing him a sly smirk. “I bet it does.”

He grinned, taking hold of his cock by the base and placing it between my folds. With a slow, deep push, he entered me, the sensation just as perfect as it had been before. I moaned, placing my palms on the cool, wet tile, bracing myself for another thrust, then another, then another. My breasts swayed underneath as Tony bucked into me hard, but their motion was soon stopped by him reaching forward and taking them into his hands, his fingertips teasing my nipples.

The sound of flesh on flesh filled the air, his thrusts growing more and more intense.

“I want to see you come for me,” he said, his words braced with arousal. “I want to see it right now.”

There was no resisting him. The orgasm that had been stirring from his first thrust was right on the brink, and I was more than happy to let it release. My legs shook as I came, my screams of delight mixing with his animalistic grunts, his cock erupting inside of me, his warmth trickling down my inner thigh.

When we both began to come down from our climax, he slid his cock out of me and I turned around, barely able to stand.

“Shall we finally wash up?” I asked, my heart still beating fast, my breath still short.

He grinned. “Only if I’m the one to make that perfect body of yours squeaky clean.”

I grinned right back. It was an offer I was more than happy to accept.

CHAPTER 10

TONY

I'd spent countless weekends locked away in luxury city apartments or beach houses with women, but none of them even came close to the three blissful, snowed-in days I had with Jude. My cabin, usually a solitary escape, had transformed into our own little sanctuary. It was like the world beyond the cabin's walls didn't exist and there were just the two of us.

The first day, we spent hours talking and sharing stories. I found myself telling her things that I hadn't shared with anyone in years. She had a way of making me feel seen, understood. We made snow angels, and I teased her about her technique while she shot back playful banter that had me laughing harder than I had in a long time.

On the second day, after the storm had passed, we ventured out and had a snowball fight. I remember the sight of her, red-faced and breathless, as she hurled snowballs at me. She was a feisty one. That night, we curled up in front of the fireplace, sharing more stories and dreams over mugs of hot chocolate.

The steamy moments were interwoven generously throughout our time together. It was like we couldn't get enough of each other. Her touch was intoxicating, and the passion between us was electric. With Jude, I felt more alive than I ever had before.

But as the third day dawned, I knew our time was coming to an end. Although the snowstorm had passed on the second day, there was still too much snow on the road but by the third day, the temperature had risen enough that the snow began to

melt. The roads would be cleared by the plows soon, and I knew it was only a matter of time before we'd have to dig out her SUV.

As I looked at her across the kitchen table that morning, I felt an unfamiliar tug in my chest. It was then that I realized just how much I didn't want our time to end. But reality was calling. We both had responsibilities and lives outside the snow globe we had been trapped in.

I hoped that what we had unexpectedly found in my cabin wouldn't melt away with the snow.

"I think the roads should be clear by tomorrow," I broke the news to her. Her face fell slightly, and a pang of disappointment hit me.

Her directness had always been refreshing to me, and true to form, she didn't beat around the bush. "So, what happens when we get back to reality?" she asked, her beautiful eyes locked onto mine.

I paused, considering my answer. The truth was, I didn't know. "That's up to you," I told her. It was the only honest answer I could give.

In the quiet of the cabin, I found myself wishing that we could stay holed up for a few days more. I liked Jude, really liked her. And not just because she was beautiful, or because she was amazing in bed, although both those things were true. It was more than that. She had an energy, a spark that had reignited something in me.

Jude was more than just a good lay. She was smart, fun, and feisty, and had a depth that I rarely found in people. If I had my way, whatever was brewing between us would continue. But I also knew that we couldn't just ignore the real world.

The thought of returning to the hustle and bustle of everyday life wasn't an appealing one. But if it meant I got to see more of Jude, well, then I'd take it in stride.

"I want the management job," she said, breaking the silence between us, "But I don't want it because I'm sleeping

with one of the doctors.” Her eyes met mine, strong and determined, yet soft with a vulnerability that made my heart pound.

I nodded, understanding her. “That makes sense,” I murmured. “Professionalism first.”

“But...” she trailed off, biting her lip as she contemplated what to say next.

My heart pounded a bit faster. “But what?” I asked, the anticipation almost too much.

“But I want you too,” she finally admitted, her cheeks turning a lovely shade of pink.

The weight of her words hung heavily between us. I couldn’t help but be moved by her honesty. It was refreshing and surprising, and something I rarely associated with relationships.

Encouraged by her admission, I decided to lay my cards on the table. “After the decision about the job is made,” I began, “Would you consider going out on a date with me?”

She seemed surprised by my question. “A date?”

“Yes, a date. I want to see you outside of this cabin, outside of the hospital,” I replied honestly. “I want to explore whatever this is between us.”

Her eyes widened slightly at my words. “The other nurses talk, Tony. You have a reputation.”

I let out a small chuckle, shaking my head. “I know,” I admitted. “And I won’t deny that I’ve had some fun with a few of the nurses on different floors. But not one of them are anything like you, Jude.”

The look on her face told me she wasn’t sure whether to be flattered or insulted, but the spark in her eyes told me she was intrigued.

“Look,” I confessed, my eyes locked with hers. “I won’t lie to you. I’ve been a bit of a... well, a man-whore.”

Her laugh, soft and low, filled the cabin. “I’m not worried about your past, Tony,” she said. “I just don’t want anyone to think I got to my position because I slept my way into it.”

I respected her for that. “I completely understand,” I reassured her. “You have my word, no one will hear about any of this from me.”

“Good,” she said, her eyes lighting up. “And maybe, if you’re lucky, I might agree to go on a date with you... *after* I get the job.”

Her playful response caught me off guard and I found myself laughing heartily. Spontaneously, I reached out and grabbed her around the waist, pulling her closer. She yelped in surprise, but I saw a delighted grin on her face.

She was a firecracker, this woman. With her, I could see something more than just a casual fling. I could see the possibility of a real relationship. But that was a thought for another day. I was content to enjoy our remaining time in the cabin, cherishing each moment I had with her.

Our flirting turned into a soft dance, our bodies swaying as our words flowed. My eyes were locked onto hers, the beautiful green orbs twinkling with mirth and something else... anticipation, perhaps? Her hand found its way to my chest, her fingers lightly tracing the contours of my muscles through my shirt, causing an involuntary shiver to run down my spine.

With every passing second, the temperature in the room seemed to rise exponentially. I could see the desire in her eyes mirroring my own. It was a raw, primal need that I knew we both felt.

I cupped her face, my thumb caressing her lower lip before I leaned in to capture it with my own. The kiss was soft at first, tentative, but it quickly grew more passionate, more desperate.

Breaking away I looked at her, both of us catching our breath. “Jude,” I breathed out, my voice sounding huskier than

I'd expected. She didn't respond with words, instead she just nodded slightly, her eyes full of want.

It didn't take us long to find our way back to the bed, her soft laughter filling the air as we fumbled our way through the space. Her body fit perfectly against mine, like the missing piece of a puzzle. As we fell into the sheets, I knew I wouldn't trade those moments for anything else. I was completely lost in her.

Our lips never parted as we tumbled onto the bed, and I could taste the sweetness of her breath mingling with her natural essence. It was intoxicating. I kissed her deeper, savoring the sensation of her lips moving in sync with mine.

Her hands roamed my back as mine caressed her sides, pulling her closer, leaving no space between us. Our kisses turned into a symphony of shared breaths, soft moans, and hungry explorations. It was as if our souls were speaking through the passion of our kisses.

I traced the contours of her lips with my tongue, and she opened her mouth inviting me in. The kiss deepened, a dance of tongues, a sweet battle for dominance that neither of us really wanted to win.

The world seemed to blur as we lost ourselves in each other. All of life's worries, all the uncertainties, all the fears, none of it mattered when we were wrapped up in one another, connected and bare, in both body and soul.

She tasted like a dream, and I knew I could never get enough. This wasn't just a kiss; it was an affirmation, a vow without words, and a moment that would be etched into my very being for the rest of my days.

Our kisses evolved into something more, a sweet promise of what was to come. Her fingers traced patterns on my skin, igniting a trail of fire that shot straight to my core. Our clothes were quickly discarded, falling to the floor with soft thuds, drowned out by the rapid beating of our hearts.

In the dim morning light of the cabin, her body was a breathtaking sight. Her curves were highlighted by the sun,

creating a tantalizing silhouette that made my breath hitch. The anticipation was intense as we moved together, a dance as old as time yet as unique as the two of us. Our bodies met in a beautiful collision of passion and desire. Her touch was electrifying, sending waves of pleasure crashing through me.

Every touch, every whisper, every shared glance was an affirmation of the connection that continued to form between us. And as the dance continued, we found ourselves getting swept away by the current, caught in the captivating pull of desire and need.

Shared breath and skin on skin sensation, the intimacy of the moment was a silent promise, an unspoken understanding that whatever came next, we would face it together.

Lying there in the aftermath, our bodies tangled and sated, I found my mind racing, already contemplating what could be next for us. The cabin, filled with the sounds of shared passion only moments before, was silent. I could hear the steady rhythm of her breathing, a lullaby that grounded me in the moment. Beside the bed, on her blanket, a sleeping Sadie snored gently.

Jude was curled into my side, her body warm against mine. I traced idle patterns on her skin, her sighs of contentment echoing in the silent room. Our shared intimacy was a tangible thing, wrapping around us like a comforting blanket.

As the seconds ticked by, the future loomed large. We had fallen into an easy rhythm in the cocoon of the cabin, away from the pressures and expectations of the outside world. We had found a connection neither of us had expected. So much uncertainty swirled around what was going to happen when we stepped back into real life.

I wondered if she was thinking the same. I wanted to reassure her, to promise that what we had shared in the cabin wouldn't end the moment we left. But would I be able to keep such a promise? I had my own demons, and a past that I wasn't sure I could overcome.

There was a fragility to the silence that surrounded us, as if acknowledging the reality of our situation would shatter the

magic of the moment. As the minutes ticked by, I found myself wishing for more time, more time in this little bubble where it was just the two of us.

Finally, unable to bear the silence any longer, I cleared my throat. “Jude?” My voice felt like an intrusion, shattering the peaceful stillness of the room.

She hummed in response, her fingers tracing my chest, grounding me. It was a simple gesture, but at that moment it was everything. I took a deep breath, gathering my thoughts.

“About what comes next...”

She placed her finger on my lips in response.

“Later. Right now, let’s just enjoy... well, the *now*.”

We kissed, sealing a silent agreement, that whatever would come next, would come.

CHAPTER 11

I heaved another shovelful of snow away from my SUV, my muscles screaming in protest. The workout was intense, more grueling than any Pilates workout I'd done before. Tony worked beside me, his face set in concentration as he diligently cleared the snow, his breath coming out in visible puffs in the chilly air. There was something incredibly attractive about his focused determination.

Sadie, on the other hand, was having the time of her life. My playful black lab was bounding around in the snow, her tail wagging so hard it seemed to propel her through the fluffy mounds of white. She would disappear into the woods nearby, only to reemerge moments later with her nose covered in snow and her eyes sparkling with joy.

A pang of guilt surged through me as I watched her. She deserved more than the small, confined yard at my house, more than the brief walks around the neighborhood. I could see the happiness in her eyes, the pure joy of exploration and freedom. She was a creature of nature, and I had confined her to an artificial environment.

I made a silent vow to myself then and there that I would take Sadie on longer walks, letting her explore and sniff to her heart's content. I would take her to one of the state parks where she could run and play freely, far away from the confining concrete mazes of our neighborhood.

My hands were starting to go numb from the cold, but I continued to dig. The sun was shining brightly, the snow melting ever so slowly in its warmth. The storm had left a

pristine blanket of sparkling white in its wake. Everything looked fresh, untouched, and full of possibilities. A fitting metaphor, I thought, for whatever lay ahead for Tony and me.

Finally, the last shovelful of snow was tossed aside. I straightened, rolling my shoulders to relieve the tension, and surveyed our handiwork. My SUV was free at last, the promise of the world beyond the cabin within reach once more.

I glanced back at the cabin, the warm light spilling from its windows promising comfort and refuge. I had found more than shelter from a storm there. I had found a connection, a spark that I hadn't anticipated but now didn't want to let go.

I looked at Tony, his cheeks flushed from the cold, a satisfied smile playing on his lips as he looked at the cleared path. Whatever the future held for us, I was ready to face it. The storm had passed, and now it was time to explore the beautiful aftermath it had left behind.

Tony's arms encircled me, pulling me close to his warmth. I was already missing him, the cabin, the incredible closeness we'd shared during the last few days. His lips brushed against mine in a soft, lingering kiss, the tenderness in it tugging at my heart.

"I won't forget your promise," he said, his eyes glinting with anticipation. "We'll be celebrating your new job before you know it."

A hopeful flutter stirred in my chest at his words. "I hope so," I replied, letting my hand slide down his arm to squeeze his reassuringly.

"Sadie," I called, turning to my beloved lab. Sadie immediately perked up at the sound of her name and trotted over to us. She pushed her head against Tony's legs, wagging her tail enthusiastically. The sight brought a smile to my face. My ex-husband, Andrew, had never managed to elicit such affection from Sadie. She had always been lukewarm toward him at best, as if she'd always known what kind of man he was deep down.

“That’s new,” I mused aloud, my gaze softening as I watched Sadie. “She never did that with Andrew.”

Tony stared at me, his brow crinkling in surprise. “Andrew?” he echoed, tilting his head like a curious puppy.

“My ex-husband.”

“I had no idea you had been through the whole ‘until death do us part’ trauma.”

Well, that was a fairly ‘Tony’ way to put it. My cheeks flushed slightly as if I’d just divulged an intensely guarded secret. And I couldn’t help but note his cynical way of referring to marriage.

“Yep,” I nodded, locking my gaze with his,” but as you can see, the ‘until death do us part’ thing didn’t really work out.”

That familiar mischief danced in his eyes again. “Well, that’s a tale I wouldn’t mind hearing,” he said, his grin suggesting he was already envisioning the story, “Especially considering how the latest chapter of your life includes a handsome doctor who is clearly much better suited for you.”

His playful self-importance was so absurd, all I could do was laugh. I gave him a soft nudge, not wanting to knock him off his imagined pedestal.

His gaze softened as he looked at me, a faint hint of regret creeping into his eyes. He was still being his playful, charmingly cocky self, but there was a sincerity in his tone that touched me. I admired his honesty, his willingness to accept his shortcomings. It was a rare quality.

A blast of icy wind cut through the silence, reminding me of the cold surrounding us. I shivered involuntarily, the chill seeping into my bones. After one more tight hug with Tony, I climbed into my car, Sadie jumping in eagerly after me.

I rolled down the window to say goodbye. Tony stepped forward, bending down to meet my gaze. His eyes were warm, the affection in them unmistakable. I leaned over and kissed him gently, my heart aching with a surprising intensity at the thought of leaving him behind.

Sadie, ever the attention seeker, began to whine from the back seat. She pawed at the car door, trying to get to Tony. He chuckled, extending his hand to let her lick it. “Alright, alright. I wouldn’t want to deprive you of your goodbye,” he teased, pretending to squirm as Sadie showered him with enthusiastic licks.

“Be careful, Jude,” he said after he’d managed to extricate his hand from Sadie’s affectionate onslaught. His voice was sincere, his eyes full of concern. “Let me know when you get home, okay?”

“I will,” I promised, my hand gripping the steering wheel a little tighter. The sudden reality of leaving, of returning to our individual lives, hung heavily between us. Tony stepped back, watching as I reversed the car out of the driveway and onto the snow-covered road.

As I drove away, I could see him standing there in the rearview mirror, a lone figure against the backdrop of the snowy landscape. He waved, and I couldn’t help but smile. This was just the beginning, I reminded myself. There was so much more to look forward to. And even if these past few days were all we had, it would still be a fun weekend to remember. But my heart hoped there would be so much more. With a final glance at Tony, I turned my attention back to the road. The tires crunched over the freshly cleared snow, the sound resonating in the otherwise silent surroundings. The familiar excitement of a new journey filled me as I drove away from the cabin, away from Tony, and back toward the world that awaited me.

As I navigated the winding roads, my thoughts kept drifting back to the last three days. They had been an unexpected whirlwind, filled with moments of laughter, exhilaration, and intimate connection. The memory of Tony’s touch, his taste, the sound of his laughter echoing in the small cabin, all of it was still fresh, intoxicating.

A sigh escaped my lips as I remembered how he made me feel. The way he held me close, the way he made love to me... it was the best sex I’d ever had. The memory of his strong

arms around me, the scent of him lingering on my skin, sent shivers of desire down my spine.

Yet despite the passion, the connection, there was something that kept niggling at the back of my mind. Tony was sexy, and funny. His charm was undeniable. But there was another side to him, a side I was more familiar with, the side he showed at the hospital.

His ego, his tendency to treat the nurses as if they were beneath him bothered me. It wasn't just annoying, it was a glaring red flag. It was as if he was two different people—the warm, sensual, and caring man in private, and the egotistical doctor in public. I found myself wondering which one was the real Tony.

A flash of anger surged through me as I thought about my ex-husband, Andrew, who was unfortunately in my thoughts due to him being brought up during the conversation about Sadie. He was like Tony in the sense that he could be charming and loving behind closed doors. And he often was, at first. But the more comfortable he got, the more he started to talk down to me, to belittle me. The memory of those hurtful words, the dismissive looks, made my hands clench on the steering wheel.

I refused to go through that again. I knew my worth, my value. I was more than just a nurse, more than just a woman to be looked down upon. I was strong, independent, capable. And I wouldn't allow any man, no matter how sexy, how charming, to treat me any less.

I shook my head, trying to dispel the dark thoughts. I had a job to fight for, a future to plan. My decision about Tony could wait. For now, I would focus on the road ahead—literally.

As I drove, the snow-covered landscape giving way to the familiar sights of the city, I let out a deep breath. Whatever lay ahead, whatever choices I had to make, I would face them head-on. Just like the snow, the past would melt away, and a new path would be cleared for me to forge ahead. And I was ready for it.

As my car took me closer to Denver, the quiet hum of the engine enveloped me in thought. The dense, snow-covered forest had begun to thin out, making way for glimpses of civilization. With each passing mile, the fresh, crisp air of the mountains was slowly replaced by the familiar smells of the city. The spell of the wilderness, the cabin, and Tony began to wane, just a bit.

The sun's rays danced on the car's dashboard, and my thoughts wandered back to Tony. *What happens next?* The age-old dilemma ran through my mind—should I call him when I got home? Or should I text? Was that too impersonal? Maybe I should just leave it be, play it cool. A small laugh escaped as it hit me... I didn't even have his number! How's that for modern romance? I'd slept with a man, spent days with him, and never thought to get his number. The humor in the situation didn't escape me.

I watched as the mountains, so magnificent and mighty, receded in my rearview mirror. The road ahead unfurled like a ribbon; winding, unpredictable, much like my tryst with Tony. It was funny how in a remote cabin, amid a snowstorm, things seemed so much simpler. But as the city loomed ahead, the complications of life, relationships, and everything else reared their complex heads.

I thought about what not having his number meant. Was it the universe telling me to not go down that road? I had never been one to pay attention to such signs, but maybe I should start. After all, relationships were complicated enough without adding overthinking into the mix.

The traffic thickened as I edged into Denver. The buildings, the cars, the people—they felt a little alien after the solitude of the cabin and the mountains. My phone beeped with notifications, pulling me back into the rhythm of daily life.

I realized that maybe it wasn't about what Tony represented or what he could be. Maybe it was about what I had rediscovered in myself, a fire, a new zest for life, an openness to the unexpected.

I would let life take its course, and if our paths were meant to cross again, they would. With or without a phone number. And whatever happened, I was ready for the adventure.

CHAPTER 12

As I turned onto my street, a sinking feeling overtook me. A beastly Ford F-250, jacked up higher than any truck had the right to be, was just ahead, unmistakable in its ostentatious display. Andrew's truck. I rolled my eyes, a bitter taste rising in my mouth. Typical Andrew, needing to assert his masculinity like that.

What the hell does he want now?

Pulling into my garage, I let Sadie out into the yard to stretch her legs. Her tail wagged happily as she began her post-trip sniffing expedition. Despite the tension of seeing Andrew's truck, I found a small smile tugging at the corners of my mouth watching Sadie. She had a way of making everything better, no matter the situation.

After scooping out the contents of my mailbox, I flipped through the stack of letters and bills, but my gaze kept sliding back to the monstrous truck, which was empty. A shiver ran down my spine. The realization crept up slowly, raising goosebumps on my arms. Andrew wasn't in the truck, which could only mean...

With my heart pounding in my ears, I rushed into the house, a silent prayer on my lips. As the door swung open, the sight that greeted me was like a punch in the gut. Andrew sprawled out on my couch, his eyes glued to my television. As if the invasion wasn't enough, he had the audacity to rearrange my carefully placed Christmas decorations!

Anger bubbled up from deep within, hot and raw. My fingers clenched around the stack of mail, the edges digging into my palm. My house, my sanctuary, violated by the one person I'd happily erased from my life, or so I thought.

I stood there in the doorway, my pulse thundering in my ears. I took a deep breath, steeling myself for the confrontation. This was not how I planned to end my rejuvenating weekend, but then again, life had a funny way of testing my resilience.

The sight of the rearranged Christmas decorations was the final straw. He had invaded my home, my space, and I was not going to allow it any longer. I took a step forward, the familiar feeling of determination solidifying in my chest. If Andrew wanted a confrontation, he was going to get one.

He grinned like a wolf as he laid eyes on me. "Good to see you, gorgeous." His eyes moved over my body in a way that made me sick to my stomach.

The memory of his deceit still stung. I remembered the countless arguments where he would spin my words, manipulating the narrative to make me second guess myself. It was classic gaslighting. Each time I accused him of infidelity, he would twist my words, undermine my confidence, and manipulate the situation until I doubted my own perceptions, making me feel like *I* was the one in the wrong.

But he had slipped up. I'd finally caught him red-handed with nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. I would never forget the look on his face that day, the shock in his eyes mirroring my own heartbreak. Andrew Paxton, the charismatic, smart, handsome man I had once loved, was nothing more than a cheater.

As I looked at him now, sprawled on my couch, my stomach churned with resentment. His charm had faded, replaced by the bitter taste of betrayal. His handsome features no longer appealed to me, only serving as a painful reminder of the heartbreak he'd caused. His intelligence, once so attractive, was now just a reminder of his manipulative tactics.

The man I had once loved was gone, replaced by this stranger who bore his face.

Sadie dashed into the room, her barks echoing throughout the house., No doubt she felt the same way about him being there that I did.

Andrew narrowed his eyes. I see you've still got that damn, loud-ass dog." I felt a jolt of anger at his insolence.

"Get the hell off my couch and out of my house, Andrew," I said, trying to keep my voice steady.

"But it used to be *our* house, Jude." An arrogant smile painted his face as he spoke.

"Not anymore." I countered his words sharply as I busied myself with putting my displaced Christmas decorations back in their rightful places. Each piece I touched brought an added layer of violation; this was *my* home and he had intentionally invaded it.

"How did you even get in, Andrew? I changed the locks."

His smirk widened. "You didn't change the garage code, darling."

A wave of annoyance at myself washed over me. I had forgotten about the garage code, one more thing to add to my to-do list for the day.

"Why are you here, anyway?" I asked, my tone frosty.

He seemed to falter for a moment. "Your parents... they couldn't get a hold of you. They were worried so they called me to check on you, seeing as they're all the way in Oregon."

A pang of guilt hit me square in the chest. I should've called them the moment I'd descended the mountain and regained phone service. But my thoughts had been tangled in a web of confusion and indecision about Tony. I hadn't given a second thought to reaching out to my parents.

As I prepared to eject the prick from my house and hopefully my life, an unexpected sight appeared from around the hallway corner. It was none other than Ashley, the woman Andrew had cheated on me with, stepping out of the guest

room. *My* guest room—the one that until recently had housed a bunch of Andrew’s old things.

She was pretty, undoubtedly so, with youthful exuberance radiating off her. She had that doe-eyed innocence that I remembered once possessing. Her wavy blonde hair cascaded over her shoulders, complimenting the electric blue eyes that were currently wide with surprise.

Beneath that youthful, innocent facade something else lurked, a keen, calculated look in those striking eyes that immediately had me on guard. Ashley might’ve been young, far too young for Andrew, if you asked me, but she was no dummy. Her slender fingers clutched a cardboard box filled with what I instantly recognized as Andrew’s belongings—a mixture of books, clothes, and old college trophies.

Ashley shifted under my gaze, a too-sweet smile playing on her lips. Her eyes flicked from me to the box in her hands and back again, the veil of innocence momentarily disrupted by what seemed like unease.

The sight of her, in my home, handling my ex-husband’s belongings with a sense of ownership left an unpleasant taste in my mouth. There was an inherent audacity in her actions that caught me off guard, like she was claiming territory that was never hers to begin with. The gall of it was unbelievable.

“What is she doing here?” I asked, raising an accusing finger toward the other intruder. Neither one of them was invited nor belonged in my home. But at that moment, it didn’t matter. What mattered was the intrusion, the violation I felt. Ashley, with her blonde hair, blue eyes, holding that box of Andrew’s things, was the very embodiment of it.

A tide of fury swelled within me as I marched toward her, my gaze zeroing in on the box she cradled. Ignoring her shrill protests, I yanked the box out of her arms.

“Be careful,” Ashley snapped, her eyes narrowing into slits. Her very presence oozed smug satisfaction, a woman who always got what she wanted and didn’t care about who got hurt in the process.

Peering inside the box, I was met with a familiar sight among Andrew's belongings. My crystal wine glasses, each one carefully swaddled in my kitchen towels. A bitter laugh bubbled up from within me. These were not just any glasses; they were a wedding gift from Andrew's parents.

"You want to explain why your girlfriend is stealing from me, Andrew?" I demanded, turning to face him, the box's weight growing heavier in my hands.

"His fiancée," Ashley retorted, her tone smug. It was like she'd won a victory, and I couldn't help but snort and roll my eyes at her. Sure enough, she raised her left hand to show off a huge, gaudy diamond ring.

"Good luck to you sweetheart. You're gonna need it being married to that one," I shot back.

She glared at me, her smug smile creeping into a sneer. "Andrew and I want those glasses. They were a gift from his parents."

I stared at both of them in disbelief, the reality of the situation sinking in. Not only had Andrew and Ashley invaded my home, but they were also there to take what they believed was theirs. Technically they were breaking and entering, not to mention burglarizing. My grip tightened around the box, the sharp edges of the cardboard digging into my skin.

I looked from Ashley, standing there with an expectant look on her face, to Andrew, who had the decency to look somewhat embarrassed. Then, my gaze fell onto the box again, onto the crystal glasses, each one a stark reminder of a past that had been marred by betrayal.

A tense silence filled the room, punctuated only by the distant hum of the refrigerator and the ticking of the wall clock. The irony of the situation wasn't lost on me. Here I was, standing in my own house, defending what was mine from the very person who had once promised to cherish and respect me.

With a sudden burst of pent-up anger, I stepped over and shoved the box into Andrew's arms. There was a satisfying crack as one of the glasses presumably broke. "Anything else

in this house you think is yours, Andrew?" I asked, my tone icy. "Go ahead and grab it now. You and your fiancée will not be coming back."

"Easy, Jude," he said, his tone frustratingly calm as he stood up and set the box down on the table. "We thought you'd be gone. Last thing either of us wanted was to make this a thing."

I managed to keep my tone cheerily venomous, even as I addressed Ashley. "Well, I'd most definitely call this a thing. So, if you wouldn't mind, kindly fuck off."

A scowl deepened on Ashley's perfectly made-up face. "We did your parents a favor by coming all the way here," she retorted, clearly flustered by my bluntness. "If we want to take what belongs to Andrew, we have every right to do so."

I chuckled, my amusement laced with disbelief. "Funny you should mention rights. Andrew's name isn't on the mortgage anymore, which means you're technically breaking and entering. And stealing. And you know what happens to people who do that, don't you? They get arrested."

Andrew, surprisingly enough, seemed to take the hint. "Ashley, it's time to go," he said, his voice filled with a hint of resignation. But she wasn't ready to back down yet.

"Well, where were you all weekend, Jude?" she shot back, ignoring Andrew's plea. "You scared your parents half to death and put us out of our way. That's pretty shitty of you."

Each of her words fueled my irritation, sparking a fiery retort on the tip of my tongue. The audacity she had to question my actions and decisions, in my own house, was beyond astounding. She stood there, in her designer clothes and entitled air, acting as though she had the right to pass any judgment on me. The thought was laughable, and yet, at the same time, infuriating.

My gaze zeroed in on Ashley, my teeth grinding together in a semblance of a smile. I knew I shouldn't let her get to me; I knew I shouldn't engage. The woman lived for confrontation, thrived on sowing discord. But I was worn out, conflicted

about Tony, and absolutely not in the mood for any of Ashley's antics.

I squared my shoulders, turning fully to face her. "Unless you've suddenly become my mother," I began, my voice pitched low and threateningly calm, "where I've been and what I've been doing is none of your damn business."

I swung my gaze back to Andrew, my expression serious. "Thank you for your... concern," I said, each word drenched in pointed sarcasm. "But I would appreciate it if you deleted my parents' numbers from your phone. I'll make sure they have Sally's and other friends' contacts if they need to check on me in the future."

The look on Andrew's face was one of slight bewilderment. I hadn't often stood up to him with such force during our marriage, so my defiance was evidently unexpected. As for Ashley, her expression was a mixture of indignation and surprise, a silent admission that she had underestimated me. It was a satisfying sight, providing a small comfort to the otherwise frustrating situation.

I held my ground, my gaze never faltering from Ashley's spiteful glare. With a sharp inhalation, she spat out the words, "You're a real bitch, Jude. No wonder you couldn't hold on to him." She flashed a smile at Andrew, as if he were her hard-won prize.

Andrew breathed out a sharp draw of air through his mouth, seeming to sense how over the line Ashley had gone with her comment.

"Easy, Ash. No need to turn this place into a warzone any more than it already is."

Ashley's insult hung in the air, a bitter pill that had been tossed casually into the mix. But I refused to let it get to me. Instead, I smirked, my response slipping off my tongue with ease. "Go fuck yourself Ashley." The harsh words echoed in the tense silence of the room.

With that, I ushered them toward the door, my heart pounding with a mix of anger and a strange sense of

exhilaration. Ashley spun around, her mouth opening as if to fire off another parting shot. But I wasn't giving her that satisfaction as I shoved them out onto the porch.

I slammed the door shut with a satisfying finality, my hand deftly flipping the deadbolt into place. The house fell into a tranquil quiet right away, a stark contrast to the storm that had just been raging within its walls.

Leaning against the door, I let out a shaky breath. I knew I should have been the bigger person, should have handled the situation with more grace and maturity. Yet in that moment, giving Ashley a piece of my mind felt deeply cathartic.

It felt good to finally stand up against the woman who had intentionally entangled herself with my husband, to show her that I was not a pushover. That I was more than capable of fighting back when pushed. And oh, how good it felt.

All the same, nothing would make me happier than never seeing those two again in my life. Hopefully, it would be the last time they'd darken my door.

CHAPTER 13

JUDE

I was met with a brisk winter gust as I stepped out of my car the next day, the chill slipping under my coat and raising goosebumps on my skin. It was that time of year again when everything was dusted with fresh snow and the air held the promise of the upcoming festivities.

I loved it.

As I made my way toward the hospital, I took a moment to appreciate the Christmas decorations that adorned the building. The twinkling lights that were draped around the entrance offered an inviting glow to the otherwise cold, sterile structure. A giant Christmas tree, adorned with multicolored baubles and tinsel, stood tall in the lobby, its star-studded peak almost touching the ceiling. It was as if the entire hospital had donned a cheerful disguise, a sharp contrast to its usual serious demeanor.

As I pushed the entrance doors open, a blast of warm air greeted me, momentarily banishing the winter chill. The pleasant aroma of cinnamon and pine wafted from somewhere, mingling with the familiar antiseptic scent of the hospital. In the background, a soft rendition of *Jingle Bells* played, adding to the overall holiday atmosphere.

I nodded to the receptionist, Brenda, whose normally stern face was lit up with a warm smile. "Morning, Jude," she greeted me, her voice filled with cheer. I returned the greeting, a smile tugging at my own lips.

As I made my way through the familiar hallways, I exchanged greetings and shared quick chats with my colleagues. There was an unmistakable buzz in the air, a mix of holiday cheer and the usual hustle of the hospital. I spotted Sally in the midst of wrestling with the surgical department Christmas tree, her forehead glistening with the strain.

“Sally,” I called, sauntering over, a mischievous glint in my eye. “Do you swear to maintain the sanctity of the ‘sisters before misters’ code?” I walked over to her, grabbing the tree by the base, taking some of the stress off her.

Her laughter rang out in the quiet office, her face lighting up in curiosity. “Oh, this sounds juicy. I swear on my favorite stethoscope.” She crossed her heart dramatically.

As we worked together to set the tree upright, I told her about my unexpected weekend escapade, speaking in a very low tone. Her eyes widened at the mention of Tony’s name, followed by a burst of laughter that made several of the baubles on the tree jingle.

“Welcome to the club, Jude,” she said between chuckles.

“The club?” I echoed, raising an eyebrow at her.

Sally nodded, her face breaking into a wide grin. “Oh, yes. ‘Tony’s Girls,’ they call it. You’re not the first nurse he’s charmed,” she explained, her eyes twinkling with mischief.

I laughed, shaking my head at the absurdity of it all. “He did mention his man-whore tendencies,” I admitted, remembering our candid conversation.

Her eyes flashed with curiosity. “Oh, come on. You can’t leave me hanging, Jude. I need details.”

I blushed, shrugging nonchalantly, though my grin gave away my feelings. “Let’s just say he’s well-versed in anatomy.”

The laughter that followed was infectious, and we both stood chuckling in the midst of tinsel and ornaments.

During a brief pause in our laughter, Sally said, “Did you know he’s only thirty-two?” I blinked, the surprise clearly

written on my face. I'd known he was younger, but eight years? That seemed like a lot.

“You serious? Jeez, I'm a damn cradle robber.”

But Sally waved my concern away. “So what? Men date younger all the time. Why can't we?”

I pondered her words, realizing she had a point when our *tete-a-tete* was abruptly cut short by the arrival of Dr. Hartford, one of the cardiac surgeons on the floor. We straightened up, sharing a conspiratorial smile as we greeted the new day and its challenges.

A little while later I was back at the charge desk, having finally completed my updates on my resume. When I was satisfied with my work, I leaned back in my chair, letting out a deep, relieved sigh. Glancing through it one more time, I noticed the marks of my growth in the nursing field, each job and responsibility shaping me into the nurse I had become. My fingers hovered over the send button, the nerves buzzing under my skin. I was about to officially apply for the OR manager position.

Click. The email shot into the virtual void, carrying with it my application and cover letter. It was done. I exhaled, a strange mix of anticipation and excitement settling within me. The decision now rested in the hands of Human Resources, who would be beginning the interview process next week.

As I sat there, staring at the blank screen, I could almost feel the change in the air. This new position was not just a job. It was an opportunity, a step forward in my career. It meant a raise in pay, something I could really use. But more than the monetary benefits, it was the prospect of a more consistent, nine-to-five schedule that drew me in. After years of working night shifts, holidays, and weekends, the thought of having a more regular work schedule felt both deserved and exciting.

Of course, there was the undeniable responsibility that came with the role. I knew well that managing the OR was more than just organizing schedules and administrative duties. It meant that whenever a nurse couldn't make their shift, it

would fall on me to step in or arrange for a replacement. It would mean unexpected crises, and more stress.

I thought of the nurses on my team—their quirks, their strengths, and the unique set of skills each one had. Could I be the trailblazer, the leader they needed?

A smile spread across my face. Yes, I could. I was ready. After all, I'd been preparing for this my whole career. The late nights, the difficult patients, the moments of crisis—I'd learned from them all. As I switched off the computer, a feeling of certainty washed over me. Whatever happened next, I knew I had given it my all. It was time to take a leap of faith and embrace the opportunity, come what may.



Two weeks. It had been two weeks since the mountain escapade, since the steamy encounters in the cabin, and since Tony and I had become a secret, tucked away from prying eyes. As I stared into my closet, selecting an outfit for the upcoming interview, I couldn't help but be reminded of the complicated layer our secret added to an otherwise routine process.

I pushed aside the multitude of scrubs that usually defined my work wardrobe, their various shades of blues, greens, and pinks stark against the few civilian clothes I owned. If I landed this manager position, the scrubs would have to make way for a more professional wardrobe consisting of crisp blouses, skirts, and slacks, perhaps even a suit or two. The prospect was exciting, but also a bit daunting. I hadn't shopped for office clothes in quite a long time.

Looking at my reflection in the mirror, I adjusted the collar of the smart, green blouse I had chosen, pairing it with a simple pair of black trousers. This was an important day. A potentially life-changing day. And yet, a tiny part of my mind kept drifting back to Tony.

He would be on the interview panel. The thought sent a flutter through my stomach. It was a strange mix of

nervousness and anticipation. Would his presence affect my performance? Should he excuse himself from the panel? No, that would only raise questions we were not ready to answer.

I shook my head slightly, trying to push the thoughts away. This was about my potential promotion, about taking the next step in my career. I couldn't afford to be distracted, not even by the tantalizing memory of our secret.

With one last look at my reflection, I nodded approvingly. The outfit was simple, yet professional, perfect for the look I was aiming for. As I gathered my papers and headed out the door, I couldn't help but feel a thrill of excitement. Whatever the outcome, it was going to be a game changer.

As I left my house, the memory of Tony and our secret lingered in the back of my mind. The thought brought a slight blush to my cheeks and a determined spark to my step. This was going to be an interesting day indeed.

Transitioning back to mere colleague from steamy lover was a tricky line to navigate, especially with Tony being part of the interview team. The fantasy dreams were deliciously naughty, laced with remnants of our time together in the cabin, making it increasingly difficult to separate the professional from the personal. The boundary blurred even further when I found myself alone, vibrator in hand, the fantasies becoming a reality of their own in the privacy of my bedroom.

But as alluring as thoughts of Tony were, I had to stow them away. I refused to let the memories of our time together be a stepping stone to this potential new job, to this possible new chapter in my career. I wanted to secure the position based on my qualifications, my abilities, and my merits, not because I had been intimate with one of the panelists.

As I walked into the hospital, the familiarity of the environment grounded me. My route hadn't changed, I was still heading to my floor greeting familiar faces, but the journey had an added layer of anticipation.

"Jude, you look fantastic!" Sally, ever the effervescent spirit, greeted me with a broad grin.

“Thanks, Sal,” I replied, smoothing down the green blouse I had chosen. Her compliment was appreciated, her enthusiasm infectious as always.

“That blouse really brings out your eyes,” she continued, giving me a once-over. “Though you could’ve shown a little more leg, just to charm them,” she added with a wink.

I laughed at her suggestion, shaking my head. “I’m here to land the job with my skills, not my legs,” I teased.

“Well, you never know what could help,” she retorted with a wink, her tone playful. Sally had always had a flair for pushing boundaries with her humor, and in that moment, her lightheartedness was just what I needed to quell my nerves.

“Thanks for the advice,” I responded with a laugh. “But I think I’ll stick to my qualifications for now.”

Sally gave me an exaggerated sigh, but her eyes twinkled with amusement. “Alright, just remember though, a little charm never hurt anyone. Good luck, Jude!”

I thanked her and headed toward the elevator, feeling a little lighter. My encounter with Sally had managed to shift my focus from Tony and our secret to the task at hand. As the elevator doors closed behind me, I took a deep breath, ready to face the challenge head-on.

Leaning against the cool metal wall of the elevator, I inhaled deeply, my fingers nervously smoothing down the fabric of my blouse. My heart pounded in sync with the ascent of the elevator, each floor adding to the weight of anticipation settling in my stomach. It was not just about the job anymore; it was about facing Tony in a professional setting while our personal secret hung in the air between us.

As the elevator chimed, indicating someone had called for it, I took another deep breath. The doors slid open, and there he was—a perfect embodiment of my dilemma, standing just a few feet away.

CHAPTER 14

I hadn't seen Jude since she left the cabin. It wasn't all that strange, considering she didn't normally work in my OR. I'd found myself wanting to request her on my cases, only to dismiss the idea quickly, knowing it would only arouse suspicion.

However, the lack of contact hadn't helped quell the undercurrent of desire that hummed in my veins whenever I thought of her. An itch I couldn't scratch, and tension that made my routine elevator rides seem far longer than they should be.

As if the universe were playing its part in our bizarre romance, the elevator doors slid open and there she was. The sight of her was like the first sip of water after a walk in the desert, a sudden, overwhelming relief. I didn't realize just how badly I'd wanted to see her until that moment.

I stepped into the elevator, a quiet gasp escaping her lips as she registered my presence. My eyes were drawn to the *O* shape her mouth formed, the memory of how those lips felt against mine flashing vividly in my mind.

"Hello," she managed to say, a soft greeting that bounced off the steel walls of the elevator. As the doors closed, her scent wrapped around me like a warm blanket. A mixture of vanilla and something uniquely Jude. I couldn't help but draw in a deep breath, my senses soaking in the essence of her.

Her appearance struck me like a bolt of lightning. She stood stoic in a sharp, professional outfit that was a stark

contrast to the wild, untamed persona she'd shown at the cabin. A crisp, tailored blazer wrapped around her figure with a green blouse beneath. Black slacks that hugged her curves and a pair of black heels completed her outfit.

The color of the blouse accentuated the verdant hue of her eyes, bringing them out in a way that captivated me instantly. Her hair was pulled back into a neat bun, a few wispy strands framing her face, lending her a sense of softness amid the rigid professionalism of her attire.

I'd seen Jude in scrubs, in casual clothes, and in nothing at all between the sheets. But seeing her like that was something altogether different. The juxtaposition of this polished, put-together woman against the passionate, vibrant lover I'd spent those unforgettable days with, made my heart skip a beat. There was something incredibly attractive about seeing that side of her, a side I hadn't been privy to before.

I wondered if it was the Jude that the rest of the world saw—a competent, confident woman, fully in control of her domain. It contrasted so vividly with the raw and intimate vulnerability we'd shared, but it didn't detract from it. If anything, it made me appreciate the layers of complexity that made up the woman standing before me. It made me want to explore them even further.

“Are you ready for the big interview?” I asked, breaking the silence. Her professionalism stood like an impenetrable fortress around her, cool and calm. Yet I found myself yearning for the candid, passionate woman I'd gotten to know over the long weekend in the cabin. I had made a promise though, and I intended to keep it.

“I am,” she replied, her voice steady. “I assume you're on your way to the interview room?”

Her question brought a nod from me as I admired the determination etched across her face. “That's right.”

“Why isn't Sadie with you?” I asked suddenly, the question slipping from my lips before I could stop it. The absence of the playful Labrador was felt—her energy had a way of filling up space that was endearing.

Jude laughed softly, her eyes twinkling. “I just checked my sugar and all is well. I didn’t think the rest of the panel would appreciate her snoring under the table during the interview.”

“True,” I conceded, chuckling lightly. “Still, it might sound crazy, but I kind of miss her.”

As the words left my lips, I couldn’t help the thought that followed, *I missed you too*. But those words remained left unsaid, sealed away for the time being. The tension in the small confines of the elevator was palpable, an undercurrent of unspoken words and lingering glances. And in the midst of it all, the desire to blur the line between professional and personal threatened to overwhelm me. But I remained silent, knowing there was a time and place for everything.

The silence that fell over us was heavy, the air thick with unspoken sentiments and lingering tension. It was Jude who finally shattered it, her voice softer than before.

“I’m sorry,” she began, her gaze briefly meeting mine before shifting back to the elevator’s doors. “For not calling or texting. I realized I don’t have your number.”

The confession coaxed a chuckle out of me, a humor-filled balm to the escalating tension. “Funny, I realized the same thing when you left,” I admitted, the confession easing the stiffness that had gradually taken root in the small, confined space of the elevator.

Then, she said something that caught me completely off guard. “Don’t give me the job because of what happened between us,” she implored, her gaze steady and serious as she met my eyes.

I held her gaze, my respect for her burgeoning. “Jude,” I began, keeping my tone level, “I wouldn’t do that. If you’re the best candidate, you’ll get the job. If not, you won’t. Simple as that.” I wanted her to know that while the cabin had given me a glimpse of the captivating woman she was outside of work, it wouldn’t influence my judgment in a professional setting.

Her integrity was one of the things I admired most about her. I could see how much she valued it, and I wanted to assure her that my own integrity was equally unshakeable.

We stepped out of the elevator in unison, the soft murmur of the hospital hallway immediately filling the void. Jude glanced around, taking in her surroundings with an air of professional curiosity. I took a moment to point her in the right direction.

“The interview will be conducted in the office down the hall to the left,” I informed her, my voice slightly huskier than I’d have liked.

She thanked me with a nod and a soft smile before turning to make her way toward the conference room. As she walked away, my eyes were involuntarily drawn to the sway of her hips. The fabric of her slacks hugged her perfectly, accentuating an ass I vividly remembered cradling in my hands. The memory of her, raw and unashamed beneath me, ignited a surge of desire that left me momentarily breathless.

Shaking my head to rid myself of the distracting imagery, I ducked into my office, needing a moment to collect myself. I wasn’t usually one to let my physical responses get the better of me, but with Jude, it seemed I was constantly in new territory.

Just as I managed to wrestle my arousal under control, the buzz of the intercom jolted me. My assistant’s voice floated through the room, pulling me from my thoughts. “Dr. Montivais, the interview is about to start.”

With a deep breath to steady myself, I made my way out of the office.

Upon entering the room, I saw Jude standing alongside Dr. Sydney McCann, our retiring floor manager, and Debbie Waller, an HR representative. The sight of her gave me a familiar rush, but I quickly pushed those feelings to the back of my mind.

“Good morning, Dr. Montivais,” Dr. McCann greeted me, offering me a warm smile.

“Good morning, Dr. McCann,” I replied, nodding in acknowledgment.

Then I turned my attention to Jude. Our eyes locked, and it was as if a silent conversation passed between us. She extended her hand toward me, and I took it, feeling an unexpected charge from the brief contact.

“Dr. Montivais,” she said, her voice steady. Her professionalism was evident, a stark contrast to the passionate woman I’d spent time with at the cabin.

“Ms. Langdon,” I responded, matching her formal tone. I let go of her hand, but the sensation of our touch lingered, a tantalizing echo of intimacy.

“Let’s get started, shall we?” said Debbie, beckoning us to the conference table.

I took a seat, doing my best to shift my thoughts back into professional mode. It wasn’t easy, not with Jude sitting across the table from me. But I had to be Dr. Montivais, the professional, not Tony, the man who’d shared an unforgettable weekend with her.

I steeled myself, focusing on the matter at hand. “Alright,” I said, settling into my seat, “let’s proceed.” The interview began, but as much as I tried to maintain a professional demeanor, part of me couldn’t help but relish the prospect of getting to know Jude better. Even in a formal setting. I would take whatever I could get.

CHAPTER 15

As I stepped out of the conference room, a wave of self-assurance washed over me. Maybe I was being a touch overconfident, but I couldn't help but feel that I had aced the interview. I had fielded their questions with ease, offered comprehensive strategies for tackling scheduling issues and curtailing excessive overtime, and been well-prepared for the more routine interview inquiries.

As I exited, I could see the satisfaction in the faces of the HR rep and the lead doctor on the OR floor. Their smiles were wide, contagious, and their eyes sparkled with approval. It seemed as if they had already decided that I was at the top of their list. I hoped so anyway.

The weight of my anxiety seemed to lift as I walked down the corridor. Each step felt lighter, more buoyant. I felt a sense of pride and excitement growing within me.

Having Tony on the interview panel was somewhat disconcerting, considering the intimacy we had shared in such a short time. His intense gaze bore into me throughout the entire meeting, a constant reminder of our time at the cabin. But somehow, I managed to maintain my composure. Our unspoken pact to remain professional held strong.

Tony was different from the man I had spent intimate time with at the cabin. His demeanor was more serious, his questions sharp and to the point, but there was still a hint of the warmth I had grown familiar with. He was thoroughly professional, yet I could see that same glint in his eyes that I had seen at the cabin.

My thoughts drifted back to our brief time together. The memory of his touch still lingered on my skin, the sound of his laughter still echoed in my ears, and the sight of his smile still imprinted in my mind. It was difficult to compartmentalize those feelings, especially when he was right in front of me.

As I retraced my steps down the hospital corridor, images of Tony in his sharp suit flashed through my mind. He had looked every bit the consummate professional, but the sight of him in that sleek ensemble had left an entirely different kind of impression.

His suit was charcoal grey, expertly tailored to his physique, accentuating the broad set of his shoulders and the leanness of his waist. The crisp, white shirt he wore underneath contrasted starkly with the darkness of his suit, making his strikingly brown eyes seem even more intense. The perfectly knotted maroon silk tie added a touch of sophistication, accentuating his chiseled jawline and lending a more distinguished look to his handsome face.

The Tony I saw in the interview room was a stark contrast from the man I spent four unforgettable days with at the cabin. Gone were the casual clothes and the laid-back attitude, replaced with an air of authority and poise. Yet despite his stern exterior, I could still detect the warmth within, the hint of a charming smile that tugged at the corners of his mouth.

His professionalism was admirable, even alluring. He commanded the room effortlessly, his authoritative voice resonating with confidence. Every gesture, every word, every glance was measured and purposeful, further solidifying his image as a competent and respected professional.

But it wasn't just his professional demeanor that caught my attention. It was the tantalizing blend of his masculine presence, his sharp intellect, and that raw sexual magnetism that had first drawn me to him at the cabin. Seeing Tony in that setting only amplified my attraction to him, stirring a subtle, underlying unease that was hard to ignore.

As I drove through the city, the twinkle of the Christmas lights adorning the streets brought a magical glow to the

bustling cityscape. Each festive display seemed to ignite the night, casting vibrant hues of red, green, silver, and gold in every direction. But as enchanting as the scenery was, my mind was elsewhere, fixated on the memory of Tony's probing gaze in the interview room.

As the hum of the city melted into the background, a specific moment from the interview echoed in my mind. Tony had asked a particularly challenging question. His eyes had locked with mine as he leaned forward slightly, his voice smooth yet filled with intrigue.

"Ms. Langdon," he'd began, folding his hands on the table, "you mentioned earlier about improving scheduling and controlling overtime. But how do you plan to deal with resistance to change from the team? What's your strategy for maintaining morale while implementing new systems?"

I remember feeling a rush of adrenaline at his question. It wasn't just the complexity of the query; it was the fact that it was Tony who had posed it. Being put on the spot by a man like him was exhilarating, to say the least. His reputation as a leader, his brilliance in his field, and his undeniable charm all made his scrutiny more intense, more challenging.

I felt a spark of satisfaction at recalling how I'd answered him. I'd spoken confidently about fostering open communication, encouraging team involvement in decision-making, and providing necessary training to ensure a smooth transition. But the real thrill was seeing Tony's subtle nod of approval, his eyes reflecting a glint of admiration.

As the city lights and Christmas cheer reflected off my windshield, blending with the memory of Tony's intense gaze, a thrill zipped through me. In fact, he was all I could think about as I finished the drive to my house, my pussy clenching each time I thought of him in that suit, those chocolate-brown eyes locked onto mine.

I sighed as I unlocked the front door of my house, my gaze shifting to the barren front yard. I usually had my outdoor Christmas decorations out by early December. I loved the festive spirit they brought, turning my simple house into a

wonderland of twinkling lights and holiday spirit. But the memory of last year's near-catastrophic tumble from the ladder had caused me to procrastinate.

Maybe I should hire someone this year, I thought to myself, stepping inside and kicking off my shoes. The thought of a professional taking over the task held a certain appeal—no more icy ladders, no more wrestling with tangled strings of lights.

“Sadie!” I called, greeted by the familiar thumping of my lovable black lab's tail against the wooden floor. As I bent to scratch behind her ears, her wet nose nudged against my hand. Her happy greeting, her warm, trusting eyes never failed to put a smile on my face, no matter what kind of day I had.

The moment I settled into the comfortable embrace of my couch, my phone began to ring from where I had dropped it onto the coffee table. I leaned forward to check the screen, seeing that it was a call from Mom, a smile spreading across my face as I snatched up the phone to answer.

“Hey, Mom!”

“Jude, baby! How are you?” Mom's excited voice burst through the phone.

I laughed, already feeling the warmth that a conversation with my mother always brought. “I'm good, Mom. Tired, but good.”

“You sound like you just ran a marathon. Are you still at the hospital? I told you, dear, you work too much.”

“Actually, I just got home. I had a job interview today, remember?”

“Oh, right! How did that go?” she asked, her voice full of curiosity and concern.

I couldn't help but beam, even though she couldn't see it. “I think it went really well. I'm hopeful.”

“That's wonderful, darling!” Her joy mirrored mine, as it always did. We chatted a bit more about the interview, my

potential new responsibilities, and the changes it would bring. After a while, the conversation shifted to the holidays.

“Speaking of changes,” she ventured, a teasing note in her voice. “Your father and I have been thinking about Christmas...”

I chuckled. “I’ve got a feeling where this is going.”

Mom laughed in response. “That’s because you’ve got my brain. Anyway, I’ll get right to it. Your father and I would love to have you home for Christmas, Jude,” Mom began, her tone edging on hopeful persuasion. “You haven’t spent Christmas in Oregon in years.”

“I’d love to, Mom, but you know Sadie hates flying.”

A light, infectious chuckle resonated from the other end of the line. “That dog is more spoiled than my grandchildren. You know, if you had a kid—”

“No, Mom, we are not having the grandkids conversation again,” I interrupted her, laughing as I envisioned the horrified look on her face.

Before she could retort, I heard a gruff voice in the background. “Give me the phone, Barb,” my father’s voice boomed through the speaker.

“Dad!” I exclaimed, grinning widely. “Are you eavesdropping on us?”

“In my own house? Never,” he replied, his deep laughter echoing through the phone. “But I do agree with your mother, Jude. We’d love to have you home for the holidays.”

I sighed dramatically, a smile still lingering on my lips. “Alright, alright. Let me think about it.”

A triumphant cheer sounded from the other side. “That’s my girl!” Dad exclaimed. “We’ll be looking forward to seeing you.”

“But I didn’t...” I chuckled again, shaking my head as I realized they were taking my consideration of the issue as a probable yes. “Anyway, I should get going. Love you guys.”

Even though Mom and Dad could be overwhelming at times, I loved my family and wouldn't trade them for anything. And while the logistics of travel with Sadie were daunting, I found myself looking forward to the idea of spending Christmas back in Oregon, surrounded by my loving, if somewhat overbearing, family.

After changing into casual clothes, I stretched out on the couch, about to close my eyes when a soft whine from Sadie jerked me back into the moment. I glanced down to see a big-eyed dog, her face nuzzled against my leg. "What's up, girl?" I asked, stroking her fluffy head. The answer came to me in a heartbeat when I followed her gaze to her empty food bowl.

"Oh, hell," I muttered, glancing at my barren kitchen. "I completely forgot about groceries." I sighed. The idea of venturing out to do a full-on grocery shop was about as appealing as a root canal.

I quickly pulled out my phone and opened the app for The Corner Deli, a local market that I frequented. It was only a few blocks down from my home and served a killer Reuben sandwich that I'd been craving all day. Not to mention they stocked essentials, including Sadie's favorite brand of dog food. I swiftly typed in my order: a couple of their famous Reubens, a bag of Sadie's dog food, milk, bread, a packet of the delicious oatmeal cookies they made in-house, and a few other odds and ends.

After confirming the order, I stood, stretched my arms above my head, and picked up Sadie's leash. "Alright, Sadie. Walk and pickup time."

She thumped her tail excitedly against the hardwood floor before getting up and bounding toward me. I clicked the leash onto her collar, grabbed my little trolley cart, and opened the door. As we headed out into the cool evening air, her enthusiasm ignited a spark of excitement in me. The bright Christmas lights strung up along the streets gave the neighborhood a festive glow that seeped into my mood.

I tugged my scarf a little tighter around my neck as we headed toward The Corner Deli. The air was brisk, a distinct

edge to it that hinted at snow in the near future. The festive decorations adorning the shops and houses we passed cast a warm, colorful glow on the frost-kissed sidewalks, infusing the night with an undeniable holiday spirit.

Sadie happily trotted along beside me, her breath puffing out in little clouds as she took in all the exciting smells and sounds of the street. I couldn't help but smile at her pure joy.

Once we arrived at the deli, I tied Sadie to the bike rack just outside, promising her I'd be quick. As I stepped inside, I was immediately enveloped in the rich, mouth watering aromas of freshly baked bread, warm deli meats, and rich coffee.

A couple of familiar faces behind the counter greeted me with cheery hellos. The two brothers who owned the place, Mike and Tim, were part of the reason I enjoyed the deli so much. Always up for some banter and full of jokes, they made every visit enjoyable.

"Well look who finally decided to grace us with her presence," Mike called out, a teasing grin on his face.

"It's been a whole three days, Jude," Tim chimed in, pretending to wipe away a tear. "We were about to send out a search party."

I laughed, returning their joking with a light-hearted roll of my eyes. "I knew I should have gone to that new place down the street instead."

After our laughter subsided, I collected my order and thanked the guys. Turning to leave, I was suddenly brought to a halt as I nearly walked straight into a solid and familiar body. A surprised gasp escaped my lips as I looked up into Tony's smiling face.

"I'm sorry!" I blurted out, stepping back hastily to put some space between us. Once I had recomposed myself, I cocked an eyebrow at him. "Are you following me, Dr. Montivais?"

Tony let out a rich, hearty laugh that filled me with warmth. "Actually, I live in the neighborhood," he explained,

his eyes twinkling. “This place has the best pastrami on rye around.”

“You better believe it!” Mike called out from behind the counter, his words accompanied by a wink.

“I had no idea we were neighbors,” I said to Tony, pleasantly surprised.

Tony shrugged nonchalantly as he picked up his to-go order and paid for his food. “Guess we learn something new every day.”

As we stepped back into the chilly night, Tony didn’t hesitate to reach down and lavish attention on Sadie, who wagged her tail enthusiastically, nuzzling her head into his hand. I watched, a soft smile playing on my lips. Despite the complexity of our situation, I found myself charmed by the sight. It seemed Sadie had a pretty good taste in men after all.

CHAPTER 16

I was just as taken aback to see Jude as she was to see me, though I'd purposely hung back to give her a little surprise. It worked, Jude's cheeks turning as pink at the sight of me as they did when, well, I made her feel other kinds of ways.

Still, knowing Jude wanted to keep things professional until the job announcement, I decided to play it cool. All the same, not wanting to let the opportunity slip, I asked a casual question.

“Hey, fancy having dinner together?”

Her eyes narrowed slightly, suspicion clouding her gaze. I didn't let that deter me though. Instead, I just continued lavishing attention on Sadie, feigning indifference to her answer. But deep down, I really wanted her to say yes. It wasn't just the physical attraction anymore; I genuinely enjoyed her company. Her wit, her sass, her intelligence, it all drew me in, keeping me perpetually intrigued. Jude definitely had my attention, and I was more than eager to explore our connection further.

Out of the corner of my eye, I couldn't help but admire her. She was dressed casually, a far cry from the polished professional attire she wore at the interview. And yet, she looked just as stunning, if not more. Her jeans hugged her curves perfectly, and the casual sweater she wore did little to hide her enticing figure. Her hair, let loose, framed her face, accentuating her beautiful features. She was breathtaking—a perfect combination of elegance and casual charm.

And it was in that casual, effortless attire that I saw the real Jude, not the professional nurse, not the seductive woman from the cabin, but just Jude—raw, beautiful, and unpretentious. It was a sight that stirred something deep within me.

I found it hard to keep my cool, which wasn't the norm for me. I was always the one in control, the one with the upper hand. But around Jude, all those rules seemed to fly out the window. Her presence set my heart racing, her laughter was like a melody that played on loop in my head, and her eyes held a world I wanted to explore. Jude was an enigma, a beautiful mystery that had me completely enthralled.

Although maintaining my cool was becoming increasingly challenging, I realized that maybe it was time for a change. Time to let go a bit. And if that someone who got me to do it was Jude, well, I was more than happy to oblige.

I could see she was amused by the way I was playing with Sadie. “The deli doesn't allow dogs inside, and it's a little too chilly for patio dining.”

My solution came out before I'd fully processed it.

“Well, in that case, we could go to my place,” I suggested, my voice laden with nonchalance. The look on her face was somewhere between shocked and amused, and I quickly backtracked with a chuckle. “Or... your place works too. Probably a little cozier, right?”

Jude laughed then, a wonderful sound that made my insides feel all warm despite the frosty weather. “Yeah, I think we can do that. But I'll be insisting on no funny business,” she warned, her eyes twinkling with mischief.

“Insisting?” I replied, the corners of my mouth curling into a cheeky grin. “Well, now I'm disappointed. Does that mean it's a yes though?”

“Yeah, it's a yes. But it's probably time that we exchange numbers.” She chuckled after she spoke, her laughter joining mine as the absurdity of the situation struck us.

“Alright, shoot me a text with your address,” I told her, rattling off my number. She took out her phone and began to type. Within a few seconds, my phone pinged with her text.

“Do you have any wine at your place?” I asked, picturing us sharing a glass, or two, in her living room.

Her response was immediate, and her tone told me she was on to my game. “Tony, we don’t need wine,” she admonished playfully. “It seems to get us into all sorts of trouble.”

I couldn’t contain my laughter, the sound echoing in the cold evening air. Yes, wine and our undeniable chemistry had indeed led to interesting situations.

With a shake of my head, my grin was unwavering. It seemed the evening was already becoming more entertaining than I’d anticipated.

“See you in a few,” I said, winking at her in a way that I hoped came off as charming rather than sleazy. She had a sparkle in her eye that hadn’t been there before, and it sent a jolt of anticipation through me.

She held up a hand, as if to ward off my enthusiasm. “Just give me about thirty minutes to do a quick clean, okay?”

I shook my head, dismissing her worry with a wave of my hand. “You don’t need to clean for me, Jude,” I assured her, trying to come across as nonchalant as possible. I meant it too. I wasn’t visiting to inspect her housekeeping skills.

Her eyes rolled at my comment and a grin stretched across her face. It was a gesture I was beginning to appreciate more and more.

“All the same,” I went on, “I’ll take my time coming over. And if you wanted to prepare a trail of rose petals leading to the bedroom...”

Jude laughed again, shaking her head. “Alright, enough already. See you in a bit, Okay?”

“You got it, *bonita*.”

With one more wry look, she headed off, leaving me standing outside the deli with a goofy smile on my face.

As I walked to my truck, I couldn't help but wonder how I was going to keep my promise of staying hands-off. With her charisma, effortless beauty, and infectious laugh, Jude was simply irresistible. And despite the professional veneer we were both trying to maintain, there was an undercurrent of attraction that I didn't think either of us could deny. It was going to be one hell of an interesting evening.

As I drove toward her house nearly thirty minutes later, I realized that she lived just two blocks away. I'd seen her walking Sadie around the block on numerous occasions. In fact, we had walked the same streets, breathed the same air, and yet I hadn't noticed her, *seen* her.

A bitter chuckle escaped me. *What an ass*, I thought to myself, not proud of my obliviousness.

It was strange to think that someone who had recently become so important to me had been in my periphery all along, just a stone's throw away. It was humbling and a little embarrassing, but also exciting. As I parked my truck and made my way to her front door, I couldn't help but feel a strange sense of familiarity.

Jude's home was the embodiment of charm—quaint and nestled snugly within the heart of our shared neighborhood. It had an idyllic, cottage-like appeal with its rustic red bricks and white-trimmed windows, smaller than my place but radiating an inviting warmth. As I approached, Jude opened the door and stepped out, looking gorgeous as she always did. Sadie ran to her side, panting eagerly at the sight of me.

“Come on in,” she said. “Just finished tidying.”

As I stepped inside, I found myself enveloped in a cozy embrace of comfort. A myriad of Christmas lights twinkled from every corner, casting a warm, enticing glow that illuminated the pleasing interior. The living room was tastefully decorated in shades of cream and earthy browns, accents of reds and greens punctuating the space with festive cheer.

A towering Christmas tree, decked out in shimmering baubles, dominated one corner of the living room. Its fairy

lights cast dancing shadows across the room, adding to the enchanting atmosphere. Garlands of ivy and holly were gracefully draped over the mantle, their dark green leaves contrasting against the flickering fire beneath.

A cluster of stockings hung cheerily by the hearth, their plush, red fabric set off by the golden firelight. On the coffee table, an intricate nativity scene held pride of place, and on the side table, I noticed a miniature snow globe village that twinkled under the soft room lighting.

The exterior was rather bare in comparison, lacking the festive spirit that permeated the inside.

“Decorations look amazing,” I said, taking in the sights.

“Thanks. Might be a little corny, but I love Christmas stuff.”

“Not corny at all. But I have to ask... why’s the outside bare?” The contrast had sparked my curiosity.

She seemed surprised by my question, and a light blush tinted her cheeks. “Oh, I was going to hire someone to decorate but just haven’t gotten around to it yet.”

I eyed the bare exterior through the window then turned back to her with a grin. “How about I help you with that?”

She shook her head quickly, her curls bouncing with the motion. “Oh no, that’s not necessary. You’re a guest, Tony. You’re not supposed to work.”

I shrugged casually, the grin still in place. “Consider it a second date.”

Her eyebrows shot up at that, and she laughed. “Second date? We haven’t even had a first one.”

Without missing a beat, I lifted the deli bag in my hand and pointed at hers on the kitchen counter. “We’re about to,” I stated, the cocky smile never leaving my face.

Shaking her head, she let out a warm, hearty laugh. “Tony Montivais, you’re a sneaky bastard.”

“I try,” I replied, winking at her and loving the warm flush that spread across her cheeks. Her house might’ve been beautifully decorated, but nothing outshone Jude’s radiant smile.

CHAPTER 17

We sat comfortably at my kitchen table, the aromatic scent of our deli sandwiches mixing with the piney scent of my indoor Christmas decorations. Tony, ever so charming, was in the middle of a hilarious story about one of his past Christmas escapades.

“Well,” he started, leaning back in his chair, his eyes gleaming with mischief. “One Christmas, I must’ve been about twelve or thirteen, my aunt decided she’d spice up our traditional festivities by introducing this little game she called *Los Doce Desastres de Navidad*—The Twelve Disasters of Christmas. She was always something of an oddball. But in a fun sort of way.”

I raised an eyebrow, intrigued and stifling a giggle at the grin spreading across Tony’s face and the twinkle in his eye. “And what exactly did these disasters entail?”

“Well, she assigned each of us kids a disaster drawn from a hat. Mine was unruly reindeer. So, I got this brilliant idea,” he continued, unable to hide the pride in his voice. “I’d borrowed a couple of my dad’s reindeer decorations from the front yard. Life-sized plastic things with lights inside, you know?”

I nodded, chuckling as I imagined a young Tony lugging the decorations around.

“Come Christmas Eve,” he went on, “I sneak these reindeer up to the roof. Imagine, if you will, a tiny Tony trying to haul two life-sized lit-up reindeer up a ladder in the middle of the night.”

My chuckles turned into full-blown laughter, picturing the scene. His storytelling was so vivid; I felt like I was right there, a silent observer of his childhood shenanigans.

“Anyway, I managed to get them up there somehow without waking the whole house, and I positioned them to look like they were about to take off from the roof. Then, I ran some string from them to a sack of presents I’d made up. Then all I had to do was wait for morning.”

“And?” I prompted, my sandwich forgotten, my full attention on Tony’s story.

“Well,” he said, pausing for dramatic effect, “let’s just say my family woke up to a pair of reindeer seemingly taking flight off our roof, presents in tow, and a very smug young me. My aunt loved it, and said I’d embodied the spirit of ‘unruly reindeer’ perfectly. My dad, on the other hand, wasn’t so thrilled about how I’d moved around his beloved decorations. But” Tony finished with a flourish, “it’s still one of my family’s most talked about Christmas stories.”

I laughed, feeling a warmth spread through me. Not just from the story itself, but from the way Tony told it, his eyes twinkling with shared amusement and the joy of reliving a happy memory.

As I listened, my gaze would wander to the strong line of his jaw, to his twinkling eyes, to the fabric of his shirt stretched taut over his chest. Each time he laughed or moved, the muscles beneath would ripple, and my fingers would twitch with the desire to touch him.

“Jude, are you even listening to me?” Tony’s teasing voice brought me out of my reverie.

“Uh, yeah, sorry,” I stammered, forcing myself to focus on his words and not on the tantalizing thought of what was beneath his shirt. A blush crept up my cheeks, and I took a huge bite of my sandwich as an excuse to not say anything more.

“But seriously, you should see my family during the holidays. Total comedy antics,” Tony continued, interrupting

my thoughts.

“Who knows? Maybe I’ll meet them sometime.”

As much as I wanted to pull him close and explore the body that had been haunting my thoughts since the cabin, I knew I couldn’t. Not while waiting for a decision about the job. It was too complicated, too risky. But that didn’t stop the desire from gnawing at me.

Right as the atmosphere in the room began to settle from the height of the story, the doorbell rang. The sound was even more jarring than normal, cutting through the unspoken intimacy in the room. We both looked at the door, and then at each other, surprise etched on our faces.

As the doorbell rang again, I turned to Tony, an eyebrow raised.

“You expecting anyone?” Tony asked. “Maybe a surprise party in my honor?”

“Nope,” I replied, shaking my head as I rose from the couch, “but I guess we’re about to find out.” I straightened my shirt, preparing myself for whoever could be on the other side of the door.

Tony chuckled, leaning back into the cushions, and gave Sadie an affectionate scratch behind the ears. “Well, the more, the merrier,” he said, although the humor in his voice didn’t quite reach his eyes. He seemed to tense up, as if annoyed by the intrusion on our time.

As I made my way to the entrance, Sadie followed as usual, getting up from her spot next to Tony, clearly smitten with him. “Who knew you’d be such a dog whisperer?” I threw the words over my shoulder, casting him a warm smile before I pulled the door open, tension tingling in my stomach.

I swung the door open, Andrew’s familiar face appearing, his expression void of any emotion. Ashley stood next to him clutching a big plastic bin that appeared to be empty. A surge of shock rippled through me, freezing me on the spot.

Of course Andrew’s presence was unexpected, but it was Ashley next to him who really threw me, her glossy hair

cascading down her shoulders, a hint of arrogance in her stunning blue eyes along with a calculating glint that set my nerves on edge.

“Evening, Jude,” he said with a cocky smile, one I wanted to punch right off his face.

“What do you want?” I asked, striving to keep my voice steady. “Actually, that doesn’t matter. I believe I told you not to come back.”

“I know, but I just need a few more things.”

“From the basement,” Ashley added with an insistent tone. “We saw some stuff last time we were here.”

Their presence felt like an unwelcome gust of cold wind. Behind me, I could sense Tony’s attention on the situation, his quiet observation marking a stark contrast to Andrew’s sudden, invasive appearance.

“Andrew, there’s nothing of yours left in the damn basement,” I said, firmly and definitively, an annoyed gaze on him. “I’d have noticed.”

“But the boxes are there, Jude,” Ashley retorted, preparing to maneuver past me. Her voice held an irritating whine that instantly made me want to slap her. “I saw them.”

My arm shot out, blocking her path. “You are *not* welcome here,” I told her, my voice low and tinged with ice. “I’ll look in the basement later, and if there’s anything there—which I highly doubt—I’ll let you know and set it out on the damn curb.”

Ashley turned to Andrew, her face twisted in a petulant pout. He sighed, a long, tired sound, and shot me a pleading look. “Jude, just let us in—”

“No Andrew,” I cut him off, shaking my head. “You’re not coming into my house. Not ever again.”

Ashley scowled at my refusal and in a huff, attempted to force the door open wider. She reached out and put her hand on the frame, preventing me from shutting it. Again, the audacity of her actions shocked me, the blatantness of her

disrespect hitting me as surely as a physical blow. Her shrill voice filled the air as she yelled at me, her manners—or lack thereof—serving only to further escalate the situation.

Suddenly, the calm, measured cadence of Tony's voice filled the hallway. "Everything okay over here?" he asked, strolling nonchalantly toward us.

My heart fluttered quickly at his approach, but I squared my shoulders and forced a tight smile onto my face. "Everything's fine, Tony," I replied, my voice firm. I didn't need his help. I could handle it.

Andrew's eyes instantly narrowed at the sight of Tony. "Who the fuck is this?" he spat, his voice sharp, a stark contrast to Tony's relaxed tone. His gaze shifted between Tony and me.

"Andrew," I said, my voice dripping with venom. "My private life is none of your business anymore." His eyes widened in surprise, but he didn't argue. He simply glared at me, anger flashing in his eyes.

Tony simply extended a hand to Andrew, his demeanor calm and collected, even a bit warm.

"Tony," he introduced himself, the corners of his mouth lifted in a genial, non-threatening smile.

A flare of anxiety shot through me as I watched Andrew's gaze flick between us, the gears of his mind turning as he tried to put the pieces together. I didn't want Andrew to know anything about my life anymore. I just wanted to move on.

Finally, skeptically, Andrew took Tony's hand, shaking it with a curt nod. "Andrew," he grumbled, the words sounding like they were being forced out through clenched teeth.

As they pulled their hands back, I could tell that the air had changed. The tension was thicker, the undercurrent of animosity tangible. But through it all, Tony remained unflappable. His calm presence was a grounding force amidst the chaos. And for that, I was grateful.

Andrew's expression was thunderous, his pale blue eyes flashing in the fading daylight. The calm, laid-back man I once

knew seemed to have been replaced by a jealous, controlling version.

“This isn’t your house anymore, Andrew,” I said firmly, the chill in my voice matching the frosty air outside.

His gaze, cold and hard, locked onto mine. “Jude—” he tried, a warning note in his voice. But I wasn’t about to back down. Not anymore.

“Go home with your fiancée,” I interjected sharply, deliberately emphasizing the last word. I threw a glance at Ashley. She was shifting uncomfortably, her gaze curiously focused on Tony who stood silently by my side. “As I said, you’re not welcome here.”

Tony, the charming doctor who was nothing like the hard men in Andrew’s world, stepped forward. His presence was commanding, effortlessly dominating the space without needing to utter a word.

“I believe the homeowner has made her intentions known,” he said. “If you ask me, there’s nothing more to be discussed.”

“Well, no one *did* ask you,” Andrew spat, then instantly recoiled as if he had found the sense to realize that pressing would put him into a confrontation that he may not want. “Fine,” he finally ground out.

Andrew spun on his heel and walked away, his gaze never leaving Tony. Ashley, looking a little flustered, nearly tripped before following him down the pathway. Her eyes remained on Tony as well, as if she were trying to decide what to make of him.

Once they were out of sight, Tony promptly shut the door, cutting off the chilly air and the residual tension that clung to it. He leaned against the door, a humorous glint in his eyes as he turned to me. “Are those two always such assholes?” he asked, his tone surprisingly light given the situation.

Laughter bubbled up within me, a welcome reprieve from the tense confrontation. I shook my head, grinning despite myself. Tony, with his casual confidence and disarming humor, had a way of making the world seem a little less

daunting. It was in that moment, in the quiet aftermath of Andrew's visit, that I found myself feeling incredibly grateful for his unexpected presence in my life.

CHAPTER 18

The heat that had started as a small flame earlier had now become a full-blown wildfire between my legs. I watched Tony as he pushed away from the door, the muscles in his shoulders and arms rippling beneath his tight shirt. His cool confidence, his strong, unwavering stance during the entire confrontation with Andrew had stirred something within me. I yearned for him with an intensity that made my breath hitch.

It was crazy. Despite it being only a minute after Andrew had nearly taken him to blows, Tony was as calm and composed as ever. It was as if nothing had happened. My eyes flicked down to his hands, which were just as still as you'd expect for a skilled doctor under pressure. I found myself thinking about what else I knew he could do with them.

My gaze moved to his face as he turned toward me, his eyes glinting with humor. "Hey, you okay there?" he asked, a smile playing on his lips. "You seem a little distracted."

I shook my head, quickly stepping out of my reverie. "Yep, I'm fine," I replied, offering him a quick smile.

He chuckled softly, his gaze softening as he looked at me. "I have a feeling that's not entirely true," he said, taking a step toward me. He raised his hand to tuck a stray lock of hair behind my ear, his touch sending a jolt of electricity coursing through my body.

"Tell you what," he continued, a hint of teasing in his voice. "How about we put Andrew and his fiancée in the past

for tonight and just enjoy our date?” He winked at me, obviously recalling our playful argument earlier.

His ease and charisma had a calming effect on me. Tony was a man who knew how to carry himself, how to handle a situation. It wasn't just his physicality that I found attractive, it was his entire persona, the perfect combination of confidence, humor, and strength.

“Now,” he said, turning toward the kitchen. “I believe we have dinner to finish.”

As Tony started to walk away, I reached out and grabbed his hand, halting him in his tracks. The surprised look in his eyes was priceless, and I couldn't help but allow a small giggle.

“Not so fast, doctor,” I said, pulling him back toward me.

Our lips met in a searing kiss. His initial surprise gave way to fervor as he pulled me closer, his strong arms wrapping around me. I tangled my fingers in his hair, pulling him even deeper into the kiss. His lips were firm, yet gentle, and the taste of him was intoxicating.

We were so wrapped up in each other that we barely noticed when we stumbled onto the couch. Tony let out a low groan as he gently pushed me down, hovering over me. “Is this how you treat all your dinner guests?” he asked, his voice laced with playful humor.

“No,” I replied, a mischievous smile on my face. “Just the ones I find particularly charming.”

His laughter filled the room as he looked down at me. “In that case, I'll have to make sure I'm always on my best behavior.”

We fell into a comfortable silence, just looking into each other's eyes. The connection between us was palpable, an electric current that left no room for anything else. I was more than just attracted to him; I was drawn to him on a level that I couldn't quite explain. But in that moment, I didn't need to explain anything. I just needed to feel him, to lose myself in

his touch, and let the rest of the world fade away. I reached up, pulling him back into another passionate kiss.

The heat between us grew as we moved together on the couch. His hands found their way under my shirt, his touch setting my skin on fire. My heart pounded in my chest as I returned the favor, my fingers tracing the contours of his muscular form beneath his shirt.

“Are you sure?” he asked, pulling back slightly. His voice was low, the question sincere.

“I’ve never been surer about anything in my life,” I replied, pulling his shirt over his head.

A moment later, my shirt joined his on the floor. The cool air of the room did little to quench the fire between us. His gaze roamed over me, appreciation in his eyes. We paused for a moment, drinking each other in, the sexual tension between us profound.

“God, you’re beautiful,” he murmured, his fingers tracing over my skin. His touch sent waves of pleasure through me, his words sending my heart soaring.

“You’re not so bad yourself,” I replied, my fingers moving along the lines of his abs, making him groan with pleasure. The corners of his mouth twitched in a smirk, his eyes sparkling with amusement.

Laughter from both of us echoed around the room. The moment was perfect—the laughter, the banter, the connection. It was more than I could have ever asked for.

As his lips found mine once more, all thoughts fled from my mind. All that mattered was the moment, the man, and the incredible bond we shared.

My heart pounded as his fingers traced the edge of my bra, his touch sending waves of anticipation coursing through me. In one swift move, he unhooked it, his eyes never leaving mine.

His hands slid down to my waist, his fingers deftly undoing the button on my jeans. He tugged them down slowly,

his gaze following the path of the fabric as it pooled around my feet.

The anticipation was almost too much as he unbuttoned his own jeans, his movements deliberate and slow. The sight of him there in his boxer briefs made my heart skip a beat.

Clothes were quickly forgotten as we found our way back to each other, our bodies pressing together in a heated embrace. His hands found their way to my backside, lifting me up as I wrapped my legs around his waist. We fit together perfectly, like two pieces of a puzzle finally clicking into place.

He held me up with those big, thick arms of his, kissing me hard and deep in just the way I wanted, the way I craved. Tony carried me over to the nearest wall, pressing me against it, the texture cool against my bare skin.

He grabbed his cock and positioned it between my folds, driving it slowly into me, my walls slick and wet and waiting for him. The sensation of his thick cock pushing deep, splitting me in two was so intense that I couldn't even focus on the kiss. I pulled my lips away, letting my head fall forward onto his broad, firm shoulder.

“Feel good, baby?”

“So goddamn good.”

He pulled back, holding me up against the wall and pushing into me again, and again. The pleasure built by the second until an orgasm was on the brink. I opened my eyes to see his handsome face tightened in an expression of erotic intensity, and that was all it took to make me come hard. I dug my nails into the thick skin of his upper back as the climax ripped through me, letting myself go completely, giving myself over to his strength.

The pleasure faded, but Tony wasn't done with me yet. Still holding me, he carried me over to the couch and set me down. His gaze drifted down to my pussy, pure hunger in his eyes.

“God, you have no idea how much I’ve been wanting to taste you.”

With that, he leaned in and began kissing my inner thighs, moving up until his lips were on my core. The intensity hit me right away, pleasure shooting through my body like bolts of lightning. I moaned with pleasure, my hands working through his thick hair as I held him in place. He teased me a bit more, kissing my lower lips and the crease of my thigh, before spreading me open and giving me exactly what I wanted.

His tongue danced on my clit, outbursts of delight shaking my body. One hand stayed below my waist, the other moving up along my curves, coming to a rest on my right breast as he squeezed it just how I wanted, my nipple going hard against his touch. The pleasure built until I couldn’t hold back any longer. I came hard once again, my back arching as he coaxed every last bit of pleasure out of me, his tongue pressed firmly against my clit.

Tony rose from between my legs, his mouth glistening with my juices.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand before gliding his cock into me as if it were made for me and me alone. Tony thrust deeply and slowly, exactly how I wanted him to. His dark eyes locked onto mine as he brought me to another orgasm, this time finishing with me. His muscles tightened and he let out a hard groan as he released, his warm seed erupting inside me.

CHAPTER 19

TONY

I 'd never been one to linger after sex. But there, tangled in the blanket on the couch with a sleeping Jude nestled against me, I found an unfamiliar desire to simply stay put. The warmth of her body against mine, the rhythmic pattern of her breath against my chest, and the soft glow of the lamp creating a halo around her tangled hair was all too tempting to resist.

But the minute I stirred, attempting to move without waking her, her eyes snapped open. She blinked a few times, her gaze slowly coming into focus. Those beautiful eyes, now soft with sleep and tinged with the lingering traces of passion, met mine. And then, as if realizing where she was and who she was with, her lips curled into a smile.

In the half-light of the room, that smile was absolutely breathtaking. It was genuine, pure, and radiated a warmth that made my heart do a funny flip in my chest. In the throes of our passion, I had seen many expressions cross Jude's face, but that one—the sleepy, content smile—was entirely new.

“I didn't mean to wake you,” I said, the sound of my voice seeming loud in the hush of the room.

Her smile deepened, the corners of her eyes crinkling slightly. “It's okay,” she said, her voice still heavy with sleep.

We stayed there, locked in each other's gaze, silent save for the faint hum of the city beyond her window. The tension from earlier had dissipated, replaced by a shared understanding of what had transpired between us. Yet there

was an unsaid question hanging in the air... where did we go from here? For the first time in a long time, I was unsure of the answer. But somehow, with Jude, that uncertainty didn't seem so daunting.

She pulled herself up and settled next to me, bare skin upon bare skin. Leaning in, she pressed her lips against mine, a simple, soft kiss that instantly caused a familiar stirring in my lower body. At the same moment, my stomach chose to betray me with a loud growl, and we both broke into laughter.

"I think we need to get dressed and finish dinner," she said, detangling herself from the blanket and standing up. I couldn't help but admire the way her body moved, so confident and comfortable in her own skin.

However, her words sparked a concern within me. "Are you feeling alright?" I asked, eyeing her carefully as she moved to retrieve her clothes from the floor.

With a swift and fluid motion, she slipped into her clothes, then turned to me with a reassuring smile. "I'm fine, Tony. Just famished."

There was a glint of mischief in her eyes as she spoke, which made me chuckle. She was quick-witted and playful, qualities that I found incredibly attractive. I watched her as she strode into the kitchen, leaving me alone with a grin on my face.

I sat there for a moment, appreciating the afterglow of our intimate connection. But the promise of shared food and her company was too enticing to resist. I pulled on my discarded pants and prepared myself to rejoin her.

As I entered the kitchen, I found Jude leaning down to give Sadie a treat. She looked up as I approached, her face lighting up in a beautiful smile. She had replenished our drinks, and the sight of her moving around in her own space stirred a deep longing within me. For a moment, I allowed myself to imagine the scene as a part of my everyday life. The thought felt strangely comforting, something I had never experienced before.

It was in those little moments, when she was simply being herself, that her real beauty shone through. The way she carried herself, the way her smile reached her eyes, the gentle way her hand smoothed over Sadie's fur. All of it added up to a woman who was gorgeous, not just physically but also in the way she interacted with the world around her.

The more I watched her, the more I was drawn in. Her beauty was not just skin deep. It was in her laughter, her passion, the way she loved her dog, the way she carried herself. Everything about her was profoundly captivating, and I found myself continuing to want more, to know her on a deeper level.

My heart pounded in my chest as I realized the depth of my attraction. Jude was no ordinary woman, and I was no ordinary man when it came to her. Everything about her was pulling me in, and I was powerless to resist.

I realized then that my feelings for Jude ran deeper than I had initially thought. They weren't just fleeting emotions fueled by physical attraction. They went way past that. It scared me a little, the idea of having such strong feelings for someone, and yet at the same time, it felt right.

I found myself feeling slight hesitation though. She was older than I was. Not that it bothered me, but it did raise a few practical concerns. And even though I found myself undeniably drawn to Jude, I wasn't sure if I was ready to give up my freedom just yet.

Was I done playing the field? The question gnawed at me. I had always valued my independence and the casual, no-strings-attached relationships I usually engaged in. But as I looked at Jude, her eyes shining with warmth and humor, I wondered if maybe, just maybe, she might be worth changing my ways for.

There I was, standing by the kitchen bar, my mind a whirlwind of emotions. I was captivated, entranced, but also filled with uncertainty and hesitation. I felt a strange pull toward Jude that I wasn't ready to confront. It was too much, too soon.

Her gaze met mine across the room, her eyebrows furrowing slightly as she caught my quiet contemplation. There was a soft questioning look in her eyes, a curiosity that I wasn't ready to satisfy.

I found myself backing away, needing some distance. "I, uh... I have to go," I blurted out, my voice rough with unexpected tension.

She looked taken aback, her eyes widening slightly at my abrupt change of tone. "What? Why?" she asked, her voice laced with surprise.

"I just... I have to go," I replied, the words tumbling out of my mouth. I could feel the weight of her gaze on me, piercing through the walls I was trying to erect around myself.

I moved toward Sadie, patting her head absentmindedly as I tried to avoid looking at Jude. "I had fun tonight," I managed to say, my voice sounding strained even to my own ears.

Before she could respond, I turned and headed toward the front door, feeling her bewildered gaze burning into my back. I could hear her starting to protest, to question my sudden departure, but I didn't stop.

"Tony?"

I closed the door behind me, effectively shutting out her words and the warmth that her presence provided. I left, my mind a tumultuous sea of emotions, leaving behind a night that had started off wonderfully but had ended in confusion and haste.

Driving home, my thoughts were a storm, the car's dull hum the only distraction from the roiling uncertainty inside me. I felt like a jerk for leaving the way I did, for fleeing from something that felt too real, too close. A monogamous relationship seemed to be too big a commitment for me at that point in my life. The freedom I'd always reveled in now felt threatened, and I wasn't ready to give it up.

My phone buzzed against the car's console, jolting me out of my thoughts. Glancing at the screen, I saw Dr. McCann's

name flash. I picked it up immediately, her voice coming through in a flurry of urgency.

“Tony,” she said, “I’m with Debbie Waller from HR. We’re looking to fill the OR manager position by tomorrow morning. Rebecca, the current manager, has announced her departure in two weeks, so we need the new person to start training ASAP. I know it’s late, but I’m thinking the sooner we can make this decision, the better.”

Her words hung in the air like a loaded gun, and I felt the familiar sense of professional anticipation wash over me, temporarily dispelling my earlier fears. Little did I know that this would change the trajectory of my relationship with Jude in ways I hadn’t imagined.

“I agree,” I said. “No sense in hemming and hawing about it.”

“Well, let’s get right to it. Who do you prefer?” Dr. McCann asked, her tone direct and brusque.

“Jude Langdon,” I responded without a second thought, surprised at the conviction in my voice.

“And why would that be?” she inquired, the subtle hint of a challenge resonating in her tone.

“Her interview was impeccable,” I began, pausing to gather my thoughts. “Her integrity shines through in her actions. The docs and nurses on her floor speak highly of her. She’s competent, has a firm grasp on management, and is a team player.”

I could almost hear the approving smile in Dr. McCann’s voice when she responded. “I’m glad we agree. I also believe Jude is the best choice for this role.”

She then dropped the bomb on me. “You’ll need to inform her tomorrow about the decision. I’ll be tied up in surgeries all morning and won’t be able to do it.”

I blinked, stunned. “Why me?” I managed to ask, trying to keep the surprise out of my voice.

“Because it’s your responsibility now, orders from higher up the ladder than both of us,” she said, her tone indicating that the conversation was over. “And besides, who doesn’t love to be the bearer of good news for once?”

We said our goodbyes and I hung up, the implication of her words sinking in. After my strange and abrupt departure earlier, I was now tasked with delivering good news to Jude. But would she even want to hear from me after the way I’d just behaved?

I continued the drive home, the night’s events replaying in my mind like a movie reel. Jude, her laughter, her playful banter, the way her face had lit up with joy when she bumped into me at the deli. The surprise of encountering Andrew and Ashley, the unexpected flare of protectiveness I’d felt toward Jude. Then the shift in emotions, the realizations, and the abrupt departure.

In the quiet of my truck, I felt the enormity of my feelings for her. Something I hadn’t anticipated, something I hadn’t planned for. I was used to being in control, to being carefree, and to living my life on my terms. But the deep emotions I was experiencing for Jude were foreign and downright terrifying.

I found myself worrying about her, about how she must have felt when I left so abruptly. I worried about her reaction to getting the promotion, how we would navigate the newfound professional link. And surprisingly, I found myself worrying about our future— something I had never given much thought to before.

As I pulled into my driveway, the night was silent, but my mind was a cacophony of thoughts, worries, and realizations. It was clear that whatever was happening between Jude and me was far more significant than a casual fling or a brief attraction.

It suddenly felt like I was standing on the precipice of something big, something life changing. And for the first time in a long time, I wasn’t sure what to do. The cocky, confident

Tony was uncharacteristically uncertain, and I had to admit, it was a frightening and exciting prospect all at once.

CHAPTER 20

As I stood in my empty living room, the warmth from Tony's presence was fading rapidly, and being replaced by a cold disappointment. The sudden change in his demeanor had left me confused and thrown off. One minute we were laughing, making love, and sharing stories, and the next he was abruptly leaving with barely a goodbye, an icy silence lingering long after the door had closed behind him.

I mulled over his behavior, trying to make sense of it. Could it be that he wasn't ready for a relationship after all? The thought stung, a sharp pang of regret settling in my heart. I thought he was different, that beneath the confident, playful exterior was a man capable of deep emotions, of commitment.

But as I sat alone in my silent house, I couldn't help but feel a creeping sense of betrayal. Had all of it been an act? The emotional vulnerability, the intimate moments we'd shared, were they just pieces in a game he'd played with countless women before me? Was I just another notch on his bedpost, another story to share with his buddies at the bar?

A bitter disappointment washed over me, mingling with embarrassment. I felt foolish for believing in him, for letting my guard down. I'd thought he was different from the reputation that followed him, a reputation of casual flings and countless lovers.

I sank onto my couch, pulling Sadie into my lap. The room seemed colder, the Christmas lights less bright. I couldn't shake off the feeling of being used, of being just another conquest for Tony. It hurt more than I cared to admit.

As I stroked Sadie's fur, I promised myself that I wouldn't allow him to hurt me anymore. I'd learned my lesson, and the next time I saw him, I'd be ready. I would guard my heart, protect myself. I wouldn't let his charm get the better of me again.

Still, as I sat in the dim light, a tiny part of me hoped that I was wrong about him. But the silence of my house, echoing with his abrupt departure, told a different story.

Sadie, my ever-present comforter, seemed to sense my turmoil. She nudged her head under my hand, her warm, soft fur a soothing presence against the turmoil of my thoughts. I drew strength from her quiet companionship, the rhythmic cadence of her breathing anchoring me amidst the waves of confusion and disappointment.

I heaved a sigh, ruffling her fur gently as I looked around the house. The festive decorations I had hung seemed to mock me, their bright cheer a stark contrast to the feelings swirling inside me. Shaking my head, I gently pushed Sadie off my lap and rose to my feet.

I padded to my bedroom, the hollowness inside me growing with every step. The bed seemed too big, too empty, as I undressed and slipped under the covers. I stared up at the ceiling, the shadows thrown by the streetlights outside dancing across the room.

The evening replayed in my mind, a confusing mix of pleasant moments and harsh words. I thought of Tony's laughter, his warmth, and then the coldness of his departure. It made little sense, and my mind spun in circles trying to understand what had gone wrong.

I rolled onto my side, pulling the blanket tighter around me. Sadie had followed me into the room, her soft snores a comforting lullaby in the otherwise silent night. She was a steady presence, her loyalty and companionship a balm to my stinging disappointment.

As I closed my eyes, I allowed myself one last thought of Tony. I thought of his smile, his bright eyes, and the inexplicable pull I felt toward him. Then I locked those

thoughts away, tucking them in a corner of my mind. Tomorrow was another day, and I'd face it head on. I needed to rest.



The following morning, I arrived at work with the sunrise, earlier than most of my colleagues. Sadie, ever my companion, trotted at my side, her tail swishing with every step. As I sat down at the desk to check my emails, one particular message caught my attention, causing my stomach to churn with unease.

The email was from Tony, asking me to come to his office at ten. I swallowed hard, attempting to quell the sudden rush of nerves that welled up inside me. I wasn't sure what to expect, especially after the strange events of the previous night. A soft whine from Sadie had me looking down at her, her brown eyes filled with concern.

"I'm fine, Sadie," I reassured her, forcing a smile onto my face. I reached for a protein bar from the desk drawer, hoping the sustenance would help settle my anxious stomach.

As the morning passed, I busied myself with my duties, my mind a flurry of questions and apprehensions. My usual jovial banter with staff was noticeably absent, replaced with a forced smile and monosyllabic responses.

Sally had, of course, noticed my unusual reticence. "Why so quiet, Jude?" she asked, raising an eyebrow at me.

Leaning in close, I lowered my voice to a whisper. "Dr. M sent me an email asking me to come to his office at ten," I confessed, my voice barely audible.

Sally frowned, her forehead creasing with concern. "Awfully formal for someone you're sleeping with," she murmured, her voice hushed to match my own.

I had no reply for that, the truth of her words sinking in. Sally was right. It was formal and unusual. And it only added to the growing knot of worry in the pit of my stomach. But I

would face it head on, the same way I did with everything. Because that was just who I was.

After confirming that no one else had overheard our conversation, I looked at Sally, trying to keep my expression neutral.

“Could be about the job,” I responded with a shrug, desperately hoping that was the case. It would be far easier to deal with than any discussion about last night.

I opted not to mention the events of the previous evening or Tony’s abrupt change in behavior. While I felt a twinge of regret over the sudden shift in our dynamic, I couldn’t deny that what had transpired had been just as passionate and intimate as our encounter at the cabin. I just hoped that it wouldn’t impact my chances for the job I had applied for.

After finishing my charting, I checked my watch. It was almost ten, and I wouldn’t be required in surgery with Dr. Farliss until eleven. That left me just enough time for the dreaded meeting with Tony. Anxiety gnawed at the edges of my resolve as I made my way to the elevator, each step bringing me closer to the unknown.

Tony’s office was located on the third floor, a stark contrast to the hustle and bustle of the OR and patient wards. The receptionist greeted me with a cool glance.

“May I help you?” she asked, her tone neutral.

“Dr. Montivais sent me an email asking to meet him at ten,” I informed her, trying to keep the unease from my voice. As she nodded and gestured for me to take a seat, I couldn’t help but wonder what lay ahead. Not knowing was the hardest part.

Without a word, she pressed a button on the intercom. The office door swung open moments later, and there stood Tony, looking as dashing and handsome as ever. The sight of him stirred something deep within me, a mixture of desire and apprehension, which resulted in my stomach doing a painful flip. His smile was warm, but with mainly a professional air to it, a stark contrast to the Tony I had gotten to know.

“Please, come in,” he invited, gesturing toward the interior of his office.

The office was sophisticated, echoing the man himself. It was the domain of a confident, accomplished professional, and somehow that thought made me even more nervous.

He shut the door behind us, effectively cutting off the rest of the world. I was aware of my heart beating in my chest, a wild drum echoing my unease. He offered me a seat, a gesture that was both courteous and considerate, but I declined.

“You don’t need to be nervous,” he tried to reassure me, the hint of a smile playing on his lips.

I laughed, a small, anxious sound that did little to alleviate my tension. “I’m a bundle of nerves,” I confessed, my voice barely a whisper.

Our interaction was professional, stiff, a complete one-eighty from the ease and warmth that had characterized our encounter the night before. The contrast was jarring, only adding to the knot of anxiety twisting in my stomach. But this was work, and we both seemed intent on keeping our personal lives separate from our professional roles. I knew that was how it should be but still a part of me yearned for the intimacy we’d shared, the sense of connection that had been so potent and real.

Tony’s professional demeanor continued as he moved behind his desk, creating an added layer of distance between us. He rested his hands on the polished wood surface, his gaze steady and serious.

“Jude,” he started, his voice carrying that same professional tone, “as you know, the interview process for the OR manager’s position has been quite rigorous. We had a number of excellent candidates.”

He paused for a moment, his gaze not leaving mine. The weight of his words hung in the air, thick and charged with anticipation. I held my breath, waiting for him to continue.

“However, one candidate stood out amongst the rest. Someone who displayed exceptional knowledge, commitment,

and a deep understanding of what the role requires.”

His words were meticulous, carefully chosen, and delivered with a degree of authority that seemed almost foreign considering our recent intimacy.

“I discussed this with Dr. McCann and we both agree,” Tony said, “your performance in the interview was impressive, Jude. Your answers were thoughtful, demonstrating a high level of competence and understanding of the role. More importantly, your track record speaks volumes of your commitment and dedication to your work. And that’s to say nothing of the glowing manner in which your colleagues speak of you.”

My heart was pounding in my chest, thudding against my ribcage like a drum. The conversation felt surreal, as though I were floating in a dream, my senses heightened by nervous anticipation. For a moment, Tony’s commanding façade faltered, replaced by the warm smile that I’d come to know so well.

“Congratulations, Jude,” he said, his voice firm but the glimmer in his eyes revealing his delight. “You are the new OR manager.”

I was momentarily stunned, the news too good to comprehend. “Thank you. Thank you so much,” I nearly gushed.

Tony chuckled, his laughter warm and contagious. “This is good news, it’s worth celebrating. Anyway, I won’t keep you. Ms. Waller from HR will be in touch via email with next steps. For now, I’ll give you a chance to let the good news sink in.”

“Thank you again,” I said, the words seeming nearly not enough for the news I’d just been given.

“It was your hard work that brought you to this point. All we did was notice what was clearly there.”

With that, he opened the door to his office to dismiss me.

“Congratulations, again,” he said, his voice returning to the professional tone. I nodded, thanked him again, and made my way to the exit. As the door shut behind me, I could hardly

believe my ears. I was the new OR manager. I felt like I was walking on air.

Despite my joy at hearing the news, his abrupt dismissal from the night before still lingered in my mind. There was an unfinished tension between us, a personal connection that had been placed on hold during our professional discussion. Although I was thrilled that I had gotten the job, I still felt an underlying current of uncertainty. I wasn't sure where we stood on a personal level, and that thought was an ominous cloud on an otherwise sunny day.

A pang of disappointment hit me, but I was quick to swallow it down.

I'm not going to spend a single second upset about him, not with this kind of news to celebrate.

I knew I was catching feelings for him that were raw and vibrant and altogether too potent. But I had a resilience inside me, a stubborn determination. If he was drawing lines, then so could I. I could squash those budding feelings, push them into the farthest corners of my mind.

"Fuck that guy," I whispered as the elevator doors shut, a small, pleased smile forming on my lips.

Emerging from the elevator on my floor, I could see Sally at her desk, her head bent over paperwork. With newfound vigor, I strode toward her, my triumph a shining beacon against the taint of Tony's coldness.

"Sally," I called out, my voice ringing through the quiet floor. As she looked up, I couldn't contain the grin spreading across my face.

Part of me wanted to play it cool, to deliver the news as if it were nothing at all.

No chance of that.

"I got the job!" I yelled, a wave of pure, undiluted joy washing over me. The sting of Tony's coldness was momentarily forgotten in the rush of my victory. The triumph was mine, and nothing, not even a handsome, arrogant doctor, could take it away from me.

CHAPTER 21

Sally's squeal of joy reverberated through the space, turning heads and causing smiles to bloom across the room. The energy was infectious, a wave of excitement flooding the normally calm environment. I stood, shocked for a moment before a laugh erupted from my chest, my surprise morphing into shared elation.

"We're going to celebrate, Jude!" Sally declared, her arms wrapped around me in a bear hug. "You bet your ass we're going to celebrate!" The warm scent of her vanilla perfume filled my nose. I nodded, grinning despite the pang of regret at the back of my mind.

I had always hoped that Tony would be part of this celebration, that he would share in the joy of my achievement. Instead, he was a ghost, his strange behavior the night before and the cold demeanor he'd exhibited during the meeting hanging heavy in my mind. The chill of his aloofness was confusing and disheartening, and I couldn't help but feel a little heartbroken.

But I refused to let his actions dampen the thrill of my success. I was the new OR Manager, an accomplishment and a victory I'd worked so hard for. Tony was a disappointment, but he was one disappointment in a sea of achievements.

I pushed thoughts of him aside and nodded at Sally. "I'm down for a celebration," I said, determination lending strength to my words. "Let's go all out."

“Let’s hit up Mellow tonight,” Sally suggested, her eyes twinkling with excitement. Mellow was a hip bar, known for its artistic cocktails and trendy ambiance. I nodded, a smile curling up the edges of my lips. The idea of drowning my mixed feelings in a cocktail or two sounded rather appealing.

But before we started making plans, I could see Sally’s gaze becoming more scrutinizing. She seemed to have a sixth sense for things, or maybe I was just easy to read. Either way, she furrowed her brows as she asked, “Jude, is everything okay?” her voice laced with concern. I was quick to plaster a reassuring smile on my face, shaking my head dismissively.

“I’m fine,” I replied, perhaps a little too quickly. I could see the doubt in her eyes, but she chose not to press the issue.

“Okay, if you say so,” she finally said, though her voice held a hint of uncertainty. She nodded, as if confirming to herself one last time what she had planned for the evening. “We’re going to let loose tonight. This is your moment.”

She was right. This *was* my moment. My success. I wasn’t going to let thoughts of Tony interfere any longer. I decided I was going to let go and truly celebrate. And if in the process, I managed to forget about Tony’s strange behavior, well, that would just be the cherry on top.

As the workday drew to a close, my mind was a whirlwind of emotion. The hospital’s steady hum of activity faded into the background as I finished my final notes. It was strange to think that soon, I would be in a different role entirely, out of the OR and behind a desk.

I walked to my car, my steps and the sound of Sadie’s leash clinking against her collar echoing in the nearly empty parking lot. As I slid into the driver’s seat, I took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. The familiar scent of my car—a mix of new leather, a hint of coffee spills, and a lavender air freshener—was comforting in a constant whirl of change.

I drove home on autopilot, my mind still processing the events of the day. I’d landed the job I’d worked so hard for, and yet I couldn’t shake off the image of Tony’s cold, unwavering demeanor.

Once home, I let out a sigh of relief. I set my bag on the kitchen counter and made my way to my room, Sadie trailing behind me. The house felt a bit emptier, quieter, and I couldn't help but feel the pang of disappointment once again.

Shaking my head, I told myself to let it go. Tonight was about celebrating my achievement, not about a man who couldn't make up his mind. I was about to start a new chapter in my life, and I was determined not to let anything dampen my excitement.

With renewed resolve, I headed to my room to get ready for the night out, Sadie bounding ahead of me.

Taking a break from my primping routine, I picked up my phone and dialed my parents. The line picked up after a couple of rings, my mother's voice filtering through the speaker. We said our hellos, but it didn't take long at all for Mom to sense that something was off.

"Jude? Is everything alright, dear?" she asked, her tone laced with worry. My dad's muffled voice echoed in the background, a mirror of her concern.

"Yes, everything's fine, Mom." I couldn't help but grin. "I have some exciting news," I quickly reassured her. But my words didn't seem to have the soothing effect I had hoped for.

Her voice sharpened a touch, "You're sure, darling? You sound a bit off."

"Just a bit tired, Mom. But the news will reassure you. I got the job!" I rushed the words out, trying to bring the conversation back on track. "I'm the new OR Manager!"

There was a pause on the other side, and then a combined whoop of joy. "Jude, that's fantastic!" my father exclaimed, his voice crackling with glee. My mother chimed in with her own congratulations, her words tumbling out in a rush. Their pride washed over me, filling my heart with warmth.

"Oh, honey! That's fantastic news!" Mom gushed, the pride in her voice making my heart swell.

"Knew you had it in the bag, pumpkin," Dad added, his voice so clear I could almost see his wide, beaming grin.

“Thank you, guys. It’s a big step up,” I admitted, my chest heavy with a sense of accomplishment and responsibility. “But it might mean I have to postpone my trip for Christmas...”

A disappointed ‘oh’ echoed down the line, but it was quickly replaced by understanding.

“It’s a big job, sweetheart. We understand,” Mom assured me, the love in her voice soothing away my guilt.

“Work’s work,” Dad added. “We’ll miss you like crazy, but it’s no small consolation to know that you’ll be kicking butt at your new job.”

Their words went a long way. All the same, I’d been really looking forward to seeing them.

“I’m so sorry about not coming home, though,” I added, my voice small. I hated disappointing them, especially since I knew they’d been looking forward to my visit.

“Nonsense,” my mother dismissed my apology, and I could practically hear the wave of her hand. “This is wonderful news, Jude, our little girl’s moving up in the world. Well, even further up than she already has, that is. We can always make other plans for a visit.”

Dad chimed in. “How about we come to see you for Christmas, sweetie? ” His suggestion made my heart flutter with happiness.

The offer was more than perfect. My eyes twinkled at the thought of spending Christmas with my parents. “That sounds amazing. I can’t wait,” I replied, my voice thick with excitement.

It had turned out to be quite the day—a new job, a night of celebration, and Christmas with my parents to look forward to. It almost made me forget about the Tony-sized cloud that had been hanging over me, almost.

“Anyway, I should get going. Sally and I are going out for some drinks to celebrate.”

“You deserve it,” Mom said. “Have fun and tell Sally hello for us.”

Dad cleared his throat. “And call a cab if you don’t feel okay driving. Better safe than sorry.”

I couldn’t help but grin at my father’s parental caution.

“I will, Dad. And I’m looking forward to seeing you both so much. Love you,” I finished.

With the thrill of the news and the joy of the conversation still buzzing through me, I made my way to my wardrobe. I pulled out a simple, long-sleeved red dress that hugged my figure just right, a pair of knee-high leather boots, and a fitted black coat. Nothing too over the top but enough to make me feel a bit special.

Standing before the mirror, I studied my reflection. I decided to apply a bit more makeup than usual, accentuating my eyes and adding a dash of color to my lips.

Despite my excitement for the evening, I couldn’t ignore the uneasy feeling in my stomach. Nausea had been a constant, uninvited companion over the past few days. I frowned, hoping I wasn’t coming down with something. I couldn’t afford to get sick, not now. I was stepping into a new role, a new chapter, and calling in sick wasn’t an option.

Brushing away the thought, I focused on the night ahead. It was time to celebrate my victory, put aside my confusion and hurt over Tony, and remind myself that there were people in my life who cared for me and shared my joy. Tonight was about new beginnings and the promise of brighter days.

I arrived at Mellow and scanned the place for Sally.

Nestled in the heart of Denver’s River North Art District, Mellow was a trendy sanctuary that married urban chic with a dash of relaxed elegance. With a brick and industrial steel exterior, it stood out among the art studios and vintage boutiques that populated the hip neighborhood.

Edgy artworks from local artists adorned the exposed brick walls, infusing the space with vibrant hues. The open concept kitchen wafted tempting aromas of creative cuisines, and the low, ambient music in the background perfectly complemented

the lively chatter. It was a popular hangout spot for Denver's young professionals and trendsetters.

Truth be told, I felt a little out of my element there among the hip, young crowd. Aging was a funny thing when it came to such subjects, I'd realized over the years. One minute you were young and carefree, the next you were stepping into your forties, into middle age.

It took me a moment to find Sally, but I soon spotted her at the bar with a cocktail close at hand. She stood up as I approached, her eyes widening appreciatively.

"Well, don't you clean up nice," she said with a tone of friendly teasing.

I let out a light chuckle, giving her a playful shove. "Look who's talking. You could give any Insta model a run for her money," I replied, eyeing her stylish ensemble.

Sally had opted for high-waisted black pants and a striking silver top that shimmered under the restaurant's soft lights. Her short hair was styled in loose curls and she had donned a bold red lip color that complemented her outfit perfectly.

"Think so?" she responded, striking a dramatic, hip-cocked pose that had me laughing.

We decided to sit at the bar, enjoying the bustling ambiance. Sally immediately ordered another cocktail, her usual margarita, but I declined.

"Just a club soda for me," I told the bartender. I also kept my dinner order simple and bland, choosing a grilled chicken salad in case my stomach decided to act up.

Sally raised an eyebrow at me, noticing my out of character food and drink choices. "Not feeling well?" she asked, a note of concern creeping into her voice.

I shrugged nonchalantly, not wanting to put a damper on our celebration. "Just a bit of nausea, nothing serious. Probably just nerves but I don't want to risk it," I explained, trying to reassure her.

“Well, if you need anything or want to go home early, just let me know,” she said, concern still evident in her voice.

“I’ll be fine. I’m sure it really is just nerves from everything that’s been going on lately.”

As the evening continued to unfold, my attention was successfully diverted from phantom figures to the vibrant atmosphere and the infectious energy of my friend. I felt lighter, freer, the excitement of my new job and the joy of her companionship overshadowing any lingering and unnecessary sadness.

As we were in the middle of a raucous laughter about a particularly ridiculous holiday decoration Sally had seen in her neighborhood, our conversation was pleasantly interrupted. A pair of handsomely charming men around Sally’s age asked if they could join us. Grinning, Sally gave me a mischievous look, silently asking for permission. The bitter pill of disappointment regarding Tony was fading, and in its place, the prospect of a night of fun and maybe even a touch of harmless flirtation had its appeal.

“Sure, why not?” I said, offering them an encouraging smile.

The taller of the two slid onto the stool next to Sally. His wavy chestnut hair, peppered with streaks of sun-bleached blonde, fell haphazardly over his deep-set, cerulean eyes. His devilish smile suggested a man accustomed to getting his way. “I’m Jake,” he announced with a flash of unnervingly white teeth.

His friend took the seat next to me. He was slightly shorter but broader, with a mess of curly black hair and eyes a few shades darker than a good cup of coffee. There was a certain swagger in his demeanor, a casualness that could easily be mistaken for arrogance. “I’m Zach,” he said, leaning back in his seat and surveying the room with a calculated air of confidence.

Despite their overt cockiness, their charm was undeniable. There was an ease to their conversation, a practiced smoothness in their compliments, suggesting they were no

strangers to the situation. Yet even amidst the laughter and playful banter, my mind kept wandering back to Tony. I forced a smile, reminding myself to be present, to enjoy the night for what it was.

Time seemed to slip by as the chatter continued, the men proving to be far more invested in the impromptu double date than I was. Zach was undeterred by my lukewarm responses, continuing his attempts at flirtation with unwavering perseverance. The final straw came when he leaned in close and moved his hand to the small of my back. His breath was laced with the scent of whiskey as he deemed it appropriate to label me a “MILF.” The crude comment left a sour taste in my mouth and my opinion of him plummeted even further.

Meanwhile, Sally was falling under Jake’s spell, her giggles growing louder and more frequent as her cocktail glass emptied and refilled. I could see the tipsiness coloring her cheeks and brightening her eyes. Despite Jake’s equally cocky demeanor, he seemed to be treating Sally with a respect that Zach evidently lacked. Or at least, that’s what it looked like from where I was sitting.

Eventually Zach’s drunken pawing and sophomoric attempts at flirtation became too much for me. I excused myself under the pretense of needing the restroom, leaving the group at the bar and welcoming the brief respite from the relentless and increasingly off-putting advances. I needed a moment alone to regroup, to shake off the unease Zach had triggered, and return with a renewed focus on celebrating my night and not letting one boorish man ruin it.

As I gave myself a moment to collect my thoughts in the bathroom, I tried to shake off the creeping irritation. Sure, Zach was a bit full of himself, but perhaps I could let my guard down a little. For Sally’s sake, at least. I reapplied my lipstick, took a deep breath, and decided to be more open-minded when I returned to the bar. After all, putting up with some annoying flirting from an obnoxious drunken bro was more than doable if it meant Sally could have a little fun.

However, when I got back, a strange sight greeted me. The seats were vacant, the men’s drinks half-finished and Sally’s

purse abandoned on the barstool.

Frowning, I flagged the bartender. “Where’s my friend?” I asked, a tinge of worry to my voice.

He jerked his thumb toward the back of the establishment. “Went out back with those guys.”

“Is there a smoking area or something?” I asked, already feeling a twist of worry knot in my stomach.

“Nah, just an alley,” he replied as he wiped down the bar. The casualness of his response did nothing to alleviate my concern.

I grabbed my bag and Sally’s and placed my card on the counter. “Keep it. I’ll be back for it,” I said, already striding toward the back door. I knew I needed to make sure Sally was okay. My heart pounded in my chest, an overwhelming sense of worry overshadowing any previous annoyance with Zach and his buddy.

CHAPTER 22

TONY

From my spot in the shadowed corner of the bar, my gaze tracked Jude. It was normal for me to be unable to take my eyes off of her. But in those moments, it was more than mere attraction that was causing me to stare.

Her laughter, a sound that tinkled like wind chimes in a gentle breeze, floated across the crowded room and I felt a smile tugging at my lips. She looked radiant, glowing in a way I'd never seen her glow before. But then, my attention veered to the two dudes accompanying her and Sally.

They were cocky and brimming with confidence, their smiles suave and practiced. I knew that game, hell, I'd practically invented it. As the night progressed, their moves became bolder, hands resting casually on backs and wrapping around waists, lips whispering words intended to charm.

My gut churned when one of the guys sidled closer to Jude, his hand falling on her lower back. My jaw set, and my hands balled into fists under the table. I was hit with a possessive urge so powerful, it was all I could do not to stride over there and rip his hand from her.

“Don't you think so, Tony?”

Sitting across from me was a woman any man would consider himself lucky to be with. Her name was Melissa, a total knockout pharma rep, brimming with the kind of effervescence and energy one would expect from a woman in her early twenties. Golden blonde hair framed a heart-shaped face, her vivid blue eyes sparkling with youthful exuberance.

She had an alluring figure, clad in a little black dress that hugged her curves in all the right places.

But she wasn't Jude.

I glanced over at Melissa, who was looking at me expectantly. "Sorry, darling," I said, my eyes flicking back to Jude for a second, then back to her. "I got a bit distracted. What were you saying?"

She repeated her question, something about whether I preferred summer or winter, but my mind was somewhere else. Even as I gave her a stock answer, I couldn't shake off the nagging feeling of possessiveness, the powerful tug of jealousy. The Tony Montivais I knew would scoff at such sentimentality. But the man who'd shared more than a few passionate moments with Jude, the man who had tasted her lips and felt her warmth, was on the brink of a meltdown.

I sat in my corner, my fingers wrapped around my drink, my date's words washing over me like white noise. I had no right to feel that way, not after my own actions, and yet I did. I was locked in a strange dance of torment and longing, watching Jude with another man, and each beat of my heart echoed with an intensity that surprised even me.

"Tony?"

My date with Melissa was supposed to be a distraction, a way to forget Jude and the pull I felt toward her. But all it had done was to bring into sharper focus what I was missing. The youthful beauty sitting across from me was no match for the woman who'd unwittingly ensnared my heart. As the night wore on, I found my mind wandering, my eyes drawn to Jude again and again, Melissa fading into the background like one of the trendy pieces of art that decorated the walls of the bar.

"Well, are you going to tell me what's so damn fascinating at the bar?" my date huffed, crossing her arms and scowling at me. Her icy blue eyes were shooting daggers and quite honestly, I couldn't have cared less.

I flicked a glance at her before returning my gaze to the spot where Jude had disappeared moments before. "Can't say

there's anything in particular," I replied, a half-smirk tugging at my lips. I knew my tone was dismissive, but frankly, I was past the point of giving a damn.

"Well, then maybe you should pay a little more attention to your date," Melissa snarled, and I blinked at her in surprise. Shaking my head, I chuckled, the sound low and humorless.

"My apologies, Melissa," I offered, not feeling an ounce of remorse for my lack of attention. I opened my mouth to offer an excuse, one that would keep her sitting across from me. However, as I tried to come up with the words, I realized that feigning interest in this young woman wasn't possible in the slightest. There was only one person who had my attention, and she was seated at the bar with another man.

"You know what? It appears I'm just not in the mood tonight."

With that, I turned my gaze back to the bar, searching for Jude, the woman who seemed to have taken hold of me like no other ever had. I heard Melissa huff again, and the next thing I knew, she was standing, pulling her little black purse onto her shoulder.

"Well, if that's how it's going to be, I have better things to do with my time," she declared, her tone as icy as those blue eyes of hers. I offered her a nonchalant shrug and a dry, "Suit yourself," in return. I didn't even watch as she stormed away, my gaze once again firmly fixated on the bar.

Something about the scene had immediately put me on edge. Her friend Sally, who I recognized from the hospital, had been relatively composed all evening, but was now swaying slightly on her feet, her eyes a little too unfocused for someone who'd only had a couple of cocktails. As if on cue, the two schmucks who had been hanging around them all night started whispering in her ear, gesturing toward the back door.

A growl had started building in my throat. Something was off about the whole thing. Sally shouldn't have been that drunk yet. I had been paying attention and she hadn't had that much. What if they spiked her drink?

I pushed off from my table, leaving my untouched drink behind, and made my way toward the group as they headed to the door. If those two thought they could take advantage of Sally, they were about to learn just how wrong they were. As I made my way over, however, the familiar sight of Jude appearing from the hallway leading to the bathroom froze me in mid-step.

Once she made her way back to the bar, she spoke briefly with the bartender. I noticed her face pale, her eyes widening in what I took for alarm. Before I had time to process what was happening, she'd grabbed her bag and was heading toward the back door.

Another sudden surge of protective instinct had me moving once again, navigating quickly toward her through the crowd of patrons. I had no plan, just a gut feeling that she needed someone in her corner.

"Jude, wait," I called out, my hand extending to gently touch her shoulder.

She spun around, surprise lighting up her features, her eyes flashing. "Tony? What are you doing here?"

I found myself at a loss for words, my rehearsed explanations fleeing from my mind at the sight of her. I shook off the question.

"I saw those two guys leaving with Sally. I didn't like the way it looked."

I gave her hand a comforting squeeze, although I couldn't say I felt much better myself. For a brief moment, I contemplated having us split up to cover more ground, but the thought of letting Jude wander alone in the alley nixed that idea.

As we turned the corner, the sight that met us made my blood boil. The two men from the bar were steering a clearly disoriented Sally out of the alley, her protests falling on deaf ears.

"No, no," Sally's voice was weak and slurred, but there was an unmistakable edge of fear. "I... I need to go back... to

find Jude.”

One of the men gripped her arm tightly, his fingers digging into her flesh. She winced, trying to pull away, but he held on. “You’re fine, sweetheart,” he said, his voice filled with condescension.

Fury surged through me like a tidal wave. I stepped forward, Jude still clutching my hand, and barked at them, “Get your hands off her. Now.”

Before I could react, Jude released my hand and stormed toward the men. She held her head high and her shoulders back, her fiery eyes blazing with indignant fury.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” she spat, her voice a mixture of rage and disbelief. “You drugged her!”

The one holding Sally’s arm laughed, a cruel and guttural sound. “Fuck off,” he sneered. “Your friend said she wanted to go with us.”

Sally shook her head feebly, her eyes wide and terrified. “N-no, I didn’t,” she stuttered.

Jude reached out to pull Sally away, but the second man stepped in front of her, blocking her path. His smug grin was infuriating, his eyes glinting with malicious joy. My fists clenched at my sides, itching to wipe that grin off his face.

I saw Jude’s body tense up, ready to launch herself at the man if necessary. I admired her bravery, but it was a situation that could turn dangerous in the blink of an eye. I wouldn’t let her risk it.

“Step aside,” I said, my voice low and dangerous. “She’s leaving with us.” I moved in front of Jude, putting myself between her and the men. “I suggest you get the fuck out of here before I call the police,” I growled, my voice echoing in the alleyway.

The one not holding Sally chuckled, a menacing sound in the quiet alley. “You really think you can take us both on?” he taunted, rolling his shoulders back in a show of machismo.

I cracked a smirk, leaning casually against the brick wall behind me. “Absolutely,” I replied confidently, my gaze unwavering. “I can beat both your asses without even breaking a sweat.”

Meanwhile, Jude pulled out her phone and began snapping pictures of the men, the flash illuminating their surprised faces. The one not holding Sally squinted at her. “What the hell are you doing?” he demanded.

“Evidence,” Jude replied nonchalantly. “For the cops, who are on their way.”

The man’s face blanched. He whipped his head around to his friend, who let go of Sally as if she were a hot coal. He took a swing at me, but I’d been expecting it. I dodged his fist with ease, sidestepping as he stumbled forward, off balance. I was just about to put him in a chokehold when suddenly, both men turned tail and started sprinting away from us down the alleyway.

“Fucking cowards!” Jude shouted after them, her voice echoing around us.

For a moment, we just stood there, staring at the retreating figures. The adrenaline was still coursing through my veins, my fists itching to throw a punch that never landed. Beside me, Jude sagged against the wall, her breaths coming in shaky gasps. But as I looked over at her, her eyes met mine, and I could see the fire still burning bright within them. I couldn’t help but admire her even more in that moment. She was far stronger than I had initially given her credit for.

Sally had collapsed onto the dirty ground the moment the men released her, a small whimper escaping her lips. Instantly, Jude was at her side, helping to prop her friend up against the wall. For a moment, I thought about giving chase to the fleeing men, maybe getting a look at their license plate or some other form of identification. But then I realized they had bought drinks at the bar. The bartender would undoubtedly remember them, and there was likely a paper trail not to mention the photos Jude had taken.

I shook off my thoughts and turned my attention back to Sally. Crouching down beside her, I checked her over quickly. Her pupils were dilated and she was clearly disoriented, definitive signs of being drugged. But as far as I could tell she had no other maladies. Still, she would need to be examined to be certain.

“Jude, we need to get her to the hospital,” I said looking up at her. Our eyes met, Jude’s full of fear and concern for her friend. I tried to offer her a reassuring smile, but I was seething on the inside.

I felt a cold fury settle in my chest, a promise to myself that I would do everything in my power to make sure those men faced the consequences of their actions.

CHAPTER 23

“Sally, you need to understand. They can’t just get away with this,” I pleaded. Tony was nodding in agreement beside me.

Sally was clearly confused, her protests weak and incoherent. But I was relentless, and so was Tony. The fact that we’d had to convince her to contact the police made my blood boil. It was infuriating that the men who did this to her might get away with it if we didn’t take action.

“Yeah, they need to be held accountable. If not for you, then for the next woman they decide to target,” Tony added, his voice firm. I glanced at him and saw the anger simmering beneath his cool exterior.

It took some convincing, but Sally finally agreed, albeit hesitantly. The next hour was a blur of blue uniforms, flashing lights, and officers taking statements. EMTs had arrived and were giving Sally a quick once-over. Luckily, whatever they’d given her had only been a small dose, and she was becoming more coherent by the minute. Despite the chaos, I felt a sense of relief washing over me. We were doing the right thing, not just for Sally, but for every woman out there who might cross their path.

One of the officers asked if we knew the men’s identities. Unfortunately, they had paid cash at the bar, leaving us with no trace of them. Feeling a sense of dread, I quickly forwarded the pictures I had taken on my phone to the officer. We may not have had their names, but at least we had their faces. It wasn’t much, but it was a start.

Sally's sobs filled the night, echoing off the brick walls of the alleyway. She was in shock, tears streaming down her face, her body trembling. I wrapped my arms around her, my heart aching for her. Between the booze, the drugs, and what had happened, she was a mess and I couldn't blame her one bit.

Tony was comforting Sally in his own way, speaking to her softly, reassuring her that she would be okay. It was a side of him I had never seen before, a side I liked, even though I didn't want to admit it out loud and risk letting him think he was in the clear for how he'd treated me before.

As we sat there in the dim light, the cold air around us, I tried to keep my feelings in check, to focus on Sally, on her well-being. But I couldn't ignore the warmth that radiated from Tony. I couldn't ignore the comfort his presence provided. It felt improper, given the circumstances, but I welcomed the relief I felt from him being there.

After one last check from the EMTs, Sally was cleared to go home, no need for the hospital.

Tony's strong arms helped me guide Sally to my car. She was too weak to walk on her own, but between the two of us, we managed to get her inside.

"Thank you," I said, turning to Tony. I expected him to leave, to retreat back into the bar and leave us alone. But he didn't. Instead, he nodded, his eyes serious.

"I'll follow you home," he said, his voice low. "To help you get Sally inside."

I shook my head. "That's not necessary. I can handle it."

He looked at me, his eyes piercing through the darkness. "I know you can," he replied. "But I want to help. You don't have to do this alone."

Despite the turmoil of emotions whirling inside me, I found myself wanting his help. We had a common goal to ensure Sally's safety. And at that moment, it felt like the only thing that mattered.

As I drove home, I could see the constant presence of Tony's car in my rearview mirror. His headlights were a

comforting sight, reminding me that I wasn't alone. I knew that when we reached my house he would be there, ready to help me with Sally. And that thought brought me more comfort than I cared to admit.

As I drove through the quiet streets of Denver, Tony's car following behind, I began to lose myself in my thoughts. My mind went to the kindness and unexpected support he had shown. He was the kind of man worth dating, worth investing in. But he clearly didn't want that. I wasn't going to be just a friend with benefits to him, I deserved more than that. I would thank him and send him on his way, no matter how much it pained me.

When we reached my house, we worked together to get Sally inside and into the guest bedroom. Tony remained surprisingly quiet, respectful of the situation. As I began to undress Sally and help her into some comfortable clothes, I asked Tony to take Sadie out to the backyard. He gave a nod and disappeared down the hallway with Sadie trailing behind, looking back at me for approval that it was okay.

In the faint light of the room, I turned to Sally, now lying on the bed, her face pale. Her eyes fluttered open as I took her hand, assuring her that she was safe.

"I know," she murmured, a small smile playing on her lips. She tightened her grip on my hand, her eyes falling closed again. "You need to hold onto Tony, Jude," she said, her voice slurring a bit. "He's... he's a good dude."

I couldn't help but laugh at that, the irony not lost on me. Oh, if only Sally knew.

"I'll keep that in mind," I replied. "But you need to focus on getting some rest."

She nodded softly, her eyes still closed. Within seconds she was sleeping, her chest rising and falling with steady breaths.

After making sure Sally was tucked in, I made my way back to the living room, where Tony was waiting. He'd returned with Sadie from her trip outside and was standing

before my wall of family photos, his thumbs hooked into the front pockets of his jeans. The array of memories displayed was a colorful mosaic of joyful moments, pictures of me with my parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and even Sadie as a tiny, energetic puppy. As his eyes traced over the images, I noticed a softness in his gaze I hadn't seen before.

I could see a hint of sadness in his eyes, a reflection of what I felt inside. I knew I needed to thank him, to tell him how much his support meant. But as I opened my mouth to speak, I realized how difficult it was going to be to say goodbye.

"You've got a big family," he commented, his voice low.

I swallowed, feeling a lump forming in my throat. As much as I longed to share stories about the loved ones that adorned my wall, I knew I couldn't. I didn't want to give him more of myself if he wasn't willing to do the same. It would only lead to more heartache.

"Yeah," I said simply, crossing the room to stand next to him. Our reflections stared back at us from the polished glass of the photo frames, two figures standing side by side yet worlds apart.

I forced a smile on my face, even though it felt like my heart was breaking into a million pieces. "Tony," I began, keeping my voice steady, "thank you for your help tonight. You didn't have to do all that, but I'm grateful that you did."

I turned to face him, my gaze searching his. "I think it's time for you to go," I continued, moving toward the door and pulling it open. The cold night air filtered in, making me shiver.

As much as I wanted him to stay, as much as I longed for his warmth, I knew I needed to protect my heart. And that meant letting him go.

He didn't move nor did he look away from the photos on the wall. My heart pounded, and the silence in the room became deafening. I cleared my throat, hoping to break the tension, but he still didn't turn.

“Tony?” I ventured, my voice shaky.

His eyes once again met mine, and I was taken aback by the look in them. It was devoid of the desire he’d shown at the cabin or during our sleepover. The look was different, deeper, and I wasn’t quite sure what it meant.

The light from the living room lamp threw long shadows across his face, making his expression even more mysterious. “Jude,” he said, his voice heavy with something I couldn’t quite decipher.

He let out a deep breath and continued, “I owe you an apology. For the way I acted the other night, walking out like that. And for the way I acted at work. I was being an ass. I’m sorry.”

I nodded, acknowledging his apology. It was nice to hear him admit his mistake, but it didn’t really change anything. We were still at a standstill, both wanting different things. I needed to make sure he understood that.

“I appreciate your apology,” I began, maintaining eye contact with him. “But I have to be clear about something. I’m not interested in being a booty call, if that’s what you have in mind. I’m too old for that kind of thing.”

The words hung in the air, causing a shift between us.

The sudden laughter that escaped from Tony took me by surprise. I felt my brows furrow in confusion. “What’s so funny?” I asked, unable to hide the curiosity in my voice.

He shook his head, his laughter subsiding to chuckles. “I don’t know,” he admitted, grinning at me. “Just something about you saying ‘booty call’ is funny.”

Part of me wanted to scold him, to tell him this was a serious conversation. But instead, his laughter was infectious, and I found myself chuckling along with him. Despite the intensity of the situation, Tony always knew how to lighten the mood. It was one of the things I admired about him, even though his supercilious attitude could annoy me at times, as if it were a way for him to stay detached from any situation that threatened to become too deep, too real.

His laughter died down, and his eyes softened as he looked at me. The amusement in his gaze was replaced by a sincerity that made my breath hitch. “I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t thinking that at first,” he admitted, and my heart sank a little. “But now, I can’t stop thinking about you, Jude. And I think I want more.”

The word ‘think’ caused a weird flip in my stomach. It was too uncertain, too tentative. I tried to push aside the doubts gnawing at me, but it was impossible.

“You *think* you want more?”

He stepped closer. “No, that’s not what I meant. I don’t think, I *know*.”

The certainty in his voice was enough to give me pause, to make my heart skip a beat with excitement.

“Well if you’re sure you want to try, then I’d like that too.”

The relief that flashed across his face was enough to make me forget my reservations. We took a step toward each other, and in that moment, everything else seemed to blur into insignificance. I felt a new kind of spark, a sense of rightness that I hadn’t felt before. And for the first time in a long while, I felt a glimmer of hope for what lay ahead.

The world around us seemed to quiet, leaving only the sounds of our breathing and the steady thumping of my heart in my ears. His gaze was heavy, anchored in the swirling emotions reflected in his eyes. I felt like I was standing on the edge of a precipice, ready to leap into the unknown.

A part of me screamed for caution, reminding me of the heartache and pain that could result. But a louder part, the part of me that had been longing for this, was shouting down the voices of reason. I didn’t want to stop, didn’t want to think about the consequences. In that moment, all I wanted was Tony.

Our lips met with an intensity that stole my breath. The kiss was passionate, filled with a desperate need, as if we were trying to convey all of our unsaid emotions through that single

act. His hands were on my waist, pulling me closer, while mine found their way into his hair, anchoring him to me.

When we finally broke apart, gasping for breath, I saw a mirror of my own feelings reflected in Tony's eyes. They held a raw honesty that made my heart clench. We had crossed that line, and just as I'd thought, there was no going back. And to my own surprise, I found that I wouldn't have it any other way.

CHAPTER 24

TONY

The kiss rocked me to my core, setting my senses ablaze. It wasn't just the physical aspect of it, though that was certainly overwhelming. It was the tidal wave of emotion, a mixture of desire, longing, fear, and something else... something deeper I had never felt before. It was terrifying and exhilarating all at once. I was wading into uncharted territory, allowing myself to feel something more than just physical attraction.

As our lips moved together, I allowed my mind to wander, to consider what it would be like to be with Jude. Not just physically, but emotionally, spiritually. Would we continue to laugh together? Would we argue? Would she comfort me in my moments of weakness and stand by my side in times of strength?

The more I thought about it, the more I realized that I wanted to find out. I wanted to explore this new terrain, to see where this journey with Jude would lead me.

In the silence of the room, as our lips finally parted, I stared into her eyes. They were filled with a warmth that made my heart pound hard in my chest.

It was more than just a kiss. It was a promise, and a pledge, signaling the start of something terrifying and wonderful all at once. As I gazed at Jude, a single thought solidified in my mind. This woman, with her fire, spirit, and vulnerability, might just be the one for me.

“You going to stare at me all night?” she asked, a coy smile on those sensual lips. “Or are you going to kiss me?”

“Oh, I’m going to kiss you,” I replied. “But you can’t blame a man for staring at a face like that.”

The kiss evolved from something soft and exploratory to an intense, all-consuming need. It was as if a dam had been broken, and all our pent-up feelings were gushing out, demanding to be felt, to be acknowledged. Our lips moved together in a fiery dance, tongues twining, each taste, each touch igniting a spark that quickly turned into a raging inferno.

Jude tasted like a mix of sweet and spice, her lips earnest and inviting. Her hands roamed my back, sending shivers down my spine. Every move she made, every sound she made, was sending me into overdrive.

I picked her up and she wrapped her legs around my waist, her arms tightening around my neck as our kiss deepened. Each step I took toward the bedroom was filled with anticipation. The hallway seemed to stretch on forever until finally, the bedroom door was within reach. I kicked it all the way open, our lips never parting, our bodies never breaking contact.

I could feel the heat radiating off her, could feel her heart racing against my chest. She was a whirlwind of passion and heat, and I was completely caught up in her. The air around us crackled with intensity, the passion between us nearly unbearable.

Her hands slipped under my shirt, her fingers tracing the muscles of my back. Every touch was like a brand—burning me, marking me. The need to have her, to be inside her, was agonizing.

As I set her down on the bed, I realized this wasn’t just lust, it was something more, something much deeper. The room was filled with an electric charge, a crackling energy that had everything to do with the woman beneath me.

The anticipation was almost too much to take as I leaned in to continue our steamy exchange. With every beat of my heart,

I realized this was just the beginning of our exploration. Our journey was far from over; it was just getting started.

Our kisses grew in intensity, leaving no room for words. Her lips were like a sweet flame, warming and enticing, consuming and addicting. I found my hands wandering, tracing the curves of her body through the fabric of her dress, every touch eliciting a sweet sigh from her lips.

Jude reciprocated, her fingers deftly undoing the buttons of my shirt, tracing paths along my chest, leaving trails of fiery desire in their wake. The world narrowed down to just the two of us, only the sound of our breath, the feel of her body against mine.

Her hands found their way to my belt, a coy smile playing on her lips as she undid it. It was a simple action, but it was filled with so much seduction, so much anticipation. She pushed my shirt off my shoulders, her hands roaming over my exposed skin, sending shivers of desire coursing through my veins.

“Are you sure about this?” I managed to say between heated kisses, my voice barely a whisper. I needed her to be sure, to want it as much as I did.

In response, she gave me a look that was full of desire and determination, her blue eyes dark with passion. “More than anything,” she said, pulling me back in, the promise of the night ahead taking hold.

In the dim light of her bedroom, we lost ourselves in each other, the boundaries blurring, the world outside forgotten. Only Jude and I, in a dance as old as time, yet feeling new and exhilarating with every passing second.

She placed her hands on my chest, a sly grin forming on those perfect lips as something appeared in her mind.

“Sit down.”

“Someone’s bossy,” I replied with a grin of my own.

I liked where this was going. We kissed once more as she guided me into a seated position on the side of the bed. She

dropped gently to her knees, her hands on my chest once more as she swept them down to my waist.

Jude licked her lips as she undid my pants, my cock springing out into her hands. She bit her lip, her eyes flicking up to mine, then down to my manhood in her grasp. I watched as she leaned in, placing her lips against my balls and kissing them gently, her touch making its way from there to the base of my cock. One kiss, then another, then another, and with each, she made her way further up my length.

Once she was at the top, she covered my head in soft licks before opening her mouth and taking me inside, wrapping around me like a sheath. She smiled as she sucked me, her delicate fingers gliding up and down my shaft.

I groaned with pleasure, slipping my hand into her thick hair and guiding her along my shaft. The sight of Jude with a mouthful of my cock was almost too sexy to bear, and it took some serious effort not to release, not to erupt in her mouth and watch as she drank every last drop of me.

“That feel good?” she asked, taking me out of her mouth for long enough to speak.

“*Muy bueno*,” I said. “Perfect. But there’s only one thing I can think about right now...”

With that, I gently guided her off my cock, my length falling out of her mouth. Once she was standing, I wasted no time stripping Jude out of her clothes, leaving her totally bare, her gorgeous body on full display.

“God, you’re like a work of art,” I said, shaking my head in disbelief of the beauty before me.

“You’ve already got me naked,” she replied. “No need for more smooth talk.”

“I’m speaking from the heart, no smooth talk. Now, come here...”

I placed my hands on her hips, guiding her down onto my lap. Jude spread her legs as she sat, bringing the glistening, pink line of her pussy toward my cock. Once she was right

over top of me, she lowered herself down, my head vanishing inside of her, followed by the inches of my length.

God, she felt like heaven. Her silken walls stretched to accommodate me, her face contorting into a tense expression of pleasure, soft moans pouring from her lips. I explored her entire body with my hands, my touch traveling from her hips to her belly to her breasts, her heartbeat thudding no matter where I touched her.

Once she was bottomed out, I put my hands onto that perfect, round ass of hers, guiding her into a slow, steady riding motion. Pleasure shot up and down my cock as she rode me, her moans more and more insistent, her hands grabbing my muscles as I guided her back and forth.

I was able to tell by the sounds that came from her and the way her cheeks reddened that she was right on the edge of orgasm. Her breasts bounced in front of me, and I kept my hands on her ass, pushing her in the way I knew would make her come.

“Come for me,” I spoke, my words a demand. “Now.”

She nodded, her eyes winced shut. Jude’s mouth opened and she pulled in one more gasp before her body clenched, her muscles going taut as she bucked hard one last time, the orgasm blasting through her. I gave myself a moment to enjoy the sight of her coming before letting loose, allowing myself to release, my cock draining deep inside of her.

Afterward, Jude fell forward, her head on my shoulder. I wrapped my arms around her, keeping her warm body close. We stayed like that for a time before she collapsed at my side.

We laid together, skin on skin, the quiet humming of the night a lullaby around us. Sadie’s soft snores punctuated the silence from her spot on the floor nearby. Jude was nestled against my chest, her breath warm against my skin, her hand loosely splayed over my heart.

I couldn’t help but replay our past moments in my mind, our bodies intertwined, the whisper of her name on my lips, her touch setting my senses on fire. A part of me wondered if

I've made a mistake, one that pushed us over the edge, from casual lovers to something much more complicated.

But as I looked at her curled up against me, eyes closed in peaceful slumber, I realized I couldn't have stopped it if I'd tried. She'd woven herself into the fabric of my life in a way no one else had ever done before.

With her hair splayed over my chest and her body a perfect fit against mine, the fear was replaced with a strange sense of calm. This wasn't a mistake. This was right. This felt like home.

"What's on your mind?" Jude mumbled sleepily, her voice pulling me from my thoughts.

Her question hung in the silence for a moment. I knew I could tell her everything, all the fears, the uncertainties, but instead, I chose to keep it light, not wanting to disrupt the peacefulness of the moment.

"Can I stay the night?" I asked, a faint smile tugging at my lips.

She lifted her head to look at me, her eyes sparkling in the muted light. A smile formed on her lips. "Yes," she said softly, laying her head back on my chest. "Of course."

Relief flooded through me, washing away any residual uncertainties. As sleep began to pull me under, I tightened my arms around her, holding her close. We fell asleep, wrapped up in each other, in the silent assurance of a shared tomorrow.

CHAPTER 25

The soft rustling of movement stirred me from my deep slumber. The faint light of dawn peeked through the curtains, bathing the room in a gentle glow. I sat up, looking over at Tony sprawled out on the bed, the sheets barely covering his lower body. He looked so peaceful, so beautiful in the quiet morning light, that I had to resist the urge to crawl back in beside him, to forget the world for a while longer.

Before I could give the matter too much more thought, I realized that Sadie wasn't in the room. The noise coming from the kitchen meant Sally must've gotten up. I was certain Sadie had heard her and went out to investigate. I slipped out of the bed as quietly as possible, not wanting to disturb Tony's rest. The morning air was cool against my skin, raising goosebumps. Wrapping a robe around myself, I tied it securely and left the room, glancing back at the bed one last time.

My gaze lingered on Tony's sleeping form, the morning light catching on the lines and planes of his body, creating a play of shadow and light. His chest rose and fell rhythmically, the soft breaths sounding like the sweetest symphony.

His dark hair was a tousled mess, giving him an irresistible boyish charm that contrasted strikingly with his strong, rugged features. His stubbled jawline, his firm lips slightly parted in sleep, the strong sweep of his nose—he was an intoxicating blend of hard and soft, manly yet vulnerable in his slumber.

The faint rays of dawn streaming in through the half-opened blinds cast a warm, golden light on his olive skin, accentuating the smattering of freckles on his shoulders and

arms, the muscles so inviting, so strong, I had to force myself to not crawl back into bed and trace their contours with my fingers.

When I'd drunk my fill of the sight of him, I turned away and headed out of the bedroom.

I found Sally sitting at the island in the kitchen, cradling a steaming mug of coffee in her hands. Her eyes were fixed on Sadie, who was darting around the backyard with the uncontrollable joy of a dog half her age. Sally's makeup from last night was a smudged mess, and her usually vibrant eyes were clouded with fatigue. It was clear she was feeling the effects of whatever those men slipped her.

"Morning," I said, keeping my voice low. Last thing I wanted was to aggravate the headache she was no doubt dealing with.

"You really saved my ass last night, Jude," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "And Dr. M. I owe him a huge thank you. I'm going to visit him on Monday, tell him how grateful I am."

Before I could tell her that Tony was still there, he appeared in the kitchen doorway. His hair was a riot of dark waves, sleep tousled and wild. He was shirtless, wearing only his jeans, revealing the landscape of his chest, the hard muscles dusted with dark hair and leading down to a toned stomach.

"Morning," he said, glancing down at his chest as if realizing in the moment how underdressed he was.

A surprised gasp left Sally's lips, her gaze widening at the sight. The coffee mug in her hand wobbled, and I reached over quickly to steady it, shooting a warning look at Tony who was failing to suppress a grin at the spectacle. His eyes met mine, the corners crinkling in a shared amusement before he moved to make himself a cup of coffee as if it were just another typical morning. But for me, it was anything but typical.

The surprise on Sally's face quickly morphed into a mischievous grin, her eyes dancing with laughter. "Well, well,

well,” she cooed, her voice carrying the hint of a giggle. “Guess you thanked him for me.”

My face heated up instantly, the blush I could feel spreading like wildfire. “Shut up,” I shot back, aiming for an irritated tone but landing somewhere closer to sheepish. “Or I’ll start banging pots and pans.”

Sally chuckled lightly, but then shifted her attention to Tony. “Thank you, Dr. M,” she said, gratitude clear in her voice.

“Think nothing of it,” he replied. “Just doing the right thing. *Es necesario* when you have men like those pricks out in the world, you know?”

“I appreciate it more than I can express,” Sally said.

“Well, don’t just thank me,” Tony replied. “This one here,” he nodded toward me, “was on her way to take those two on by herself before I insisted on coming. Truth be told, I probably did them a favor by not letting Jude rip them a new one on her own.”

“You’re right about that,” I said, a tinge of anger gripping my words.

Sally turned back to me. “Can I shower and borrow something to wear home?”

“Of course,” I replied, gesturing vaguely toward the guest room. “There are some clothes in the top drawer you can use.”

Sally nodded her thanks, her gaze flitting between Tony and me, a knowing smile tugging at her lips. As she left the kitchen, she threw one last comment over her shoulder. “Oh... and try not to thank him too much while I’m in the shower.” With that, she was gone, leaving behind a silence that was suddenly filled with a mix of awkwardness and laughter.

Tony and I stared at each other, our eyes flicking toward the doorway Sally just disappeared through. The silence stretched on, heavy with the aftermath of her teasing.

“So...” Tony began, rubbing the back of his neck with a sheepish grin. “That was... something.”

I chuckled lightly, rolling my eyes. “She can be a bit forward sometimes.”

There was another beat of silence, then we both broke into laughter, tension evaporating into the morning light. As our chuckles died down, Tony stepped forward, closing the distance between us. His eyes gave way to something deeper, more intense, and before I knew it, his lips were on mine.

His kiss was hungry, echoing the desire coursing through me. As he pulled away, he whispered against my lips, “I don’t have any plans today.”

Neither did I, I realized. “Same here.”

He raised an eyebrow, the corner of his lips tugging upward. “Then why don’t we spend the day together? After we drop Sally home, of course.”

It was impulsive and not entirely thought through, but it felt right. I found myself nodding, a smile spreading across my face.

“Sounds perfect.”



Two weeks had swept by since that awkward, but delightful, morning with Sally. Tony and I had woven our lives together in a captivating dance of familiarity and novelty, spending nearly every evening in each other’s company. Sometimes we nestled into the warmth of his house, other times the quiet comfort of mine, filling the hours with laughter, conversation, and an intimacy I hadn’t known I craved.

We had ventured on actual dates too, exchanging the stillness of our homes for the buzz of the city. And we’d cooked for each other, his signature Spanish dishes winning my taste buds over with their rich, fiery flavors. I had found myself playfully teasing him about it, the meals so delicious that I jokingly lamented the extra pounds I feared they would add.

But one morning, after a night spent apart, I noticed that my playful laments might not have been so unfounded. There were indeed a few extra pounds clinging to my frame, a minor change, yet enough to be noticeable. It didn't add up. While I had been indulging in Tony's cooking, I hadn't altered my diet that much nor had I been slacking on my exercise. On top of it all, an unsettling wave of nausea had been sweeping over me throughout the days, coming and going.

My mind immediately jumped to a gall bladder issue, given the nausea and unexpected weight gain. But then, it struck me. My period, as regular as clockwork, had not yet arrived. The realization held me captive, its implications swirling in my mind. I was late, something that had never happened before.

As I made my way to work that day, a gnawing apprehension formed in the pit of my stomach. The morning seemed to blur around me, the familiar streets passing in a haze as my mind played out the looming possibilities. The small, nondescript pharmacy I usually frequented suddenly had an ominous presence as I approached it. Gathering my resolve, I stepped inside and grabbed a pregnancy test, an act I never thought I'd need to undertake at this stage in my life.

Once at work, I quickly and discreetly retreated to the seclusion of the restroom, the small box clutched tightly in my hand. As I unwrapped the test and went through the motions, my heart pounded wildly in my chest. It was a deafening echo in the otherwise silent room, the only sound accompanying my chaotic thoughts.

I watched as the small device worked its magic, a river of anxiety coursing through me. I was a whirlpool of emotions—apprehension, shock, fear, and an odd tinge of excitement I hadn't expected. As the seconds ticked by, I found myself clutching the edge of the sink, my knuckles white as the result I feared and longed for simultaneously took its time to reveal itself.

And then there it was. The positive sign stared back at me from the small digital window. I blinked, once, twice, as if my

disbelief could alter reality. But the result remained the same. I was pregnant.

The world seemed to stop spinning for a moment, and a wave of emotions crashed over me, leaving me breathless. I stared at the little device that had just single-handedly tipped my world off its axis. I felt the ground beneath me shift, my life changing in an instant.

My heart continued to pound furiously as I tried to wrap my head around the reality of it. There was a life, a tiny, precious life, growing inside me. A life that Tony and I had created. The thought brought on a rush of joy, mingled with a healthy dose of fear. It was uncharted territory for me, for us.

As I continued to stare at the positive sign, a sense of calm slowly began to wash over me. Yes, I was nervous. Yes, it was unexpected. But there was also a part of me that was indescribably happy. Life would undoubtedly be different from this point onward, a beautiful and terrifying adventure that I was about to embark on. As I pocketed the test and took a deep breath, I couldn't help but wonder if it was an adventure I was ready for.

I went quietly about my day trying to figure out the best way forward. I knew without a doubt that this baby would be my highest priority until I took my last breath.

CHAPTER 26

The next day dawned bright and early, the morning sunlight streaming through the bedroom window, chasing away the darkness. I woke up to the melody of bird songs and the familiar buzz of my phone on the bedside table. Blinking sleep out of my eyes, I picked it up and found a sweet text from Tony.

Good morning, sunshine. Did you dream about me?

A smile tugged at my lips as I read his message, a warmth spreading in my chest. Tony had a knack for making me feel special, even with something as simple as a text message. I quickly typed out a response.

I dreamt about chocolate chip cookies.

Almost instantly, a reply came back, filled with laughing emojis.

The chocolate chip cookies obviously symbolized me. They're delicious, and you can't get enough of them.

I couldn't help but laugh.

Our playful banter continued, each message bringing a smile wider than the last to my face. It was a beautiful morning, peaceful and filled with sweet laughter. But as our conversation went on, the joy began to give way to anticipation. The memory of the pregnancy test popped up unbidden. The playfulness began to dwindle, replaced by a gnawing anxiety.

As if to add to my unease, a wave of nausea washed over me. I rushed to the bathroom, my body physically acting out my internal turmoil.

Rinsing my mouth, I stared at my reflection in the mirror. My face was pale, my eyes wide with the weight of my situation. I wondered what the best way to tell Tony would be. We were both medical professionals; we should have known better. We should have been more careful.

I was on birth control, but it was a low dose due to my lack of sexual activity before Tony. The irony wasn't lost on me. I had been careful not to have any sexual encounters, yet when I finally did, it resulted in a baby.

The question of how to tell him remained. I had no idea what his reaction would be.

When I returned to my bedroom, the familiar buzz of my phone greeted me. It was another text from Tony.

Want to spend the evening together? His words lit up the screen and sent another jolt of anxiety through me.

I needed time to process, time to think, time to decide on how to deliver the news to him. And I couldn't do that with him around. As much as I wanted to be with him, to lose myself in his presence, I knew I had to get myself together first.

With a deep breath, I texted him back. *I can't tonight. I have some work stuff to sort out with the new position. Tomorrow doesn't look good either. Sorry.*

I hit send, bracing myself for his response. I didn't want him to worry, didn't want to arouse his suspicion. But it was only a matter of time before he'd realize that something was amiss. I felt a little guilty, throwing such lame excuses his way as if he were some clingy Hinge date I wanted to rid myself of.

As if on cue, his reply came through, and I exhaled a sigh of relief when I read it.

No worries, Jude. Take your time. I'll be here when you're ready.

His understanding and patience soothed my frayed nerves, if only a little. As the seconds ticked away, however, I was filled with a growing sense of dread. Tony was being patient—for now. But how would he react when I told him the truth?

Tony was an enigma. I couldn't predict his reaction. Would he be shocked, angry, disappointed? Or would he be happy, excited to become a father? The uncertainty was enough to drive me mad.

With a sigh, I forced the maddening thoughts away. They weren't helping. All they were doing was causing my stomach to churn, intensifying the queasiness. I decided to focus on what needed to be done next, like scheduling an appointment with my OB/GYN.

Mustering every ounce of calm I could manage, I dialed the number and waited for the receptionist to pick up. My fingers drummed a nervous beat on the table, my heart echoing a similar rhythm in my chest. The call connected, and I forced out the words, asking for the earliest available appointment.

“Hi, this is Jude Langdon,” I said, struggling to keep my voice steady. “I need to schedule an appointment as soon as possible. I just had a positive pregnancy test result.”

I ended the call, securing an appointment for the next day. That task completed, I sat back, allowing the weight of the situation to wash over me. Everything was becoming real, really fast. The reality of my pregnancy was setting in, and with it, the certainty that my life was about to change in ways I could never have anticipated. I only hoped Tony would be able to handle it too.



I found myself in the sterile surroundings of the doctor's office, seated on the edge of an examination table covered in a crinkly paper sheet. Everything around me felt oddly surreal; the clinical white walls, the stark overhead lighting, the soft hum of the air conditioner providing a strangely comforting background noise.

A nurse bustled around me, her demeanor professional yet kind. She chatted as she worked, asking routine questions about my last period, my symptoms, any family history of high-risk pregnancies, and my use of birth control. With each question, I found myself providing answers with a detached sense of disbelief.

She handed me a small plastic cup and directed me to the restroom, the action feeling so strangely ordinary and yet monumental all at once. I completed the task, my hands shaking slightly as I did so. When I handed the cup back to her, she gave me a sympathetic smile, as if she understood a tornado was spinning inside me.

I sat in the silence of the room waiting for the test results, the seconds ticking away like hours. My mind was a jumble of thoughts, anxieties, and questions, all overshadowed by a single, momentous fact—I was pregnant. I was about to become a mother. The thought was both exhilarating and terrifying.

When the nurse returned, her smile was warm and confirming. “Congratulations, Ms. Langdon, you’re definitely pregnant.”

A sense of elation washed over me; a feeling so potent it nearly took my breath away. Despite the risks, the uncertainties, the upheaval it would undoubtedly bring, I couldn’t deny the spark of joy that ignited within me. I was going to have a baby.

The doctor came in and did a quick exam to ensure that everything was alright. She prescribed prenatal vitamins and reminded me to keep an eye on my water intake as well as to eat healthy and get enough sleep. We scheduled an ultrasound for a future appointment, and I got dressed once she left the room.

As I left the doctor’s office, my mind began to whirl with the practicalities. I was older and that coupled with my diabetes meant my pregnancy would be considered high risk, and I’d need to start thinking about how to handle everything. Precautions, tests, and checkups, lifestyle changes, my work

schedule... a mountain of considerations and adjustments lay ahead.

Amid all the planning, one thought loomed larger than any other and that was telling Tony. I had no idea how he would react, if he would share my joy, or if this new revelation would shatter the beautiful connection we were building. I pushed the uncertainty away. I would find out soon enough, and I could only hope for the best. I allowed myself a moment to bask in the confirmed realization that I was going to be a mother.

Back at work, I felt an odd sense of detachment, as if I were going through the motions, performing the familiar tasks and routines, yet my mind was somewhere entirely different. I was so lost in my thoughts that I nearly walked past my office door before I heard Tony's voice.

"I'm heading to see her now," he was saying, his tone casual and relaxed. I paused, lurking just outside my office door, hidden from view.

"Jude, huh?" The other doctor, a jovial, middle-aged man I recognized as Dr. Sean Rosenbaum, chuckled. "You two seem pretty close. You dating or something?"

I held my breath, my heart pounding as I waited for Tony's response. The seconds ticked by, feeling like hours, until he finally spoke.

"Yeah, we've been dating."

The words washed over me, eliciting a rush of happiness that spread from the tips of my toes to the top of my head. Despite everything, despite the worries and uncertainties that swirled in my mind, I couldn't suppress the smile that spread across my face. Tony had acknowledged our relationship openly, casually, like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Dr. Rosenbaum laughed again, this time louder. "Well, well, well, Dr. Montivais. Never thought I'd see the day. What's next? Marriage, kids?"

My smile faltered, the playful teasing hitting too close to home. I held my breath again, anticipation coiling in my

stomach.

Tony's response was quick, *too* quick. "I don't think that far ahead, Rosenbaum."

There was a pause before he continued, his voice quieter. "I've never really thought about having children. It's not really my thing."

His words hit me like a physical blow, knocking the breath out of me. His casual dismissal of the idea of children was like a dagger to my heart. It felt as if my world—which was already teetering—had just been pushed off its axis. The hallway around me blurred as my head spun, the implications of his words crashing down on me.

I took a deep, shaky breath in an attempt to gather myself. I needed to stay calm. To think. To figure out what to do next. With a final glance toward the direction of Tony's voice, I turned and walked away.

A sickening wave of nausea washed over me, one not brought on by the early stages of pregnancy. I couldn't face him, not now, not after what I had just overheard. Swiftly changing my course, I veered toward the nearest bathroom. Once inside, I locked the door behind me and leaned against it, taking deep, shaky breaths. The cold, sterile smell of the bathroom did nothing to help the rush of nausea that was roaring through me.

Each minute that passed felt like an eternity as I stood there, my eyes focused on the white tiles beneath my feet trying to will away the roiling in my stomach. My mind raced, replaying Tony's words over and over again. His comment about the idea of children felt like a slap in the face, a cold dousing of reality on the dreamy cloud of happiness I had been living on.

He didn't want children. And yet, here I was, carrying his child.

A lump formed in my throat, making it difficult to swallow. I felt an overwhelming urge to cry, to let loose the storm of

emotions inside me, but I couldn't afford to break down, not at work.

I checked my watch. Ten minutes had passed. I had to assume that he had left the area, thinking I was busy or maybe out for lunch. Taking a deep breath, I straightened my back and unlocked the bathroom door. As I made my way back to my office, I hoped against hope that I wouldn't run into him.

Sitting alone behind my desk, a question echoed in my mind like a haunting refrain. *What was I going to do?*

The father of my child didn't want children. The reality of that cast a long, daunting shadow over my newfound joy of impending motherhood. Tony and I worked in the same building, shared the same professional circle. I wouldn't be able to hide my condition for long, no matter how I tried to conceal it.

We were dating, but it was still early. The seriousness of our relationship felt nebulous, a shifting entity that had suddenly gained more weight than I was prepared to handle. I wanted it to be serious, and Tony had seemed to share the same sentiment. But a child was a complete game changer, and I was uncertain how he'd react to it. This unexpected curveball had the potential to disrupt our budding relationship in ways I couldn't predict.

I also knew I had options, choices that rested squarely on my shoulders. It was only a day or so into this new reality of mine, but I already harbored an unfathomable love for the child growing within me. A love that seemed to grow with every heartbeat echoing softly in my own body, a rhythmic reassurance of life blossoming within me.

That love dictated my next steps.

Picking up my phone, I dialed Tony's number, my heart pounding against my ribs. I asked him to come over for dinner at my house that evening. His acceptance was swift and enthusiastic, and it twisted my insides with a strange mixture of relief and apprehension. He was oblivious to the life-altering news awaiting him.

A deep sigh escaped my lips as I hung up the phone, staring out of the window at the busy streets below. The world continued to move in its rhythm, my turmoil a tiny speck amidst everything else. I wished for a moment I could be a part of that blissful ignorance, but reality was waiting, pressing against the barriers of my consciousness.

No matter what happened next, I knew that I would be okay, I would handle it. I would face whatever came my way, armed with the resilience I had cultivated over the years. Because this wasn't just about me anymore, it was about the tiny life growing within me, the life I was already fiercely protective of. And for that life, I would face anything, even the uncertainty of a future with a man who wasn't sure if he wanted children.

CHAPTER 27

TONY

The hum of the operating room receded behind me as I exited, the rhythmic beeping of the heart monitor a testament to another successful procedure. A routine pacemaker installation, but important work all the same. My satisfaction was short-lived as my phone buzzed incessantly in my pocket, drawing me back into the reality of life outside of the sterilized walls. I blinked at the multitude of messages flooding my screen, each marked with the same familiar name: Mami.

Something was wrong.

My heart pounding, I quickly dialed her number. She picked up almost instantly, her voice trembling and hoarse.

“Tony, *hijo*, it’s Papa,” she choked out.

I felt the color drain from my face as I switched automatically into my native Spanish, a desperate need for comfort in the face of the unknown. “¿*Qué pasó*, Mami? What happened?” I asked, trying to keep my voice steady.

“*Tu padre...*” she broke off, her sobs filling the line. “He’s had a massive heart attack. The doctors, they... oh, Tony, you need to come home. Now.” Her words tumbled out in a torrent, a mix of English and Spanish that reflected the chaos of our world in that moment.

Every molecule in my body seemed to freeze. The bustling hospital around me faded into the background, replaced by the concern and worry in my mind. My father, my rock, my role model... fighting for his life.

“*Estoy en camino*, Mami. I’m on my way,” I managed to force the words out, my throat closing up with a mixture of dread and fear. The hospital hallway suddenly felt oppressively small, the sterile walls closing in on me.

“*Es grave*, Antonio. It’s serious,” my mother’s voice trembled. “He’s asking for you. For his *chiquito*.” The endearment she used, one my father often called me, hit like a punch. I sank into a nearby chair, the world spinning around me.

“*Lo siento*, Mami, I... I need to get a flight. I’ll be there as soon as I can,” I told her, my voice sounding distant and hollow in my own ears.

“*Por favor*, Tony,” her voice broke, the desperation palpable even through the distance. “Hurry.”

The call ended with a soft click, and I found myself frozen, clutching the phone, the gravity of the situation pressing down on me.

My father, my hero, was in a hospital bed on the other side of the world. I was a surgeon, trained to save lives, but in that moment, I felt utterly helpless. All I could do was pack, arrange for an immediate emergency leave, and get on the first flight home to Spain. To my father’s side. To face the unknown.

My pulse thundered in my ears as I quickly made my way through the labyrinth of hospital corridors. Each step felt leaden, as if I were wading through quicksand, the usually familiar scenes around me blurring into insignificance. I needed to get home. To Spain. To Papa.

The first person I saw was my assistant, Paul Madison. His normally cheerful face twisted in concern as he caught sight of me, no doubt reading the urgency in my stride. I stopped in front of him, out of breath, feeling a sickening twist of fear in my gut.

“I need a flight to Spain, Paul,” I blurted. “As soon as possible, as few layovers as possible. Can you do that?”

His eyes widened in surprise but he nodded immediately, not even questioning the abruptness of my request. “Of course, Dr. Montivais. I’ll get on it right away.”

I thanked him before spinning on my heels and making my way to the hospital administrator’s office. As I navigated the whitewashed halls, all I could think about was getting home. I could hear snippets of conversations—the daily gossip, upcoming surgeries—but it all seemed so distant, so irrelevant. My world had been blown apart, and I needed to be with my father.

Reaching the office, I pushed open the door without preamble, a wave of cool, air-conditioned air hitting me as I stepped inside. Samantha Chan, the hospital administrator, a kindly woman in her late fifties with glasses perched on her nose, looked up from her paperwork in surprise.

“Tony?” she questioned, worry etching lines into her forehead. “What’s wrong?”

In a few terse sentences, I relayed the news, my words tumbling over each other in my haste. Her expression morphed from shock to sympathy as I spoke, her fingers steepled in front of her.

“I’m so sorry, Tony,” she said softly, reaching out to pat my hand. “Of course, we’ll take care of everything here. You take as long as you need.”

I nodded, swallowing the lump in my throat as she handed me the sabbatical paperwork. It felt surreal, signing those documents, the cold realization hitting me that I wasn’t sure when I would be back.

Walking out of the office, I felt the weight of the situation pressing down on me. Amidst the spiraling worry for my father, one thought remained constant—I needed to tell Jude. Before I left, I had to see her. I hoped I would be able to make that happen, to tell her in person why I was leaving so abruptly.

I raced back to my office, adrenaline fueling my movements, my mind swirling with a thousand different

thoughts. Upon entering, I saw Paul, his eyes frantically scanning the computer screen, fingers flying over the keyboard.

I mustered a weak smile of gratitude as he turned to me, a mixture of relief and worry in his eyes. “Dr. Montivais, I’ve managed to book a flight. It leaves Denver at five p.m., with a one-hour layover in Paris before continuing on to Madrid.”

I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding. “Thank you, Paul. You’re a lifesaver.”

He merely shrugged modestly, turning his attention back to the screen. “It’s the least I can do. Now, about your surgery schedule—”

“Yes,” I interjected, running a hand through my hair. “Move the emergent cases to Dr. Colter. I’ll fill him in on the way. Reschedule everything else for at least two weeks out, please. If I need more time, I’ll let you know.”

“Of course, Dr. Montivais,” he said, his fingers already moving to reschedule my appointments. His efficiency was a blessing.

I thanked him again before turning away, my mind back to Jude. I didn’t want to leave her in the dark. My stomach twisted with anxiety at the thought of telling her, not knowing when I would see her again.

I’ll call her from the airport. I need to get home to pack and prepare.

I raced home, committing several traffic violations. As I unlocked the front door and entered, a rush of conflicting emotions washed over me. The familiar surroundings felt both comforting and alien in light of the news.

I had barely an hour to pack. My mind was a ball of mush. What do you pack when your father’s life hangs in the balance and you have no idea when you’ll return?

Moving in a flurry of activity, I hastily grabbed my suitcase and began to throw in whatever I could find. Clothes, toiletries, travel documents—all were tossed in without care.

The ticking clock became my enemy. In the back of my mind, I had this gnawing feeling that I was forgetting something.

With a last look around, I zipped up the suitcase, grabbed my keys and headed for the door. I drove to the airport in a haze, the sights and sounds fading into the background as my thoughts roamed to my family back in Spain.

As I stepped into the bustling airport, a strange calm washed over me—I'd made it there in time.

With a sigh of relief, I handed over my suitcase and collected my boarding pass. As I sat at the gate waiting for the boarding call, I let my head fall back against the seat, closing my eyes. The last few hours had been nothing short of a rollercoaster. From an average morning in the OR to unexpectedly racing across the world.

The constant hum of the airport activity buzzed around me. I felt disconnected from it all, caught up in my own drama. I was solely focused on getting to Madrid, on reaching my father's side.

In my haste and worry, something crucial had slipped my mind. The memory of a warm smile, teasing laughter, and tender kisses. The image of Jude's face flashed before my eyes, and my stomach clenched with guilt. I couldn't leave the country without telling her what was going on. I couldn't just stand her up for dinner without an explanation.

But before I could dwell on it, an announcement came across the speakers. Flight to Paris, now boarding. I swallowed hard, stood up, and with one last look at the city I'd come to call home, I walked toward the gate, onto the airplane, and into the unknown. My mind was far too consumed with worry for my father to realize what I had left unsaid, or who I had left in the dark.

Wait until you're on the plane, I told myself as I formed up in line to board the plane. Sit down and take a deep breath before messaging her. One thing at a time.

As the seatbelt sign blinked off and the low hum of the airplane engine filled the cabin, I finally felt my body relax

into the plush first-class seat. The immediate urgency was over. Now, it was just a waiting game.

A flight attendant came around, her polished smile never faltering. I requested a cocktail, something strong. She returned promptly, placing a crystal glass filled with amber liquid on the small table in front of me.

As I cradled the glass in my hand, the dim lights of the cabin reflecting in the liquid, I allowed my thoughts to wander. I found myself replaying the whirlwind of the last few hours, my mind stuck in an endless loop of worry and regret.

The sip of the cocktail burned a path down my throat, the kick of the alcohol grounding me. I leaned back into my seat, allowing the smooth liquor to soothe my frayed nerves.

My eyes wandered aimlessly around the cabin, and they fell on a man sitting a few seats away from me. A black lab was sprawled across the empty seat next to him, its head resting on the man's lap. A service dog. The sight brought back a rush of memories that I hadn't had the time or sense of mind to process until then.

Jude.

The realization hit me like a punch to the gut. The guilt was immediate, overwhelming. In the chaos of the day, I had completely forgotten to contact her. She was probably waiting for me to arrive for dinner. She had no idea what was happening.

I reached into my pocket, my fingers fumbling for my phone, but it wasn't there. A quick pat down of my other pockets yielded the same result. My phone, my only way of contacting Jude, was at home, probably sitting on the kitchen counter where I'd left it in my mad dash to pack.

The cabin suddenly felt claustrophobic, the hum of the engines louder, the cocktail sour. For the first time since I received my mother's call, panic started to creep in, not for my father but for Jude. I had left her in the dark, with no explanation, and no way to reach me.

As the miles stretched between us, with no way to convey the sudden upheaval of my life, all I could hope was that when I eventually returned, she would understand and still be there, waiting.

CHAPTER 28

The smell of rosemary chicken wafted through the air, the aroma of home-cooking filling the emptiness of the kitchen. As I set the table for two, I ran through my meticulously planned speech once again, hoping to ease my pounding heart.

“Tony,” I began, rehearsing aloud as I adjusted the silverware, “there’s something I need to talk to you about...” It was easier speaking to an empty room. I paused, taking a deep breath to steady my voice.

“Recently I’ve been feeling nauseous and I’ve gained a bit of weight,” I continued, smoothing the tablecloth. “I took a test, I saw my OB/GYN, and it turns out I’m pregnant.”

I flinched at my own words. They still sounded so alien, so foreign. I took a moment to compose myself before pressing on, “It was unexpected. I’ve been on a low dose birth control, but apparently it failed.”

The words hung heavy in the air. I couldn’t believe I was saying them. But as much as being pregnant scared me, as much as telling Tony scared me, it also filled me with a strange excitement.

“I’ve thought long and hard about it,” I spoke, more to myself than the absent Tony, “and I’ve decided to keep the baby.” I paused, my hand unconsciously wandering to my belly. “You have a choice too though. You can decide how involved you want to be. I would really love for you to be a

part of this child's life. Even if... even if we don't make it as a couple."

The last words stung, but I had to be realistic. I knew this could be a dealbreaker for us, but I wanted him to know that I supported his choice as well.

As the final words of my speech echoed around the empty dining room, I felt a strange sense of calm wash over me. It wasn't ideal, it wasn't perfect, but it was honest.

The scent of the rosemary chicken grew stronger, a reminder of the real world waiting beyond my anxious musings. I went back to preparing the dinner, trying to shake off my lingering nerves. All that was left was to wait for Tony. And with a deep breath, I resolved to do just that.

The hum of the refrigerator was the only sound in the house, punctuating the anxious silence that had settled over me. 7:30 p.m. The numbers glowed ominously on the wall clock, pushing my nerves into overdrive.

Tony was thirty minutes late. An unexpected twist in our usual routine, where he always showed up promptly, sometimes even early. I found myself constantly peeking at my phone, each passing minute increasing my anxiety.

Initially, I had tried to keep the mood light, texting him. *You're running fashionably late, aren't you?* and *Is this a new strategy? Make the lady wait?* But the absence of his witty retort, his silence, was deafening in the quiet room.

As the clock struck eight, my worry transformed into a gnawing fear. What if something had happened to him? What if he was hurt? I couldn't just sit around anymore, chewing on my lower lip. I had to call him.

I reached for my phone, my nerves unraveling. As I dialed his number my mind filled with scenarios I didn't want to imagine. My heart sank when I heard the familiar dial tone, only to sink again as it went straight to voicemail. "You've reached Dr. Antonio Montivais, please leave a message," his prerecorded voice spoke from the other end.

The voicemail beep was a stark reminder of the growing dread inside me. I hung up, feeling even more worried. My rehearsed speech lay forgotten, replaced by fear. Where was he? Had something happened to him? As the minutes turned into hours, I was left with nothing but a looming silence and a hundred unanswered questions.

As worry continued to gnaw away at me, I felt the need for a comforting routine. Almost instinctively, I found myself walking toward the kitchen, reaching for the cabinet where I usually kept my wine. A glass of Pinot Noir had always been my fallback plan on tough days, the smooth drink offering a soothing balm for my nerves.

But as I reached out, my eyes fell on my reflection in the glass door of the cabinet. My hand instinctively dropped and I stood there for a moment, the stark realization washing over me. I couldn't have that glass of wine, not with the little life growing inside me.

Instead, I opened the fridge, pulling out a bottle of sparkling water. I cut a fresh lime, squeezing the tangy juice into the water, the refreshing fizz bringing a semblance of normalcy to the otherwise uncertainty of the evening.

Taking my drink, I moved to the living room and settled down on the couch, my gaze fixed on the door. The inviting scent of the food wafted from the kitchen, a delicious feast that lay untouched.

Sensing my unease, Sadie curled up at my feet, her presence providing some much-needed comfort. As I ran my fingers through her soft fur, my other hand rested on my stomach, and I allowed my situation to be a grounding force against the turmoil of the night.

I continued to watch the clock, waiting, the delicious smell of food beginning to feel suffocating, the untouched dinner a reminder of the fear that continued to grow. As the hours ticked by, I began to think of worst-case scenarios. Had there been an emergency and he got pulled into surgery? Images of him, his brow furrowed in concentration as he navigated through a life-or-death operation filled my mind's eye. But

then a different thought occurred—what if he wasn't at the hospital?

A wave of panic washed over me as my mind painted a more terrifying image—an accident. The roads could be treacherous in winter, and Tony was not the most careful driver. The more I thought about it, the more my worry spiraled, consuming every rational thought, replacing it with horrifying images of twisted metal and flashing lights.

I knew our relationship wasn't exactly a secret at work. We hadn't taken any pains to hide it, but we also hadn't announced it to everyone. We were careful, and yet we were not. The hospital staff knew we were seeing each other, so I assumed if something had happened at work, someone would have called me.

My heart pounded as I tried to squash the rising panic. I wanted to call the hospital, to ask if he was there. I wanted to call the local police station to ask if there had been any accidents. I needed to know he was safe. But there was a part of me that held back, a small voice whispering, "What if it's nothing? What if he simply forgot?"

But even that thought stung. What if he had just forgotten? Was this dinner unimportant to him? Was I? I shook my head, trying to rid myself of the madness. But it was persistent, refusing to be quieted, filling every second of the unnerving silence that stretched on.

I paced around my living room, glancing at my phone every few seconds, hoping to see Tony's name light up the screen. The uncertainty was unbearable, my mind running in circles with unanswered questions. I decided I should try to distract myself, so I moved toward the kitchen to put away the dinner that was apparently going to go uneaten. Every movement felt robotic, a ghost of the enthusiastic preparations I had made earlier.

The smell of the dish now turned my stomach. With the apprehension of telling Tony about our unborn child, I had poured all my emotions into making my favorite meal, using it

as a shield against my anxiety. But all of that had been replaced by a rising sense of dread and disappointment.

What was meant to be a night of revelation, of hope and shared joy had turned into a nightmare. I felt alone, the silence of the house pressing down on me, a stark contrast to the lively scenario I had pictured for the evening.

As I moved around the kitchen, my hand once again absent-mindedly moved to my stomach. A small bump was barely noticeable, but I knew it was there. I knew our child was there. And at that moment, I felt an overwhelming sense of love and protectiveness. I promised the tiny life that no matter what, I would protect them and love them, even if I had to do it alone.

With a newfound determination, I turned off the lights in the kitchen and made my way back to the living room, hugging myself tight. Tony had not shown, he hadn't called, he hadn't texted. But I decided it didn't matter. I would tell him when he did decide to show up, when he finally thought to call. I would tell him about our child. And no matter what his reaction was, I would face it.

As I sunk into the couch, Sadie lifting her head briefly to look at me before snuggling back into her position, my mind went back to that conversation between Tony and his colleague. His voice echoed in my head, "I've never even thought of having children..."

My heart clenched in my chest, a deep trepidation settling within me. Could he have somehow found out about the pregnancy and was now avoiding me? But that was impossible. The only person who knew about it was me. I hadn't confided in anyone else yet. It was my secret, and Tony's absence was nothing more than a strange coincidence.

I groaned aloud, pressing the heels of my hands into my eyes. The more I thought about it, the more I felt like I was spiraling into a pit of angst and overthinking. *Stop it, Jude*, I chastised myself. This was not the time to concoct wild theories. I was being paranoid, a side effect of the enormous secret I was carrying, and the stress of wanting to share it.

I picked up my phone again, staring at the dark screen. I felt a pang of disappointment and worry, a mixture of emotions I hadn't expected to feel. He could be in trouble. Or he might just be busy. Or he could be avoiding me. The possibilities were endless, and not knowing was driving me insane.

I threw the phone onto the couch and leaned back, closing my eyes and taking a deep breath. I needed to calm down, to stop my brain from running away with crazy thoughts. I needed to trust Tony, to believe that there was a plausible explanation for all of this.

After all, he didn't even know he was about to become a father. And for now, that was my only solace.

CHAPTER 29

TONY

The blazing midday sun of Madrid greeted me as I disembarked from the plane, an aggressive, direct contrast to the soft evening light I'd left behind in Denver. The city buzzed with life, its citizens embracing the promising day before them. The relentless wave of exhaustion I felt seemed to stand in opposition to the energy around me.

An hour remained of my journey, a stretch of highway standing between me and my parents' home on their vineyard. The thought itself was more draining than the drive could ever be. Buying a phone at the airport crossed my mind, a concession for the absent device left in the rush of my departure. A glance at the time reminded me it was four in the morning Colorado time. Jude would be asleep, oblivious to the world, and I was not about to shatter her peace with a call.

Instead, I collected my carry-on and navigated toward the car rental desks. Despite the chaotic swirl of my thoughts, one constant remained — I missed her. As my father's condition and the concern for him bore down on me, thoughts of Jude persisted, a persistent thread woven through the tapestry of my mind. Funny, I thought. All those years spent learning to compartmentalize as a cardiothoracic surgeon and one woman managed to scramble it all.

Jude, her laughter that could warm the coldest of rooms, her spirit as vibrant as a Colorado sunrise, the understanding in her hazel eyes, her seamless blend into my life. A twinge of something akin to regret rippled through me.

“Perfect, Antonio,” I muttered to myself as I entered the near-empty car rental office. “Nothing like an existential crisis before noon.”

I shook off the mental detour and refocused. I had a family to support, a father to comfort. Everything else, significant as it was, would have to wait. Jude would understand, she always did. That was simply who she was.

Upon securing a rental, my first order of business was to call my mother. The public payphones scattered around the airport felt outdated, a relic of a past era, but seeing as I had left my phone at home, they were my lifeline.

I took a deep breath, picked up the receiver, and dialed the familiar number. The line crackled, and an automated voice announced in Spanish, “Please insert the correct change.” With a metallic clink, the coins dropped.

After a couple of rings, my mother’s weary voice came through. “Hola?”

“Mami, soy yo, Antonio,” I responded, my words spilling out in a rush.

“¡Antonio! ¿Dónde estás?” Her voice, a mixture of relief and apprehension, echoed in my ear. It was clear she’d been on edge, waiting for my call.

“Estoy en Madrid,” I reassured her. “Just landed a little bit ago. No tengo un teléfono, so I’m calling you from a payphone at the airport. I’ll be there in an hour.”

My mother sighed in relief. “Oh, gracias a Dios. But don’t bother coming to the house, go right to the hospital, entiendes?”

A cold spike of fear stabbed through me. “¿Papá está peor?” The question of whether or not Dad was doing better or worse blotted out every possible thought in my mind.

“No, no peor. They’re putting in stents. Estaremos allí,” she explained, her voice holding a tinge of strain. The news was unexpected, yet not surprising.

“De acuerdo, Mami. I’ll head there now,” I replied, my heart pounding. “See you soon.”

We ended the call, and I headed for the car. A cyclone of anticipation and worry twisted through my head. A torrent of scenarios played out, each more frightening than the last. But through it all, my resolve remained steadfast. I had to be there for my family, to be strong for them, just as they had always been for me.

The car hummed along the winding roads, the purr of the engine a steady backdrop to my spiraling thoughts as I drove to the hospital. The scenic routes brought back the carefree days of my youth. Little cafes where I used to grab churros for breakfast, the park where I played football, the streets where I’d learned to drive. All carried imprints of a simpler time, overlaid with a tinge of nostalgia.

But it wasn’t a childhood friend I found myself wishing for by my side, it was Jude. Her presence had become a source of strength and calm I didn’t realize I had begun to rely upon. I wished she was with me to help me navigate through this, to hold my hand, her quiet strength bolstering my own. To lend me the courage to offer my parents reassurances despite my fears.

With a jolt, I finally understood the depth of my feelings for her. It was as if I had been driving through a fog and had finally emerged into startling clarity. The thought hit me with the force of a punch—I was in love with her. I was in love with her and I had just left her thousands of miles away without a word.

Love wasn’t a part of the plan. Love was messy, it made you vulnerable, it took you by surprise. It had snuck up on me like a burglar in the night.

When I finally arrived at the hospital, I found my mother in the chapel, her petite form bowed in prayer. The glow of the candles cast flickering shadows over her lined face, lending a touch of serenity to the worry etched in her features. Her rosary was gripped tightly in her hands, the beads winking in the soft light as she worked through them.

“Mami,” I said softly, not wanting to startle her.

She looked up, surprise giving way to relief. “Antonio,” she breathed, reaching out to me for an embrace.

My mother, Pilar, had always been a portrait of quiet beauty. Her hair, once a lustrous cascade of auburn curls, had softened into a lighter, hazelnut hue over the years, streaked with elegant silver. A stark contrast to my father and me, with our dark hair and Mediterranean complexion.

Her skin, once kissed by the Spanish sun, had grown paler with age but still retained a lovely glow. It was a testament to her strength and resilience. Her eyes, the color of a cloudless sky, were brimming with worry when I met her at the chapel but glimmered with relief when she saw me.

Even in the throes of fear for my father, she was the epitome of grace, her quiet faith a beacon for me in the face of uncertainty. I’d always seen myself in her, especially in the firm set of her jaw when confronted with adversity and the soft kindness in her eyes, traits I was glad I’d inherited.

I knelt beside her, joining her in prayer. The familiar words of the Hail Mary were instilled in my memory, the Catholic prayers from my childhood echoing around the chapel even though I hadn’t practiced in over a decade.

“Estoy tan contenta de que estés aquí,” she said, her voice thick with emotion. “I didn’t know when you were going to arrive.”

“I came as soon as I could, Mami,” I reassured her, grasping her hand. “And I’m happy to be here.”

She smiled, squeezing my shoulder before nodding back toward the altar, indicating without words that she wanted me to join her.

We prayed together, filling the quiet space with our soft murmurs echoing through the emptiness of the chapel. It felt strangely comforting, being there with my mother, calling upon a faith I had long neglected.

Leaving the tranquility of the chapel behind, we ascended to the floor where my father was being operated on. Our query

to the attending nurse earned us a sympathetic smile and an assurance that it would be another half hour or so before the surgery was done.

An oppressive hush hung over the waiting area, the tension gnawing at the edges of my calm. I felt the weight of my mother's worry mirrored in my own heart, the atmosphere thick with uncertainty. Time seemed to stretch, every ticking second a lifetime as we waited for news, hope and fear warring within us. I tried to call on my own vast knowledge as a cardiothoracic surgeon, but the patient being my beloved father muddied the waters.

I was swept away by the familiar whirlwind of family before I could make my escape to the hospital's business center. My mother's sisters, a trio of loving chaos, bustled into the waiting room. Their entrance was like a colorful explosion, each of them a unique spectacle.

The eldest, Tía Mercedes, was the epitome of a matriarch. Her sharp, eagle-like eyes were softened by the gentle waves of her grey hair, always neatly pulled into a bun. Mercedes was the embodiment of tough love, carrying an authoritative presence that we all respected.

Next was Tía Rosa, the middle sister, whose flamboyant personality matched her flamenco dancer past. Her fiery red hair, now streaked with white, was as vibrant as her spirit. Rosa had a vivacious laugh that echoed around rooms, managing to soothe nerves and spread cheer.

The youngest, Tía Isabel, was a gentle soul who always had a calming effect on all of us. With her ash blonde hair, kind eyes, and soft-spoken nature, Isabel was the nurturing presence we all craved in times of distress.

The moment they saw me, their tear-streaked faces bloomed into smiles. Hugs and kisses came in a rapid-fire flurry, a Spanish tradition I'd almost forgotten in my time away. The guilt of not having been home for a few years overwhelmed me as I took the brunt of their good-natured chastising.

“I see you’ve been too busy to visit your old tías, eh Antonio?” Tía Mercedes teased, her voice a blend of affection and reproach.

In the midst of consolations, crying, and joyful reunion, the need to contact Jude was momentarily forgotten, especially when my tías’ husbands and children all poured into the room. I was eager to see them, to hear about their lives.

The joy of our reunion was soon cut short by the arrival of the doctor, his entrance into the room hushing us immediately. The first thing he did was cast a reassuring smile at all of us, complimenting the beauty of our family. I could see the flicker of anxiety dancing in everyone’s eyes, waiting for him to deliver the news.

“Señor Montivais is in recovery and doing very well,” he assured us, his words lifting the tension from the room. “You should be able to see him within the hour.”

Relief washed over me like a tidal wave, a deep exhale escaping my lips. Tears of joy sparkled in my mother’s eyes, mirroring the watery sheen I could see in my aunts’ gazes.

There was a moment of stillness, a brief pause before an eruption of relieved laughter and happy tears filled the room. We hugged each other tightly, our family, ever so vocal, expressing love loudly and proudly.

In that moment, the world seemed to spin a little slower, and the heavy weight that had been pressing down on me since my mother’s phone call eased, if only for a little while.

I managed to slip away from my family, retreating to the quiet seclusion of the hospital’s business center. My fingers flew over the keyboard as I typed out an email, my mind filled with thoughts of Jude.

Subject: I’m Sorry I Missed Dinner

Dear Jude,

I can only imagine how worried you must be, and for that, I am truly sorry. I want to explain to you why I didn’t show up for our dinner date.

My mother called me from Spain. My father had a heart attack and was taken to the hospital. The suddenness of the news forced me to catch the earliest flight to Madrid, leaving no time for anything else. In the rush of it all, I forgot my phone at home.

As I write this, I'm currently at the hospital, waiting to hear more about my father's condition. He has just come out of surgery and we are waiting to be able to see him.

I promise to call you as soon as I have a working phone. I am sorry for any concern this has caused you.

As I sit here in this sterile hospital, thousands of miles away from you, I realize how much I miss your comforting presence.

Please take care of yourself, and Sadie too.

Best, Tony

Best. Something about the word rang hollow. But closing the email with *Love, Tony*, like I really wanted to, would've been too much for the circumstances, more than I was ready to lay on her, especially through a medium as impersonal as email.

As soon as I pressed send, a pang of longing washed over me. The cold glow of the computer screen couldn't warm the emptiness that filled the space where Jude should be. I sighed, pushing away from the desk, and stepped back into the chaos of my waiting family, chaos that during those moments I was more than grateful.

CHAPTER 30

The night Tony stood me up, sleep had been a game of tag I was losing. Every time I almost caught it, my mind decided to race off on another horrible tangent. I had no idea where he was or if something had happened to him. It wasn't like him to just disappear. I knew I should eat something but between the worry and the morning sickness, food was the last thing on my mind.

I was sprawled on my couch, the low noise of the morning news on TV serving as my only company. My phone had become like an extra appendage. I jumped when it pinged a notification, almost dropping it in the process of checking what it was—an email notification from work.

My heart rocketed up into my throat, adrenaline flushing through my system as I opened the email. I read it once, then twice, just to make sure I wasn't hallucinating from lack of sleep.

Spain. Heart attack. Phone left behind. It was like I'd been thrown into the deep end of a cold pool. But amidst the shock, there was a sigh of relief. He was safe. He hadn't ghosted me.

And the cherry on top? He missed me.

I clutched my phone lovingly to my chest. This was far from the scenario I had imagined. But at least now, I had answers. And a whole new set of worries.

My fingers danced across the phone screen as fast as they could, replying to his email. My eyes were dry, and my hands were shaky, but my mind was surprisingly clear.

I was relieved that his father was on the mend. I told him as much, expressing how happy I was to hear that the surgery went well and that his father was recovering. “*Keep me in the loop, okay? I’d really appreciate it,*” I wrote. And then, without thinking, I added, “*I miss you, too.*”

I looked at the screen, chewing my bottom lip. Did I miss him? Hell yes. More than I’d thought I could miss anyone.

And before I could second guess myself, I added a “*P.S. I love you.*”

I froze. Did I just...?

I stared at the words. There they were, in black and white, staring back at me. Was I ready to admit to myself that I was in love with him? Even more so, was I ready to *tell* him that I was?

Well, hell. I guess I was. Because even as my brain screamed at me that it was insane, my heart was beating a steady *yes, yes, yes.*

With a sharp inhale, I quickly hit the backspace button. I knew I loved him but it wasn’t the time to tell him, he didn’t need that added complication. I deleted the line and ended it with a simple *Take care.* But that didn’t seem right either, too businesslike, too professional.

“*P.S. Will you be back by Christmas?*” I quickly typed out, deciding that mundane future plans were a safer bet.

Pressing send, I sat back, staring at my phone. How was I going to navigate the weeks or possibly months ahead without him knowing I was pregnant?

I let out a sigh, tossing my phone aside. It landed on the cushion next to me, and I stared at it as if it were a beacon in the night. Tony was safe.



By the time I saw his response two days had passed, and he’d sent it in the wee hours of Colorado time. I had settled into my

new role as OR manager, which I was thrilled about, but it was also keeping me very busy.

I was swamped with a mountain of responsibilities, learning the ropes of the management side of things and keeping up with the admin work that came with it. However, I loved the new challenge. The mental stimulation helped me navigate through my day, keeping me occupied and focused. Yet there were moments here and there when my mind would veer off to Tony, the baby, and the whirlwind of emotion and possibility surrounding it all.

Then there was the morning sickness.

While it wasn't the throw-up-your-guts kind, it was definitely a presence. I felt a constant knot of queasiness in my stomach from the moment I woke up until mid-morning. The nausea was like an annoying background hum that wouldn't shut up until I had eaten something substantial.

The odors in the hospital didn't help either, adding another layer of discomfort. I'd been in the medical field for so long and had become desensitized to most things, it was ironic how pregnancy brought a heightened sense of smell that was more of a curse than a blessing in my current environment.

I managed with a few sips of ginger ale or saltines. Both would often help settle my stomach, and I found solace in the routine of my day. I was learning to navigate this new world of mine, filled with the excitement of my job and my pregnancy.

Reading his words, I felt a pang of longing. I missed him. Despite the looming conversation we needed to have, I missed his presence, his voice, his touch.

I could almost feel Tony's weariness. His words were wrapped in an exhaustion that I could almost feel. He detailed his situation, explaining that he would likely be in Spain until a week or so after Christmas, which was just around the corner.

His mom wasn't faring too well, he explained, her stress and worry for her husband overcoming her. His dad, fortunately, was on the mend and expected to be discharged in

a couple of days, but he would need a fair bit of help at home while he continued to recover.

The distance between us felt starkly real. I missed him like crazy, yet a part of me also felt relief. The delay in his return gave me a little more time to gather my thoughts, to decide how to tell him about the baby. But with each passing day, the secret felt heavier, like a lead ball in my stomach.

I contemplated asking for a quick call. There was so much I wanted to say, so much I wanted to hear. I craved the sound of his voice, the reassurance it would bring. But something held me back, maybe fear or the recognition that he already had a lot on his plate. So instead, I stared at his email, my fingertips brushing over his written words on the screen as if I could somehow feel him through them.

With a sigh, I locked my phone and slid it into my pocket. I was back to the reality of running the OR and the excruciating waiting.

Later in the shift, I was sitting at my desk caught up in my new managerial duties, when the floodgates finally gave way. A sudden knot tightened in my throat, my eyes burned, and before I knew it, hot tears were spilling down my cheeks.

Goddamn hormones!

Suddenly, the door to my office creaked open and in walked Sally. I felt a lurch in my stomach at the thought of her seeing me in such a state, but before I could attempt to compose myself, she had already noticed the teary mess I was. Her eyes widened for a moment, then with a soft sigh, she quickly shut the door behind her and hurried over to me.

The sight of her, a mixture of concern and surprise etched on her face, only made my tears flow harder. She quietly placed her arms around me, an occasional whimper slipping past my lips or a snuffle from my nose. I could feel Sally's concern mixed with contemplation on what to say.

I had yet to learn how to navigate the new hormonal waters. The pregnancy had turned me into a sobbing mess, and

to make matters worse, the one person I wanted to share the journey with was miles away, tending to his own family crisis.

I let out a shaky breath, trying to calm my racing heart.

“Alright, Jude. Out with it,” Sally finally said, her eyes soft but insistent. I took a shuddering breath, wiped my tears away, and just let it all spill out.

“I’m pregnant,” I blurted, letting the words hang in the air. “And... and Tony is in Spain. His dad had a heart attack and he won’t be back until after Christmas.”

Sally’s eyes flashed at the enormity of the news I’d just dumped on her. She kept one arm around me, gently rubbing my back.

“Oh, sweetie...” she said, but I didn’t give her a chance to interject further.

“And I love him, Sal. I love him so much it hurts. He doesn’t know about the baby, doesn’t know about my feelings, and I don’t know what the hell to do!”

The confession tumbled from my lips in a rush, my voice thick with emotion. I half-expected to feel relief after laying it all out there, but the knot in my chest didn’t loosen. Sally was quiet for a moment, her eyes wide as she absorbed my confessions.

She let out a sigh, took my hands in hers and said, “Listen to me. You need to breathe. Yes, this is a lot to handle but panicking isn’t going to help anyone, especially not you or your baby.”

I nodded, trying to calm my racing heart, hanging onto her words like a lifeline.

“Three weeks isn’t that long. Tony needs to be with his family right now, just like you need to take care of yourself and the baby. This isn’t the right time to tell him about your pregnancy over an email, or even a phone call.”

She paused, giving me a stern look. “You need to tell him face to face, Jude. He deserves to hear it directly from you, and you need to see his reaction. I know it’s scary, and I can

totally understand your need to have some help and companionship during all of this, but it's the right thing to do."

As I listened to Sally, I knew she was right. I needed to pull myself together and I needed to be patient.

I swallowed, forcing a nod. "You're right, Sal," I said, wiping at the remnants of my tears. "I need to wait. I need to tell Tony face to face." A thought suddenly occurred to me. "But what about my parents?" I asked, recalling that they'd be landing in a couple of days for Christmas. I looked at Sally, my eyebrows shooting up as a wild thought struck me. "Do you think a grandchild would be a good Christmas gift?"

The question was out before I could second-guess it, a desperate attempt to inject humor into an emotionally draining conversation. I half-expected a chastising look from Sally but instead, she let out a bark of laughter that echoed around the room, her eyes twinkling with amusement.

"Well, my dear," she began, wiping a tear of laughter from the corner of her eye, "I don't think there's a grandparent in the world who wouldn't be thrilled to receive a present like that. But" she continued, her smile fading into a serious look, "you still need to tell Tony first."

Her words made sense. No matter how joyous the news might be for my parents, it was Tony's right as the father to know first. We laughed a little more at the thought of the dramatic Christmas reveal, and despite the heaviness in my heart, I felt a small sense of relief. There was a plan, however shaky, and that was something I could hold on to.

The rest of the day turned into a blur of laughter and tears, of fear and courage. As I closed up my office, I realized that, for the first time since the pregnancy test, I was genuinely smiling. I wasn't alone in this. I had support. I had a plan. And somehow, I was going to navigate through the chaos one day at a time.

CHAPTER 31

As the gray winter days continued to roll in, the emptiness of the house seemed to echo off the walls, a constant reminder of Tony's absence. Missing him was like a dull ache, a constant throb at the back of my mind. The usual comfort of my home was replaced with an unsettling quietness. Tony was thousands of miles away with his family and I was left to deal with the early stages of pregnancy in solitude. It was hard, harder than I ever imagined it would be.

Just as I was trying to get a grip on the physical changes, my phone buzzed with a text. A quick glance at the sender's name was enough to sour my already queasy stomach. Andrew. Of course. Because life had a wicked sense of humor.

Coming over for the last of my things. Please don't make a scene like last time. See you soon.

Seeing Andrew's name flash across my screen sent a jolt of anxiety through me, like a shot of adrenaline to the heart. My palms began to sweat, my heart was pounding, a familiar dread sinking into the pit of my stomach.

He'd even added that cheeky "see you soon" at the end of the message, as if we were old pals catching up over coffee, not ex-spouses with a tumultuous past. Andrew never missed a chance to stir the pot.

As I sat there clutching my phone, I could feel the dread slowly ebbing away. I looked around my living room, at the life I'd built without him. The cozy blankets draped over the

back of my couch, the half-finished puzzle on the coffee table, Sadie snoozing peacefully at my feet. This was my sanctuary, my safe haven. I wouldn't let Andrew disrupt that.

The dread began to harden into something else entirely, something more akin to determination. I was not the same woman Andrew had cheated on, and I was damn sure not going to let him walk all over me again. I was stronger now, stronger than I'd ever been. I had found someone who treated me with respect, someone who valued me for who I was, not what they wanted me to be. I had a baby on the way, a new life that needed protecting.

I wasn't about to let Andrew disrupt the peace I had finally found. As I prepared myself for the upcoming confrontation, I felt a surge of resolve. I wasn't the same Jude he'd left behind, and he was about to find out exactly how much I'd changed.

Sadie padded over to me, pressing her snout into my knee. She looked up at me with those soulful brown eyes, as if sensing the tension radiating off me. I ruffled her soft fur, drawing a measure of comfort from her company.

But my heart rate spiked again as I heard the unmistakable rumble of Andrew's oversized truck pulling into my driveway. Through the living room window, I watched as he stepped out, Ashley clinging to his arm like a leach, because *of course* he'd bring her with him.

A surge of anger coursed through me. He'd given me barely any notice on purpose, hoping to catch me off guard. He'd always thrived on these games of power, games I was no longer willing to play. His intent was clear—he wanted to catch me at my weakest, wanted to see me squirm under Ashley's triumphant gaze.

But he didn't know the woman I'd become.

As they approached the front door, determination swelled within me. This was my home, my safe place. He had no power here. I was not going to crumble, not going to let him see me hurt. I squared my shoulders, held my head high, and strode toward the door.

My hands were steady as I opened it, meeting Andrew's surprise-filled gaze head on. I stood there, a woman transformed, ready to banish the ghost of my past and claim my future. I felt empowered, a force to be reckoned with. And I was ready to show Andrew just how much I had changed.

"Andrew," I greeted him, my voice steady and calm. "Ashley." I nodded at her too, not missing the flicker of shock crossing her face. They had underestimated me, and I was ready to show them just how wrong they were.

As Andrew approached, a wave of unwanted familiarity washed over me. The cocky stride, the overconfident smirk, and the piercing blue eyes that were once my world but now only made my skin crawl.

"Hey Jude, I just came by to get those things in the basement," he said with an easy drawl.

"I told you the last time, there's nothing down there of yours."

"Yes there is," Ashley shot out, her eyes narrowing into hateful little slits. "And if you don't give them back, that's stealing. We could call the police on you."

I chuckled. "Wow, brains *and* beauty, she's really the whole package, huh, Andy?"

Before the back-and-forth could continue, Andrew raised his palm, silencing Ashley with a gesture.

He stepped forward, hands on his hips. "Enough is enough, Jude. I want my things."

"I've told you, Andrew," I said, holding my ground, "there's nothing of yours left in the basement. And if I do happen to find anything, I'll pack them up and send them your way."

He shook his head, his brow furrowed. "That won't do, Jude. I need to see for myself."

I folded my arms across my chest, the surge of adrenaline heightening my senses. "I'm not letting you in my house, Andrew. Not now, not ever again."

He stared at me, surprise flashing in his eyes. Clearly, he hadn't expected this level of resistance from me. But I wasn't the same woman he'd left. I was stronger, more confident.

"Jude," he began again, his voice laced with feigned patience, "don't be difficult. I'm not taking no for an answer."

His refusal to respect my boundaries ignited a flame within me. It was high time I showed him who he was dealing with. "Well, you're going to have to start getting used to it, Andrew, because no is exactly what you're getting."

Andrew looked past me into the house. "Where's your boyfriend? Is he the reason you think you can tell me what to do now?" My cheeks heated, but I pushed down the urge to lash out. "Tony doesn't need to be here for me to handle you, Andrew," I shot back.

"Right," Andrew said. "But Tony or not, I'm coming in. Now, if you'll get out of the way..."

He took a step forward in an attempt to stride right on in. Any other point in my life, I might've stood aside and let him do it but not this time.

Maybe it was the baby, or maybe I'd just finally had enough. But in that moment, I decided that I was done with him.

The smugness on Andrew's face faded as I lifted my hand, sticking out my finger and poking it right into his chest. "No, Andrew. You're not stepping one foot inside *my* house."

Andrew's eyebrows shot up, clearly not expecting my audacity. "Oh, really?" he drawled, crossing his arms over his chest. Ashley remained silent, her smirk turning into a frown, as if even she could sense that something had changed.

"Yes, really," I replied, mustering all the confidence I could. "You think you can just bulldoze your way into my life again, take whatever you want, and leave? That's not how it works. Not anymore."

Andrew opened his mouth to retort, but I pressed on. "You and I are done, Andrew. We've been done for a long time. And yet here you are, trying to control and manipulate me like you

did when we were married. Well, guess what? I'm not that person anymore. I'm not the same Jude who let you walk all over her."

I felt my face heating up from pure anger. "You have a new life, with Ashley, and I have mine. Whatever connection we had, you broke it when you cheated on me. You're not coming in. You're not taking anything. You're leaving. And this time, it's for good."

The stunned silence that followed my speech was so gratifying, I could almost taste it. Andrew's face paled and his cocky stance deflated.

"And one more thing," I added, my gaze never leaving his, "I don't need Tony, or anyone else, to protect me from you. I can handle you just fine on my own, which is what I'm doing this very moment. Now get the fuck off my property before I have you both arrested for trespassing and harassment."

Andrew's usually smug expression was replaced by a shell-shocked, blank stare. He opened his mouth, closed it, and then tried again, managing to spit out a meek, "Fine."

Ashley looked at him, her icy eyes wide with disbelief. She turned back to me, her mouth half-open, but she must have thought better of it because she snapped it shut and stomped off toward the truck. Andrew, looking like a sulky teenager who'd just been grounded, followed her without another word.

From the doorway, I watched them. Ashley climbed into the passenger seat, her face a mask of fury and embarrassment. Andrew slid into the driver's seat, his shoulders hunched and defeat clear on his face. With a loud roar, the truck pulled out of my driveway, leaving tire tracks in its wake.

A sense of satisfaction filled me as I watched the vehicle disappear down the road. I had finally stood up to Andrew and his bullying, and it felt damn good.

As I closed the door, a cold gust of wind swirled around me, carrying with it the first few delicate flakes of snow. I took a deep breath, watching as the world around me started to

resemble a snow globe. I thought of the baby growing inside me, and a nurturing warmth spread through my body.

There would be challenges ahead, especially with Tony still in Spain and the baby news waiting to be delivered. But if I could face down Andrew and Ashley, I could face anything. I smiled, finally at peace, as the snow continued to fall.

A sudden determination took over me. I looked at the bare and undecorated front lawn. The Christmas decorations were still in the garage, waiting to be put on display. Making up my mind, I bundled myself up in a warm coat and boots, with Sadie curiously following me to the door.

We stepped outside into the chilly evening air. With the snow gently falling, it was a perfect time to put up the decorations. The holiday spirit was already in the air, and despite what had just happened, I felt oddly cheerful.

While Sadie watched from the porch, occasionally darting out to catch falling snowflakes with her tongue, I got to work. I focused on the decorations that didn't require ladders or heavy lifting, mindful of my condition. The twinkling lights and festive ornaments gradually transformed the front lawn, each piece bringing a small sense of accomplishment.

Once the last piece was in place, I stepped back to admire my handiwork. There was something undeniably satisfying about seeing the Christmas decorations light up the front lawn, illuminating the falling snow.

Back inside, I traded my winter gear for some cozy loungewear. I started a fire in the fireplace, the orange flames crackling and dancing, providing a comforting warmth against the winter chill. Settling down on the couch with a hot cup of tea, I curled up under a blanket, Sadie snuggling up beside me.

A soft ping drew my attention to my phone. It was a text from my mom, overflowing with excitement about their upcoming visit. I smiled, picturing the joyful chaos my parents would bring.

As I watched the flames dance in the fireplace, a calm sense of resolution settled over me. I thought of the baby

growing inside me, and for the first time, it didn't feel like a terrifying unknown.

Despite the hole that Tony's absence left in my life, I realized I was okay with it. Of course, I wanted him to be a part of our lives, but I was ready to face the prospect of raising the baby alone if he wasn't in the picture.

The showdown with Andrew had proven that I was stronger than I had realized. With that thought in mind, I closed my eyes, the soft crackling of the fire and the gentle snores from Sadie lulling me into a sense of peace and contentment that I hadn't known in a long, long while.

CHAPTER 32

Time started to warp, blending the handful of days before Christmas into a hazy mess. Each email notification felt like a cruel reminder of the distance between us. Tony and I were still technically in the same world, but as his responses became less frequent and more sterile, I felt more like I was reading a medical journal than correspondence from the father of my child.

“It’s like he’s just Dr. Tony, M.D. and that’s it,” I said to Sally one day, staring at the latest email update. “Dad’s oxygen levels are stabilizing. The nurses say he’s responding well to therapy. Mom’s doing alright.”

“Maybe this is his way of dealing with it,” Sally had said. “I mean, most men aren’t exactly emotionally expansive. He’s going through a difficult time, and maybe retreating to his clinical, professional mode is how he’s coping.”

She had a point. All the same, it was still hard.

There were no sweet nothings, no shared jokes, no affectionate sign offs. Just the facts, plain and simple. In a way, I could understand. Sally was right—maybe it was how Tony dealt with crises, he used logic and efficiency. But understanding didn’t make it hurt any less.

Every new message from him carried an undercurrent of distance, an emotional detachment that I found harder to bear than the physical one. As the days wore on, the words I miss you—words he seemingly had typed so easily before—disappeared from his emails.

As much as I tried not to, I couldn't help but feel like he was slipping away. It was like we were slowly becoming two strangers living on opposite sides of the globe.

Even with the ever-growing life inside me, a living testament to our connection, I couldn't shake the feeling that our bond was fraying with each passing day. And with no way to know when Tony would be home for certain, I was left feeling stranded, floating aimlessly in a sea of doubt.

Typing out responses to Tony's emails had turned into a sort of ritual. A ritual of longing and frustration that was becoming harder to carry out with each passing day. I kept my replies impersonal, mirroring his own. *Glad to hear he's doing better* or *That must be really hard for your mom*. But every time I pressed send, I felt like I was leaving a piece of myself unsaid, like there was a whole other email waiting to burst forth from my heart.

I wanted to tell him how much I missed him, how the house felt empty without his laughter filling it. I wanted to tell him about my own worries, how I was juggling work and morning sickness that felt more like all-day sickness. But most of all, I wanted to tell him about our baby.

Every time I placed a hand over my belly, I was acutely aware of the secret I was keeping. A secret that felt heavier each day, bearing down on my soul. I longed to share this joy with him, to hear his voice brimming with excitement or shock or fear. Any emotion would do, as long as it was something.

Each day, however, I held my silence. Tony had enough on his plate without me adding to it. He was miles away, dealing with his own problems. The last thing he needed was me complicating things further.

But oh, how I missed him. I missed him with a depth that ached, a longing that seeped into my every thought. My heart felt empty with his absence, and the secret I was carrying felt like a constant whisper in my ear, growing louder with each passing day.

It wasn't just the morning sickness that was making me queasy. It was the emotional distance, the silence, and the

secret, growing everyday just like our child.

I felt like a wreck. The nausea had grown worse and gripped me in a relentless stranglehold, making it impossible for me to function normally. It wasn't just in the mornings anymore. It lingered throughout the day, hovering over me like a dark cloud. I knew I had to do something about it, especially with my new role at work demanding so much of my attention.

I made a call to my doctor, explaining my situation. Her voice was comforting over the line, a calm presence amidst the storm of my worries. After hearing me out, she prescribed Phenergan, a nausea medication safe for pregnant women. She also cautioned me about my stress levels, reminding me of the risks associated with a diabetic pregnancy at an "advanced" age.

"Advanced age, huh?" I retorted, unable to resist the urge to give her a bit of sass. "Never thought I'd hear that phrase applied to me."

She laughed, but her tone sobered as she reinforced her point. "I know you, Jude. You're resilient, but remember, pregnancy isn't a sprint, it's a marathon. You have to pace yourself, okay?"

I promised her I would, but a small part of me felt a tinge of resentment. How was I supposed to manage stress when I was carrying a baby, missing the man I was in love with, and handling a promotion all at once?

After a couple of days on the medication, I felt a slight improvement. It wasn't miraculous, but at least I could get through the day without having to make a mad dash to the bathroom every few hours.

I looked at myself in the mirror, gave a half-hearted smile, and said, "Well, welcome to motherhood, Jude. Buckle up, it's gonna be a bumpy ride."



Before I knew it, it was the day of my parents' arrival, and I was heading to the airport to pick them up, Sadie by my side as a source of comfort. My parents, Helen and Richard, were the epitome of what you'd imagine when you thought of "baby boomers." My dad, a former law professor still with a full head of silver hair, looked ever the intellectual, his glasses always perched precariously on the edge of his nose. My mom, a retired executive, was the picture of sophistication, always put together, and yet with a warmth about her that made her approachable.

"Darling!" my mom greeted, enveloping me in a tight hug. "God, I can't believe how long it's been!"

Dad ruffled Sadie's fur fondly before turning to me. "Good to see you, kiddo."

As we got into the car, the familiar, comforting chatter of my parents filled the space. Mom talked about the flight while Dad thought out loud about what he wanted for dinner. Yet they always had a way of knowing when something was wrong with me, and that day was no different.

"You seem a bit off, sweetheart," Mom noted, turning to study me in the front seat. "Is it the new job? It's not too stressful, is it?"

"No, not at all. I mean, it's hard, but the good kind of hard."

I tried my best to brush off her concerns, but Mom wasn't easily fooled. She gave me that scrutinizing look that only mothers can perfect.

"Is there a man involved?" she probed, and I nearly choked.

I glanced in the rearview mirror and saw my dad roll his eyes good-naturedly. "Helen, give her some space," he said.

"Well, I'm just asking," she responded, but her eyes stayed on me.

I let out a sigh. "No. I mean, yes. I mean... it's complicated. Nothing I want to get into now." God, it felt like

such a cliché. But how else to describe what was going on without plopping the truth down in front of them?

I expected more questions, but to my surprise, both of them nodded, their expressions softening. I felt a warmth spreading through my chest, a reminder of why I loved my parents so much. They might be nosy and overly concerned at times, but they always respected my decisions.

“Well, darling,” Mom said, patting my shoulder, “just remember, no man is worth losing yourself over.”

And just like that, our conversation moved onto lighter topics. But Mom’s words lingered in my mind, a poignant reminder that life was full of twists and turns, and all I could do was buckle up and hang on.

We went home and settled in for the night, and before I knew it, the clatter of Christmas morning had taken over the house. The aroma of fresh coffee filled the air and the crackle of the fireplace was the soundtrack to our holiday. Dad had claimed the large armchair and was snoring peacefully, wrapped in the satisfaction of a post-presents holiday nap. Mom and I were in the kitchen, baking cookies and dancing around each other in a choreographed routine of mother-daughter harmony.

But as we moved in sync, a ball of guilt twisted in my stomach. Each happy domestic scene, each moment of tranquility only served to remind me of the secret I was keeping. It was like a shadow hanging over me, painting every joyful moment with a shade of regret. It wasn’t fair to them. It wasn’t fair to me.

With a shaky breath, I turned to my mom, my hands covered in flour, my heart pounding.

“Mom,” I started, my voice breaking a little. She looked up from where she was measuring out ingredients, her eyes filled with concern.

“What is it, sweetheart?” she asked, her motherly instincts kicking in full force.

“I’m...” I swallowed, steeling myself. “I’m pregnant.”

I knew I'd made the decision to tell Tony first. But something had to give, and that was it.

For a moment, there was silence. Then my mom's face split into a grin, her eyes watering as she threw her arms around me.

"Oh my God, Jude! Oh my God!" she exclaimed, her voice so loud that it jolted my dad awake. He shot up from his chair, his glasses askew and his eyes wide.

"What's wrong?" he asked, looking from me to my mom, concern etching lines into his forehead.

Mom pulled away from me, still grinning, and turned to him. "Nothing's wrong, Richard! Just that our daughter is going to have a baby!"

And just like that, the room erupted into pure, unadulterated joy, the guilt finally lifting.

The happiness was infectious, washing over me in waves. The warmth of their embrace, the sound of their laughter, it was a balm to the fears that had been eating away at me. Dad scooped me up, his arms strong and comforting, a twinkle in his eyes as he spun me around. The room was a blur of smiles and tears.

"How far along are you, sweetheart?" Mom asked, her hand already on my belly.

"About six weeks," I replied, a hand coming to rest atop hers.

"And are you okay?" Dad's voice was laced with concern. "I mean, physically, emotionally...?"

"I'm... managing," I admitted. "The nausea's been pretty bad, but I've got medication now."

"That's good, that's good." Dad nodded, relief evident in his eyes.

They looked at each other, the question unspoken but clear in their expressions. The father. I knew it was coming, and part of me dreaded it.

“So, who’s the lucky guy?” Mom asked cautiously, giving me a look that clearly said she knew there was more to the story.

Just as I was about to reply, the doorbell rang, its sudden chime breaking the tension and bringing the conversation to a halt. We all looked at each other, surprised. I wasn’t expecting any visitors.

“I’ll get it,” I said, my curiosity piqued. As I walked toward the door, I could hear my parents whispering in the kitchen.

Unsolicited questions and unexpected doorbells—a true holiday, indeed.

“Give me a second, I’ll be right back,” I said over my shoulder heading toward the door. I couldn’t help but feel a pang of anxiety. If it was Andrew on the other side of that door, ready to ruin my holiday with one more visit, I wasn’t sure how I’d react.

As I reached the door, I took a deep breath before opening it, ready to face whoever was on the other side. But as it swung open, all the witty comebacks and scathing remarks I’d prepared for Andrew died on my lips. Because standing in front of me wasn’t my ex—it was Tony.

He was there, standing on my porch, dusted with snow and grinning from ear to ear. “Merry Christmas, Jude,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

I stood there frozen, words failing me. Was this a dream? It had to be. Because otherwise, that meant Tony was here. On my doorstep. On Christmas Day.

I glanced back over my shoulder, my mind racing. My parents were in the kitchen, waiting for an explanation I didn’t have.

CHAPTER 33

The look on Jude's face was a surprise. I don't know what I expected. A squeal of delight? A punch to the arm? But definitely not the stunned silence and wide-eyed shock that greeted me. It was disconcerting, to say the least. I hadn't traveled halfway across the globe for such a less than enthusiastic greeting.

"What's the matter, Jude?" I asked, trying to keep the smirk off my face. "Black lab got your tongue?" I glanced over at Sadie, who watched me with what almost seemed like skepticism in those dark eyes of hers, as if she were just as unsure about my presence as her mom surely was.

She was a sight for sore eyes, standing there in her cozy sweater and jeans, a relaxed ensemble that did nothing to hide her feminine curves. Her usually free-flowing hair was pulled back in a short ponytail, her makeup light and natural.

Seeing her face unframed by those loose waves, I was struck by her natural beauty. Her eyes, as always, were expressive, reflecting the whirl of emotions that was no doubt spinning inside her. Her lips seemed to be tempting me for another round of the kissing I'd so enjoyed with her.

I had to swallow hard, reminding myself that I was not there for a casual visit. There were important things we needed to discuss. But in that moment, all I wanted to do was take in the sight of her, feel the warmth of her in my arms, and revel in the knowledge that I was back where I belonged, in her presence. In her life. And hopefully, in her heart.

Before she could say anything, I decided to take matters into my own hands. Literally. I took a step forward, wrapping her in my arms and pulling her toward me. Her eyes widened even more but she didn't resist. That was a good sign.

I kissed her. Hard. I poured all my frustration, longing, and—dare I say it—love into that kiss. I wanted her to know how much I missed her. How much I needed her.

As I finally pulled away, I looked at her, trying to gauge her reaction. I couldn't tell whether or not she was glad to see me.

“So,” I said, trying to keep my voice casual, “did you miss me?”

As I placed my mouth on hers it was like getting a jolt of electricity right through my system. At first, she didn't respond, and I had a sinking feeling that I'd misjudged the situation. But then her lips were moving, and my body went from zero to sixty in less time than it took me to blink.

Just as things were getting really heated, the sound of a throat clearing from behind caused us to pull apart, and it was like someone poured cold water over my head. I jerked back, peeling myself off Jude and turning toward the sound.

I saw her parents standing there watching the spectacle we'd made with a mix of amusement and surprise. I knew them from the pictures scattered around her home, and the least I could do after such an entrance was to introduce myself.

I released Jude, stepping forward to greet them. I walked up to her dad first, a mirror image of Jude with his sparkling green eyes and the same tinge of stubbornness.

“Tony,” I said, extending my hand to him. “Tony Montivais.”

“*Doctor* Tony Montivais,” Jude added. “We work together.”

I could see the surprise in his eyes, probably because his daughter hadn't mentioned anything about me to them. His grip was firm, an unspoken challenge that I met with equal

strength. Then I turned to her mother. She had the same warm smile as Jude, the same expressive eyes.

“And you must be Jude’s mother,” I said, extending my hand to her as well. She took it with a curious look, clearly wondering who the hell I was and what I was doing kissing her daughter.

There were some explanations to be made, and I had a feeling that I was in for a long evening. But with Jude by my side, I was ready for anything. Even the infamous meeting with the parents.

The click of the door closing behind me felt a little too final, like a gunshot starting a race I wasn’t ready for. Jude moved swiftly, her eyes wide and frantic, trying to steer the conversation away from dangerous waters. Her efforts were futile.

From the corner of my eye, I saw her mother step forward, a friendly glint in her gaze. She looked straight at me, an innocent smile on her lips, but her question hit me like a wrecking ball. “Are you the father?”

My mind came to a grinding halt. Every thought, every sound, every sensation except for the thundering of my heartbeat ceased to exist. My gaze jerked immediately over to Jude, and I watched as a deep blush spread across her cheeks, a crimson flag of truth waving on her face.

“MOM!” Jude squealed, her voice echoing in the silence of the room. She sounded horrified, embarrassed, like a teenager caught sneaking in after staying out past curfew. It was too late for damage control. The cat was out of the bag and running around the room, causing a commotion.

I felt my own face flush, a strange mixture of surprise, confusion, and something else I couldn’t quite pinpoint swirling inside me. My world tilted as I looked at Jude, her wide-eyed, deer-in-the-headlights expression mirroring my own internal chaos. I was blindsided, cornered, and utterly lost. All I could do was look at her, trying to find some grounding in her gaze.

I tried to decipher her expression. She looked terrified, the fear dancing in the depths of her eyes. Damn. The last thing I wanted was for her to be afraid of me, of us, of this. I took a step back, needing to put some physical distance between myself and the situation as my mind grappled with the revelation. The room spun around me, but I kept my gaze locked on Jude, the eye of my storm.

I glanced at her parents, their eyes wide with shock, same as mine, only theirs held a glimmer of excitement too. I imagined they had been over the moon a few moments ago, happy at the prospect of a grandchild. Now, they looked as if they were walking on eggshells, unsure of how to react. This wasn't how I'd planned on meeting her parents for the first time.

I looked back at Jude, her face pale and strained. She opened her mouth to say something, but the words were stuck in her throat. I needed to hear her say it, to confirm what her mother had so bluntly asked, what she had so expressively responded to. Was I about to be a father?

My heart was racing, my mind whirling, but a warm, radiant joy started to spread through me, setting every nerve alight. We were going to have a baby. *Our* baby.

Without thinking, I closed the distance between us and scooped Jude up in a bear hug, her small frame fitting perfectly against me. Pure, unadulterated joy erupted from my chest as I spun us around, the world blurring into a mix of glorious color and light. I felt like I was flying, like I was invincible.

Jude laughed, a soft, melodious sound that filled my heart with joy. She gazed up at me, her beautiful eyes twinkling with tears and excitement. "Are you okay?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

I grinned down at her, my chest rumbling with a jubilant laugh. "I'm more than okay, Jude. I'm great. We're having a baby!" I said, the reality sinking in. It felt like a dream, a beautiful, wonderful dream I never wanted to wake up from.

I bent down to capture her lips in a sweet kiss, every nerve ending in my body rapidly firing. The taste of her lips was the best Christmas present I could have ever asked for. As I pulled back, I gently cupped her face, my gaze drinking in her radiant smile, the glow in her eyes. “Merry Christmas, Jude,” I whispered, my voice thick with emotion.

It was the merriest damn Christmas of my life.

EPILOGUE I

Almost two years later...

It was Corbin's first birthday and I watched as the living room slowly turned into a mini amusement park, complete with bright decorations, a buffet of cupcakes, and toys strewn all about. Jude, along with both sets of parents, Sally and a dozen other friends from work, all with kids of their own in tow, were making sure it would be a memorable one.

"I still don't see why we have to throw such a huge party," I said out loud, watching as my dad Edgar—looking healthier and stronger than ever—and Jude's dad moved the couch to make room for the small inflatable castle Jude had rented. "He's only one. He won't remember any of this."

Jude, who had been arranging cupcakes on a tiered stand, turned to me with a knowing smirk. "It's not just for him, Tony," she said, wiping her hands on her apron. "It's for us too. Our baby boy is turning one. That's a big deal. Plus," she added, her eyes sparkling with mischief, "this baby deserves everything."

I couldn't argue with that. I grinned at her, my gaze softening. "You're right. He definitely does."

Life had been a whirlwind since that unforgettable Christmas nearly two years ago. I'd been promoted to Chief Cardiothoracic Surgeon. It was a big deal, a culmination of years of sleepless nights and relentless hard work. But as proud as I was of my professional achievements, my real

happiness stemmed from the beautiful life Jude and I had built together.

Jude was thriving in her management role at the hospital. Her brilliance and hard work paid off, her career skyrocketing faster than either of us could have anticipated. Her wit and sass, and her never back down attitude were quickly making her one of the most indispensable members of the staff, and I couldn't have been prouder.

We'd moved to a stunning home in the Cherry Creek neighborhood of Denver. It was a perfect mix of classic and modern architecture, situated in one of the most picturesque parts of the city. With wide, tree-lined streets and boutique shops around every corner, Cherry Creek fit our family like a glove.

The house itself was a thing of beauty—a grand, two-story structure of elegant brick and stone, with large windows that let in an abundance of natural light. The spacious, open plan living area was perfect for entertaining, and the expansive backyard would be an ideal playground for Corbin as he grew.

Upstairs, the master suite was our personal sanctuary, and Corbin's nursery was decorated in warm, welcoming hues, filled with books and toys. Jude's touch was everywhere—in the tastefully picked furniture, the cozy fireplace, the artwork adorning the walls. It was our home, our haven. Life, as they say, was good. Better than good, in fact. It was perfect.

There was something magical about being able to celebrate life's milestones with the people we loved most. Seeing my dad playing with his grandson, seeing Jude's mom fussing over the food, and my mother carrying around a camera capturing every moment, filled me with overwhelming joy.

I wrapped my arms around Jude from behind, my chin resting on top of her head. The scent of her shampoo filled my nose and a sense of contentment washed over me.

“We really did this, didn't we?” I asked her.

Jude leaned back into me, her hand coming up to caress my cheek. “Yes, we did. We made a little human. And he's

perfect.”

I laughed, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. “That he is. Our little man.”

My thoughts wandered to our boy, and I could hardly believe it had been a year since he’d come into the world.

Corbin was the picture-perfect blend of Jude and me. He had my dark hair, so soft to the touch, and the same chiseled facial features that all the Montivais men were known for. His eyes were a mesmerizing green, courtesy of Jude, which shined with mischief every time he flashed that infectious smile of his. His laughter was as refreshing as a spring day and as contagious as any toddler’s could be.

He was a bundle of energy, that kid. Only a year old, but his curiosity would put Einstein to shame. He was just as stubborn as both his mother and me, never backing down when he’d set his sights on something be it a toy, a dog, or a situation that he surely was too little for.

In his wake, Corbin left a trail of squealing laughter and absolute chaos, but it was the most beautiful mess I’d ever been a part of.

There was something so incredibly humbling about seeing your own traits reflected in your child. It made you want to be a better person for them. Corbin gave me that feeling. He was a mirror of not just my looks but my actions, and every day, he pushed me to be a man worthy of his admiration.

So much had changed in a year. But one thing that remained constant was the love I had for Jude and our son. It was this constant that made every day feel like Christmas, every moment like a gift.

As I watched our loved ones bustling around our living room, the kids playing together and filling our home with that wonderful sound of children’s laughter, I felt like the luckiest man alive. I had everything I could ever want. A family who loved me, a woman who made me feel like a king, and a son who was my whole world.

As I watched Jude move around the room, her laughter filling the air, I knew one thing for sure—I wouldn't change a single thing about our perfectly imperfect life.

“You know, Tony,” my dad said, clapping me on the back with a hearty laugh, “it's best to just let the mother have her way. It makes life a lot easier.”

I chuckled, shaking my head at his sage advice. Dad was a hulk of a man, with a thick beard and laugh lines that told tales of a life well-lived. His once dark hair was now peppered with grey, but his eyes, as bright and warm as a summer's day, were as youthful as ever. They held a twinkle that was part mischief, part wisdom, the same twinkle that I saw in Corbin's eyes. Dad appeared strong as ever and healthy—you'd never know looking at him that two years ago he'd nearly left us.

As he spoke in Spanish to my baby boy, he cradled Corbin in his arms, my father so huge in comparison that Corbin looked almost newborn-sized. My parents had made me promise that I'd teach our little one the language of our roots so they could communicate with him. And true to my word, I'd been speaking Spanish to him while Jude spoke English.

Speaking of Jude, she had been trying to pick up Spanish too, much to my amusement. Her attempts were cute, and her accent was incredibly endearing, but her vocabulary... well, that could use some work.

As if on cue, she walked over to us with a smile, attempting to impress my parents with her newfound linguistic skills.

“Buenos tardes, suegros,” she said with a confident grin. “Estoy muy caliente.”

I burst into laughter, clutching my stomach as my parents tried to stifle their own giggles. Jude blushed a deep red, realizing her mistake. “I meant, estoy muy feliz!”

I pulled her to my side, pressing a kiss to her temple. “You're doing great, mi amor. Just remember, caliente is hot, feliz is happy.”

She rolled her eyes at me, but I could see the laughter dancing in her gaze. “Yeah, yeah, I’ll get it right next time.”

“Can’t wait to see what you come up with next,” I teased, unable to resist. It was those moments, filled with love and laughter, that I cherished the most.

Despite the festive atmosphere and the laughter bouncing off the walls, I had anticipation curling in my gut. Our son turning one wasn’t the only cause for celebration, and the small box hidden securely in my pocket was a testament to that.

As Jude expertly maneuvered around with the cake, the crowd singing “Happy Birthday”, my gaze found her parents. Her dad caught my eye and nodded his approval, an emotion that mirrored the pride swelling within my chest. Jude helped Corbin blow out the single candle on his birthday cake as everyone cheered.

Sally, Jude’s ever-prepared friend, had her camera at the ready. She was documenting every minute of Corbin’s big day, but there was another important moment about to unfold. She turned the camera toward us, an excited grin playing on her lips. This was it.

I carefully positioned myself to stand behind Jude, dropping down on one knee. I heard an audible gasp from the room, but my attention was focused only on her, in anticipation of her turning around.

A piece of cake still in her hand, Jude turned, her eyes widening in surprise. The cake wobbled precariously as she stammered, almost dropping it onto my head. A collective giggle spread through the room, but then silence fell again as they all waited for her reaction.

She gasped, covering her mouth with her free hand, her eyes watering as she took in the sight of me down on one knee before her. The shock transformed into a squeal of delight, and in that moment, amidst the ensuing cheer and laughter, I knew I’d made the right decision.

The love of my life, the mother of my child, the woman who had turned my world upside down in the best possible way, was about to become my fiancée. And I couldn't wait to embark on our next journey together.

On my knee, with all our loved ones surrounding us, I looked up at Jude, her sparkling eyes wide with eagerness. I took a deep breath, preparing to bare my soul to her in front of everyone.

“Jude,” I began, our eyes locked on one another’s. “From the moment I first saw you, I knew there was something special about you. Your wit, your resilience, and that incredible spark you carry drew me to you like a moth to a flame. You’re not just beautiful, you’re brave, intelligent, and fiercely independent.”

The room was quiet as a tomb, with everyone holding their breaths. Jude’s hand was over her mouth, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. I smiled, the corner of my mouth tilting up in that cocky way she claimed to hate but secretly loved.

“You’ve given me the best gift of all—Corbin.” I glanced at our son, busy with his cake, oblivious to the gravity of the moment. “Being a father has made me a better man, and it’s all because of you.”

I swallowed, the lump in my throat making it a little hard to speak. But I had to finish, to say the words that were burning inside me. “You are my best friend, my love, my partner in crime. Every single day with you is a new adventure. You challenge me, push me, and love me in ways I never thought possible. I want to spend the rest of my life with you, fighting battles, overcoming challenges, and raising our beautiful son. Will you make me the happiest man alive and marry me, Jude?”

Then in a lower voice, almost a whisper meant only for her, I said the three words I knew she understood in Spanish, “Te amo, Jude.”

With that, I opened the small box, the beautiful diamond ring catching the light that poured in through our towering windows.

For a moment the room was silent. Then a shout of 'yes' broke the quiet and with a nod of her head, she flung herself into my arms. The room erupted in applause and cheers. As I held her close, her laughter ringing in my ears, I knew I had everything I could ever want. I had my family, my love, and my future, all wrapped up in the woman in my arms.

EPILOGUE II

Two months later...

Fall had splashed its breathtaking palette over the Colorado wilderness, and Tony's cabin—our cabin—was a painting come to life. The aspens shimmered in hues of gold and amber, a stark contrast to the dark green of the pines, and the air was crisp with the bite of the changing seasons. The once vivid blue of the sky was now mellowing, splashed with strokes of orange and pink as the sun set earlier with each passing day. Everywhere you looked, autumn was staking its claim.

And smack dab in the middle of the rustic wonderland was our charming cabin, its dark wood facade looking more inviting than ever against the riot of fall colors. The cabin, once a symbol of solitude, was now filled with the laughter and love of our small family. Sadie snoozed gently by her favorite window, golden light streaming down as her chest rose and fell.

Corbin, our curious little explorer, had a knack for discovering every nook and cranny in the cabin that wasn't toddler-proofed. Between keeping him from the fireplace and fishing him out from under the bed, Tony and I had our work cut out for us. Never a dull moment with the little man around, that was for sure.

Exhaustion was a small price to pay for the joy he brought into our lives, however. The cabin echoed with his giggles, his goofy babble, the pitter-patter of his tiny feet. His infectious

energy had turned the cabin upside down, and yet I wouldn't have it any other way.

As Corbin finally succumbed to his afternoon nap, Tony and I collapsed on the couch, spent but content. The cabin fell silent, save for the soft crackling of the fireplace and Corbin's gentle snores. Fall afternoons were meant for cozy fires, comfy sweaters, and hot cups of tea, and as I snuggled into Tony's embrace, I couldn't think of a better way to spend the day.

"I mean, really, look at us," I start, my voice musing, echoing through the serene quiet of the cabin. As I watched the autumnal landscape beyond the window, painted with strokes of fiery reds, golds, and browns, the words slipped out effortlessly. "Who would have thought? What started with me trudging through the snow, cursing you under my breath, ended up *here*."

I could hear the smile in Tony's voice as he responded. "You were cursing me under your breath?" he placed his hand on his heart in an exaggerated way, as if he'd been mortally wounded by my words.

"Of course I was!"

We fell into laughter, snuggling closer to one another.

"But it was worth it," I said. "I'd drive up a thousand mountains during a thousand blizzards if I knew this life was waiting for me at the end of it all."

He grinned. "You still feel that way even when Corbin turns our house into a disaster zone?"

"Even then."

A comfortable silence fell over us before my thoughts circled back to the wedding we were still in the throes of planning.

"As for the wedding," I mused aloud, letting the ideas unfurl. "Do we go big and grand in a cathedral? Or opt for something more intimate and low-key? Or... maybe we could even get married in Spain."

Tony chuckled against my neck. “Spain, huh? That’s not a bad idea. My parents’ vineyard would make quite the venue. Though, aren’t you worried your family won’t want to travel that far?”

I swatted at his chest playfully. “They’d cross an ocean for us, and you know it. But honestly, with you, I’d say ‘I do’ in a snowstorm on top of a mountain.”

“Well, this is Colorado. That could be arranged.”

I giggled at his response, the easy banter bringing a warmth to my heart that had nothing to do with the roaring fire nearby. Sensing a shift in the air, I turned in his arms, his handsome face splitting into a devilish grin that matched my own.

“Now that our little tornado is down for his nap, maybe we can spend our free time more creatively.” I placed my fingertip on his chest, making it clear what I had in mind.

Tony raised his eyebrows, his gaze twinkling with mischief. “Oh, is that so? Do tell what you have in mind.”

With that invitation, I decided to show him instead. We lost ourselves in each other, forgetting about our discussion on wedding plans, lost in our love and the stillness of our Colorado haven. We kissed deeply, passionately, his taste and touch as intoxicating as they always were.

It was hard to lose myself in the moment though, knowing the secret I was carrying.

I decided it was time to spill it. It was time for Tony to know.

“One sec,” I said, taking his hands gently from my hips. “Something we need to talk about first.”

Still grinning from our little love-filled interlude, I slipped out of Tony’s arms and moved to my suitcase, my fingers brushing over the edges of a manila envelope hidden amidst my clothes. It felt heavy in my hands, not physically, but the promise it held, the secret I’d been keeping, gave it a weight I was only too ready to share.

My actions drew Tony's attention. His playful smile shifted to a look of intrigue, his forehead creasing slightly at my serious expression. "What is it, mi amor?" he asked, genuine concern replacing the remnants of his playful tone.

"There's something I've been meaning to talk to you about," I began, returning to him, the envelope clutched tightly in my hands. "Something I've been suspecting for a little while. But I wanted to be sure first."

With that, I placed the envelope in his hands. He looked down at it, a puzzled expression on his handsome features. He lifted the flap, his fingers carefully extracting the contents. The crisp, printed ultrasound images fluttered onto his lap, and his eyes immediately flew up to mine, a mix of shock and wonder blooming in their depths.

I watched as he bent over the images, his fingers tracing over the two fuzzy blobs distinctly visible in the center of the prints. A long moment of silence passed. Then he looked at me, his eyes wide with disbelief.

"Twins?" he asked, the word barely more than a whisper.

I nodded, biting my lower lip to contain my grin. "Twins."

He shot up from his seat, the pictures clutched tightly in his hands, his eyes wide and brimming with an emotion I could only describe as pure joy. "We're having twins?"

"We are," I responded, watching as his shock gave way to a beaming smile that threatened to split his face.

He pulled me into his arms, spinning me around in a dizzying swirl of laughter and kisses. The happiness in his voice was contagious. "Twins! We're having twins!"

As we collapsed onto the couch, breathless with laughter, I couldn't help but think that right then was my perfect moment. Our family was growing, and the future looked brighter than ever. With Tony by my side, I knew we could handle anything. Even the double trouble that was about to bless our lives.

Once the news of our upcoming duo had sunk in, a silence fell between us. It was the kind of silence that followed a revelation of excitement and joy. I caught the sparkle in Tony's

eyes, a glimmer that matched my own exhilaration. The ultrasound pictures fluttered from his hand, landing softly on the cabin floor.

Before I knew it, he had closed the distance between us on the couch, his lips meeting mine with an intensity that left me breathless. The heat of his kiss stoked a fire within me that had only been lightly simmering a moment before. It wasn't just the pregnancy hormones, or the solitude of the cabin, or even the lingering adrenaline from my announcement—it was us, Tony and me, with our love for each other coming to the forefront in a moment of euphoria.

His fingers traced the curve of my waist, pulling me closer into his embrace. Our bodies fit together seamlessly as always. I could feel his heart beating against mine, the rhythm syncing into an intoxicating dance.

The cabin, the impending delivery, the possibility of a wedding in Spain, all faded into the background. There were only two people in the universe at that moment, two people wrapped in each other's arms, lost in a sea of kisses, laughter and whispered promises of love.

It wasn't just passion and desire. It was love, pure and powerful, promising a future filled with wonder and challenges, laughter and tears, kisses and cuddles, and two more tiny little miracles. And I was ready to dive headfirst into it all, with Tony by my side.

"I'm having Deja vu," Tony murmured against my neck, his lips ghosting over the sensitive skin and sending shivers down my spine.

I chuckled, tracing my fingers along his stubbled jawline. "Deja vu?"

"Mmm-hmm," he hummed. "Remember our first time here? In this very cabin?"

I tilted my head back, giving him better access to my neck while my mind traveled back in time. The memory of my first visit to the cabin was etched into my mind, as vivid as if it had

happened yesterday. “I remember,” I confirmed with a nod. “How could I forget?”

His hands dropped to my waist, his fingers dancing over the soft fabric of my shirt. “You wore that cute little number,” he mused, a mischievous glint in his eyes. “What was it again? A pink sweater.”

“Red,” I corrected with a laugh. “And it wasn’t cute. It was practical.”

“Practical,” he repeated, pulling away slightly to look me in the eyes. His fingers hooked on the hem of my shirt, his thumbs making lazy circles on my skin. “Well, I must say Jude,” he murmured, his gaze dropping to my lips. “I’m a big fan of practical.”

“Oh, are you now?” I asked, pulling him closer again, unable to resist the magnetic pull between us.

“I am,” he replied, his voice dropping to a seductive whisper. “Especially when practical involves you, me, and this couch.”

The heat flared between us again, our playful banter turning into another heated kiss. But this time, it was filled with years of shared memories, mutual respect, and a love that ran deep. And I knew, without a doubt, that there was no place in the world I’d rather be.

With his words still lingering in the air, Tony’s hands began to wander, skillfully and confidently tracing the curve of my back, slowly working their way down. His touch was electric, leaving a trail of desire wherever his fingers grazed. I could feel my pulse quickening, my breath hitching in my throat.

His lips left a trail of fiery kisses along my jaw, down my neck, to the exposed skin above the neckline of my shirt. His fingers lifted it just enough to expose my stomach. His touch was tantalizingly slow, as if savoring every inch of the journey. I lifted my arms in silent invitation, and he gently pulled the fabric up and over my head, his eyes never leaving mine.

Likewise, my hands found their way to the buttons of his shirt. Each one popped open with a satisfying snap, revealing a sliver of the chiseled physique I knew so well. I couldn't help but run my hands over his chest, feeling the warmth of his skin, the rhythm of his heartbeat underneath my fingertips.

Once his shirt joined mine on the floor, Tony leaned in to kiss me again, a groan escaping him as our bare chests met. The sensation of our skin against skin, the intimacy of the moment, sent shivers down my spine. Our clothes continued to shed, one piece at a time, the air between us thickening with anticipation and desire.

Yet even amidst the fervor, there was a tenderness to our movements, a mutual understanding that this was more than just a physical act. Every touch, every lingering glance, was a silent expression of the deep affection we held for each other. But most of all, it was a reminder of our unbroken bond, one that had withstood the test of time and challenges, one that would continue to flourish in the days, months, and years to come.

It wasn't long before he was inside of me, his manhood fitting in that perfect way it always did, as if his body were made for mine. He moved deeply within, our chests rising and falling, our fingers weaving together. Tony gazed down at me with that intoxicating, heated stare he always did during our lovemaking, as if there were nothing on his mind but my pleasure, and my pleasure alone.

He effortlessly brought me to orgasm once, then twice. The third time he came with me, his muscles tensing as he let out a deep groan, his seed draining deep. I wrapped my arms around his powerful body as we came together, our delight blending us into one being of pure love and desire.

We lay together afterward, in the tranquil glow of our cabin, our bodies entwined in a comfortable silence. The log walls hummed softly with the echo of our shared laughter and whispers, imbuing the space with an undeniable sense of passion and intimacy. Tony's arm draped protectively around me, his steady heartbeat a comforting rhythm against my back.

His fingertips lazily traced patterns on my bare skin, each touch sending pleasant tingles through me.

“Life has really dealt us a good hand, hasn’t it?” he said, his voice hushed, humbled. “Look at us—a beautiful son, another two on the way. We’re going to have our hands full.”

I turned my head to look at him, propping my chin on his chest. His eyes twinkled with anticipation, excitement and love. “I wouldn’t have it any other way,” I replied, tracing the line of his jaw with my fingertips.

He chuckled, the sound deep and rich. “Neither would I. And it’s just going to get better, babe. We have so much to look forward to.”

I snuggled back into him, letting my fingers draw lazy circles on his arm. I couldn’t help but agree. We had weathered the storm, faced our share of challenges, and emerged stronger on the other side. And now, life was gifting us with another chance at happiness. Two more, actually.

“Spain wedding?” I asked, peering up at him through half-lidded eyes.

“Only if you want it, my queen,” he replied, pressing a kiss to my forehead.

I smiled. Tony and I were about to embark on a new chapter in our lives, but if it was anything like our past, I knew it would be a journey filled with love, laughter, and plenty of surprises.

Closing my eyes, I allowed the peaceful sounds of the cabin—the crackling fire, the soft rustling of the wind outside—to lull me into a state of blissful contentment. As I drifted off, Tony’s gentle touch anchoring me to reality, I found myself looking forward to our future with more excitement than I’d ever felt.

Our story had been nothing short of a whirlwind, filled with ups and downs, trials and triumphs. But if there was one thing I was certain of, it was that our future held nothing but promise. Because no matter what came our way, I knew that we’d face it together, side by side. Just as we always had.

As I closed my eyes, letting the hum of our cabin and the rhythm of Tony's heart lull me to sleep, I couldn't help but smile. This was our story. Our love. Our life. And I couldn't wait for what came next.

The End

I hope you enjoyed Jude and Tony's steamy reverse age gap love story. I have great news! You can read my Amazon T0p 60 age gap, older man, younger woman bestseller, My Ex's Dad, [HERE](#).

Here's what readers had to say about My Ex's Dad:

"This story gets you right from the beginning."

"Sexy dad with a little silver and young woman ready to make a name and profession for herself. Just because there's a little snow on the mountain top doesn't affect the heat in the furnace! Great story with some exciting intrigue. So glad it was a beautiful HEA!"

I've also included a sneak peek into that story on the next page.

MY EX'S DAD (PREVIEW)



I'm planning my ex-boyfriend's wedding,

Needless to say I'm freaking out.

**It's not what you think. I want NOTHING to do with my
ex.**

I've fallen head over heels for the FATHER of the groom.

Months ago, he saved my life on a stormy night...

All I knew was that a hot, bearded stranger showed up right
when I needed it.

He asked me to spend the rest of the night with him in his
mountain cabin - and I thanked him with great pleasure.

It was the most sensual night of my life.

But I never thought I'd see the mystery mountain man again.

Months later - imagine my surprise at a rehearsal dinner, when
my handsome stranger is introduced as the father of the groom
- my ex boyfriend.

I have to tell him the truth...

**But how do you tell a man with a dangerous lifestyle, set
against having more children, that he'll be a father again?**

Readers note: This is full-length standalone, older man,
surprise pregnancy, ex's dad romance. You'll need a cool glass
of water because the HEAT level is scorching. K.C. Crowne is
an Amazon Top 8 Bestseller and International Bestselling
Author.

PROLOGUE

“Something wrong?” I asked.

He kept those gorgeous blue eyes fixed on mine.

“I know this is all pretty damn sudden. I want this more than you know - but not if you’re not ready. So you want it to happen, it happens. Or if you want it to stop right now, it stops.”

He was giving me an out.

I couldn’t help but smile at his words.

I’d been waiting for this moment for what felt like eternity.

“No, I don’t want this to stop. Trust me.”

Jack grinned. “Good. Because I’ve got some ideas...”

He lowered himself again, his lips pressing against my mouth and his hardness against my thigh.

I moaned through the kiss, opening my legs and wrapping them around his waist, his massive cock now pressing against my sensitive center through my jeans.

He continued to press his stiff cock against me, grinding between my legs.

We continued to kiss, his hands moving down to the hem of my shirt and reaching underneath, his rough, warm touch traveling over my bare skin all the way to my nipple.

I did the same, reaching under his flannel and placing my hands on the flat plane of his abs.

With one touch I could tell his abs were chiseled.

I moved my hand down to his sexy happy trail, which felt like the perfect amount of hair.

My heart started to race in anticipation.

The longer we kissed, the more Jack seemed to become possessed by an animal-like passion, his hands teasing my nipples, pinning me down just the way I wanted.

When I couldn't take any more, I grabbed his shirt and eagerly pulled it off, revealing his torso.

Jack's body was even more stunning than I imagined. His chest was huge and solid, two square pecs dusted with the perfect amount of salt and pepper hair.

His shoulders broad and round, the wide upper V of his chest and back tapering down into a slimmer, but just as solid middle.

His arms were thick, his biceps tense from the strain of holding his body up.

Damn. This life in the woods sure is treating him well.

As I lay there eye-fucking him, Jack reached down and took hold of my shirt pulling it up slowly.

I arched my back a bit, the soft material sliding across my skin and then finally over my head. My hands went to work on my button and fly, and I quickly shimmied out of my pants and kicked them off.

The way Jack looked at me, you would've thought I'd had on the most tantalizing lingerie imaginable.

I didn't have anything particularly sexy on; I hadn't expected to be partaking in any sort of bedroom shenanigans. My bra was a simple black sports bra, my panties matching and high-cut.

He looked me up and down with hungry eyes, shaking his head as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing. I could feel the heat of his intense desire.

I wanted him desperately to do more than just look.

“Goddamn, you’re something else.”

As I grinned, I swept my eyes over his body, my gaze lingering on the bits of gray here and there on his chest and in his beard. They were a reminder of something I’d nearly forgotten—the age difference.

Am I really about to sleep with a man that’s twice my age?

The moment he placed his hands between my legs, rubbing me through my panties, I knew the answer was yes, yes, I was.

I closed my eyes and focused on the sensation of his big, rough hand on my most sensitive spot, pleasure pulsing out of me, Jack knowing just where I wanted his touch.

“That feel good, gorgeous?” he asked. His voice was low, heavy with arousal.

“So damn good. Don’t stop.”

He didn’t.

Instead, Jack pulled my panties to the side and continued to touch me, his bare skin against mine. I moaned, already feeling the stirrings of an orgasm.

The man was an expert, finding my clit and making slow circles around it, each motion bringing me to another level of delight.

“Mhmmmmmm.”

Jack touched me and teased me and built just the right amount of anticipation before spreading my wet folds and entering me with his finger.

“Ohh yess.”

I was beyond wet by that point, him pushing into me with ease, my walls gripping him. I let out a cry, bucking in his hand.

His finger felt so good, so damn good, but it being inside of me only made me crave his cock that much more.

He held fast over top of me, gazing down as he worked with his hand.

The orgasm built and built until I was right on the brink.

“Come for me,” he said. “Now.”

There was something so erotic about his stern, insistent voice that I couldn't resist. I did as my master instructed, releasing and letting the climax rip through my body.

“Yesssssssss!”

I pressed my face against his arm next to me, soft whimpers of total pleasure filling the air.

The orgasm crested and receded.

When it was gone, all I wanted was more.

I don't think I could ever stop wanting more of Jack.

I opened my eyes and reached down, undoing his belt, button and zipper with an intensity that was practically frantic. Jack chuckled as he helped.

“Easy, little lady. We've got all night, you know.”

I couldn't help but smile at his words and easy tone.

Gruff and even standoffish as he might've been, there was something to Jack that was also comfortable and calming, something that made me feel safe despite him being two shades away from being a total stranger.

“I need you inside me.”

He chuckled again as he did the rest of the work of opening his jeans.

“Don't worry, I want this even more.”

I grabbed onto them and his boxer briefs, yanking both down. His cock sprang out, his length and thickness so much that my eyes went wide at the sight of it.

How the hell...

I pushed aside my concerns at the logistics, and instead went right to it.

I wrapped my fingers around him, my hand seeming so small in comparison to what I was holding.

Jack closed his eyes and growled as I began to stroke him, my grip sliding up and down his length, my fingertips teasing the ridge of his head. Part of me wanted to make him come right then and there, to feel his cock pulse in my hands as he drained.

Jack had other ideas in mind.

He lowered himself, the tip of his cock grazing my lips and sending another shiver of delight up my spine. He positioned his head right at my entrance. I felt practically electric knowing that he was moments from being inside me.

“Shit,” he said, his voice low. “Lemme go grab something.”

Before he could move, however, I placed my hands on his rear and held him in place, making sure he didn’t go anywhere.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m on the pill.”

The corner of his mouth curled. “Good. Because even the two minutes it would take to run to the other room would be pure torture.”

“Ditto.”

He replaced his cock where it had been moments before, this time pushing into me. His head entered, tingling spreading through my entire body as if his dick had supernatural powers..

Jack moved in slowly, inch by inch. I could sense that he was well aware of how big he was and knew it might be a lot for me to handle.

The sensation of him pushing into me was beyond intense. I kept my eyes open, watching as his thick cock vanished inside of me, disappearing between my legs.

The feeling of him moving inside was unlike anything I’d ever felt, his thickness stretching me as the wetness of my arousal helped him to glide right in.

“Wow,” I moaned.

He grinned as he pushed the rest of the way inside, filling me completely.

“I take it that feels good.”

“Y-yeah.” The sensation of him completely inside of me was so intense that I couldn’t say a single word other than that.

Jack reached up, peeling off my sports bra, my breasts tumbling out. He leaned down and took one into his hands, his mouth wrapping around my nipple and his tongue lashing it, making it hard.

I arched my back, his cock unmoving inside of me as he gave my breasts attention.

When he was good and ready, he lifted his hips and withdrew, pushing into me hard.

This time I took him much more easily and Jack repeated his thrust.

Again.

Again, pleasure building inside of me.

I wrapped my legs around his hips and my arms around his back, my hands falling onto his powerful muscles.

I focused on the broad muscles of his back tensing underneath my touch and each time he entered in and out of me, his grunts sounding next to my ear as he thrust into me at a steady, pulsing pace that put me into a trance.

“More,” I moaned. “Please. Harder.”

My orgasm was building up more and more.

I was in pure ecstasy and I never wanted it to end.

CHAPTER 1

One Week Earlier

“**W**hoa, easy!”

A flash of horse tail accompanied by a piercing whinny nearly knocked me off my damn feet. Margo, my Palomino, did *not* want to go outside. I hurriedly placed my hand on her ivory white mane, stroking her slowly in an effort to calm her down.

“There we are, sweetie,” I said, speaking softly. “That’s it.”

Margo, good girl that she was, calmed down right away. It was unlike her to get worked up like that. Out of the three horses we had on the family farm, she was easily the most mellow and easy to handle. When I caught sight of the pasture through the open barn door and spotted flurries of snow dancing on the early winter wind, I realized right away what was wrong.

“I swear, girl,” I said, a smile on my face. “You’ve always been afraid of the snow—ever since you were a dang foal.”

Margo snorted, her big, dark eyes situated on the open door, as if on guard. With her white mane, golden coat and powerful muscles, Margo was about as gorgeous as horses came.

“Well, let me tell you about a concept I learned back in college. It’s called exposure therapy. You ever heard of that?”

Margo kept her eyes on the snow as I hopped up on a nearby worktable, clapping my hands onto my knees.

“It means that if you’re afraid of something, like spiders or the dark, or in your case my fine-coated friend, a little snow, the best way to get over it is to expose yourself to it a little at a time.”

Another snort, timed perfectly to appear as if she were dismissing the concept altogether.

“Now, now,” I said, holding up my gloved hands. “I know it sounds a little crazy on the surface. But trust me—I think it could do you wonders.”

I hopped off the workstation and headed over to the barn door. I looked out to the huge stretch of pasture of our Colorado farm, the Rockies rising in the distance. The grass was dusted with snow, the air chilly enough to make me pull my shearling coat a little tighter.

“See? Nothing to be worried about. Just a little fresh winter powder to invigorate.”

I couldn’t speak for Margo, but I was eager as hell to get out there. I’d spent the last few hours holed up in my room going over legal documents, trying to make heads or tails of the convoluted legalese within. Some fresh air sounded like just the thing to get my mind right.

Margo, on the other hand, didn’t want to budge. I turned, putting my hands on my hips.

“Alright, girl. Lucky for you, I’m not above a little bribery now and then. So, how about this; we go out there for a little while and when we get back, I might let you have a few of those apple-oatmeal treats you can’t get enough of.”

Margo let out another snort and stamped her hoof. She was responding to my gentle tone more than anything, but sometimes talking to her felt like negotiating with a misbehaving toddler—a massive, furry toddler.

I stroked her mane a few more times, making certain that she was calm and ready to be taken out. When I was confident

Margo was good to go, I went to work strapping on her riding gear and leading her out of the barn.

Another cold draft hit me as I stepped out, snow curling on the wind. I buttoned my coat the rest of the way, pulling the collar up against the back of my neck.

“Kinda chilly out, huh?” I asked Margo. “Well, it’ll be good to get out, stretch those legs of yours a bit. Don’t want you getting fat on us, right?” I gave her haunches a pat before shutting the barn door.

I turned my attention back to the trail. The sky had darkened in the short amount of time I’d been in the barn, the western distance over the mountains having grown a few shades dimmer. It was enough to give me pause and wonder whether or not it was a good idea to take Margo out after all.

“Don’t tell me you’re going for a ride, Bee?”

I didn’t need to turn to recognize the English-accented voice as my dad’s. He approached out of the corner of my eye, leading one of the younger horses back to the barn.

“Why, don’t you think I’m up to it?” I flashed Dad a smile.

Dad approached, dressed in his usual outfit of rugged jeans with an equally rugged fur-lined denim jacket, a gray page cap on his head and light brown boots. Dad was tall and strapping, with the same sable hair and light green eyes as mine. Most of my other features, like my lean, dancer’s physique, were from Mom.

His face was weathered but handsome. I watched as his eyes narrowed as they often did in an expression of intelligent scanning. Dad was an interesting man, a perfect blend of the English sophistication of his place of birth and the outdoorsy ruggedness of his chosen home in the States.

Dad allowed himself a small smile. “You wouldn’t ever catch me saying something so ludicrous, love.” He adjusted his hat and turned his attention toward the horizon. “Only that the weather’s looking a bit rough. Phone says that we’re due for a bit of a snowfall here in a short while—as if those mean-looking clouds aren’t all the indication one needs.”

“They’re still a ways off,” I said. “Besides, I wasn’t planning on going out for all that long, just a quick trot around Wheeler Hill then back down. Shouldn’t take any longer than thirty minutes.”

My father regarded me with a bit of skepticism before turning his attention to the clouds once more, as if they might’ve eased up in the last minute.

“I know better than to try and talk you down once you’ve set your mind to something, Bee.”

I winked. “That’s right. And it’s what you love about me.”

He laughed. “That may be the case. But it’s also the trait of yours responsible for these gray hairs I’ve sprouted over the years.”

“That and the fact that you’re not getting any younger.” I smiled and nudged him with my elbow as I spoke, letting the old man know I was only messing around.

I nodded and smiled at the horse Dad had been leading. “How’s the new girl?”

“Oh, Butterscotch here?” he chuckled, giving the horse a pat. “As sweet as they come. Already have a prospective buyer in mind. As long as her training continues as it has, she should be ready for her new home in a month or so.”

Training horses was the bread and butter of business at Wheeler Ranch.

He smiled back, shaking his head. “Well, get on with it. We’ll discuss dinner when you’re back. I believe your mother was keen on going into town tonight, though I suppose that all depends on what the weather has in store for us.”

I tipped my hat before climbing up on Margo and settling in.

“Be back before you know it!” With that, I nudged Margo with my heels, watching as Dad gave me a final wave before leading the horse into the barn.

I glanced downward, holding on to the brim of my hat against another hard gust of wind. Margo kept on straight and

steady, but I could feel the nervousness quaking through her.

“You’re doing just fine, girl,” I said, stroking her side as she moved. “See? That mean old snow isn’t so bad.”

Margo let out another snort but kept moving forward all the same. The closer I drew to Wheeler Hill, the more I could make out the darkness of the clouds ahead. Part of me wondered if Dad was right, that it’d been a bad idea to go out with this kind of weather on the horizon. I slipped my phone out of my pocket, a picture of Margo on the lock screen. With a few quick swipes, I opened the hourly weather forecast.

It was looking rough. A large snowstorm was set to arrive in the next couple of hours, with a predicted eight to ten inches of snow. All the more reason to make the trek in good time. So long as Margo cooperated, we’d be back within the hour.

I spent the time it took to reach Wheeler’s Hill going over my plans for the next few months, specifically those relating to the wedding planning business I’d been putting together, although it wasn’t yet much to speak of. I’d spent all of last year learning everything I could about both running a small business and the wedding planning industry. So far, all I’d had to show for it was exactly two clients, one of them a family friend.

I’d set aside a little money that I’d earned from each event, but I hadn’t been able to land my next wedding. The ranch occupied a ton of my time, and as much as I loved living with Mom and Dad, it was hard as hell to keep my up-and-coming business separate from life on the ranch.

In short, I needed an office. With an office, I’d finally be able to get my business off the ground. An office would be a place I could go to and focus, to have meetings, to give *Beth’s Dream Weddings*—my business name—the feeling of being, well, *a business*. Denver was only a forty-minute drive from the ranch, which meant the commute wouldn’t be much at all.

Mom and Dad had offered to pay for the deposit and the first year’s rent of the office. They didn’t like to make a big show about it in terms of what clothes they wore or cars they drove or anything like that, but my parents had money. Dad

had been an investment banker who'd long since sold his firm for a huge payout, and Mom had been an executive project manager back in England.

None of that mattered to me, England was a lifetime ago. So long ago, in fact, that I didn't even have an accent anymore. Besides, I wanted my business to be *my* thing, something I built with my own two hands. Having my parents simply cut me a check to rent an office seemed hollow. Writing my own check, however... I couldn't imagine anything more satisfying.

A cold rush of wind pulled me back into reality. I looked around, realizing that I'd become so lost in my own thoughts that I hadn't even realized I was nearly at the peak of Wheeler Hill. The name "Wheeler Hill" was something of a misnomer. It was tall, a thousand or so feet high, and afforded a sweeping view of the valley where the ranch was located. A well-worn path weaved upward, aspen and pine trees dusted with snow towering overhead.

It was my favorite place to come when I needed some fresh air, or just to clear my head. Not to mention, the view was killer. When I reached the clearing at the top, a smile spread on my face. The Rockies loomed large to the west, white peaks rising and falling across the length of the horizon.

The ranch was to the east, the gorgeous fifty-five-acre stretch of land nestled down in the valley. The property consisted of a handful of buildings; two barns—one for horses, the other for cows—a guest house, a supply shed, and a three-story home built in classic Colorado chalet style with a pointed roof and wood exterior. The interior of the house had been completely remodeled with just about every modern amenity one could want.

Sometimes I wondered why Mom and Dad had made the decision to leave their old lives behind and start fresh in Colorado. All it took for that question to be answered was a trip to the top of Wheeler Hill, to take in the gorgeous panoramic view of the ranch and Rockies, the sky vast and huge and endless up above.

Off to the west, the other side of the valley was covered in a thick blanket of trees, the endless green reaching all the way to the Rockies in the distance. A few plumes of gray smoke rose here and there from the woods, sure signs and a reminder that people lived out there. I imagined burly men in red flannel, axes slung over their shoulders, a metal mug of whiskey and coffee in hand. Tough, independent sorts of guys that you'd never see in downtown Denver.

I smiled, closing my eyes and letting the fresh, mountain air fill my lungs. Only the cold pinprick of snowfall on my face and the shudder of Margo underneath me brought me back into reality.

I patted Margo's side. "Alright, girl, you've done good. Let's get on back home, alright?"

Margo didn't waste a second before turning, pointing us both in the direction of the path leading back down the hill. I pulled the reins, starting her off into a slow trot down. The path was covered in about a half inch or so of snow.

The precipitation picked up on the way down, swirling through the air, the cold making my cheeks burn. The sun had begun to dip lower, the sky behind the clouds aglow with a soft, dull light. Darkness was growing by the second.

Margo picked up her pace, in spite of what I instructed.

"Easy, girl. Easy."

Between the snow and the cold and the dark, she was getting nervous. I needed to get her back to the barn soon.

Her pace seemed to pick up in direct proportion to the increase in snowfall. We headed down the path, my heart beating faster. I slipped my phone out of my pocket and checked the reception. It was spotty as it always was out there, but I had a couple of bars.

Margo let out a whinny while my eyes were on my phone. I looked up just in time to shove my phone back into my pocket and bring my attention to what she was upset about. I gasped, spotting two black figures crossing the path ahead.

"Whoa, girl!"

Margo did as I asked. At first, the two creatures looked like big, shaggy dogs but it didn't take me long to realize they weren't dogs—they were bears. Black bears, to be specific. They weren't an uncommon animal around the area, though it was strange that they'd come right onto the path. Either way, I wasn't too worried. Black bears could look scary, but they were mostly harmless as long as you gave them their distance and didn't spook them.

“Cubs, Margo,” I said, a tinge of relief hitting. “Just a couple of baby bears trying to get home, like you and me. Nothing to worry about.”

I stroked Margo's mane slowly, feeling her body shake with nervousness. One of the cubs stopped in the middle of the path, glancing up at me. Despite the initial fear, I had to admit the cub was pretty damn cute. The first cub crossed, then the second. I kept Margo still until they were gone.

“Ready, girl?”

I patted Margo on her side once more, giving her the signal to start moving. She did, taking her first steps with a tiny bit of trepidation.

“Come on.”

Margo took some more steps forward, quickening her pace to the kind of trot that would bring us home in due time.

Just as we hit the next bend, I turned to my right just in time to watch as a huge, black form appeared in the woods, dark eyes staring back at me.

I'd been so wrapped up in keeping Margo calm that I'd forgotten one of the first rules of bears: Where there's cubs, you can guarantee that mama bear isn't far behind.

She rose up on her back paws, making herself bigger and letting out a deep growl that Margo didn't care for one bit. Margo rose too, a fright-filled whinny sounding.

“Easy, girl. Easy! Just—”

I didn't have a chance to finish before I tumbled backward, slipping off the horse. For several long seconds the world was

a swirling blur as I fell. Pain blasted from my head and hip as I landed on both. Another bray from Margo filled the air, and through bleary eyes I sat up just in time to watch as Margo began tearing down the path without me.

I turned slowly to see the big, hulking mama as dark as a chunk of night itself. I stayed still, my heart beating hard as hell in my chest. Every instinct in my body told me to get up and run for it, but I knew enough to understand that running was the worst move to make when a bear was sizing you up.

Finally, after several moments that stretched out into their own mini eternities, the mama let out a snort as she returned to all fours and began across the path in the direction her cubs had gone. She tossed one more glance in my direction, as if confirming once more that I wasn't a threat, before shuffling off into the woods.

I was alone. The danger having passed, the pain occupied my mind in full force. I'd crashed hard onto my hip, the momentum bouncing my head off the ground. Margo was long gone. Knowing her, she'd bolted straight home to the ranch. If she hadn't, however, my parents wouldn't be happy if I came home without her.

Speaking of home, I needed to get moving. The pain was intense, and as I pushed myself up to standing, a dizziness overcame me that made it hard to stay that way. I staggered to the nearest tree and leaned against it. The dizziness lingered, and the longer I stood, the more I realized I was going to need to call my dad and have him come and get me.

My hand shot to my hip pocket, and I pulled out my phone and quickly brought it to my face. My heart sank down to the soles of my boots as I looked upon the totally smashed screen. When I'd fallen, I'd landed with all my weight on the phone, crushing it to the point of uselessness. I tried in vain to turn the screen back on, but it remained black.

I felt weak. The phone fell from my hand and onto the snowy ground. I stepped back against the tree and slumped down into a sitting position. An incredible fatigue came over

me like a heavy blanket, my eyelids drooping more and more...

I needed to get home, and I needed to do it before nightfall and the snowstorm were in full force.

First, I just needed to close my eyes...

CHAPTER 2

So much for a quiet walk in the woods.

Last thing I wanted to deal with was a pissed-off mama bear.

Buddy, my Australian Shepherd/Border Collie mix, stood at my side, his perked-up ears letting me know he was on high alert, his multicolored coat dusted with fresh snow.

“Stay right there, big guy,” I said as I crouched down, holding my palm out a bit in front of me. “Leave it.”

Well-trained dog that he was, Buddy stayed right at my side. My other hand hovered near the Magnum revolver I kept at my back hip for the possibility of such an occasion. During my years living in the woods, I’d only ever needed it for the rare warning shot. Truth be told, the idea of having to shoot a bear didn’t sit right with me in the slightest. A man needed to be prepared all the same.

The woods ahead shifted, branches moving. Slowly, I lifted my binoculars to my eyes. It was getting dark, and between the setting sun and the snow-filled clouds above, spotting anything in the woods wasn’t easy—especially a black bear and her cubs.

I groaned as I stood up.

You’re approaching the wrong side of forty, dumbass. About time you started realizing you’re not twenty-five anymore.

I chuckled, shaking my head at my internal monologue. I'd been told on more than a few occasions that I could be the cocky sort. To that end, I'd cultivated a mental discussion designed to keep my ass in check. It was true that I was a few years shy of fifty. Maybe it was time I started acting like it.

Maybe. For the time being, I was having too much damn fun.

I held position for a bit longer, making sure that the bears had moved on. As I stood, I glanced up into the trees above. A few different types of birds were there and I passed the time by naming them off.

I let my eyes linger on a Goldfinch for a while, the beautiful golden color of its wings a striking contrast to the greens and whites around it. The bird hopped along the branch before finally taking off, flying into the distance.

Buddy turned his head toward me, letting his tongue hang out as he panted. I reached down and scratched the top of his head.

“Alright. You ready to get a mo—”

Before I could finish my sentence, another rustling sounded out, this time behind me. I turned in the direction of the path up Wheeler Hill—the border of Wheeler Ranch—and watched the trees. I'd expected to see the bear coming back.

It didn't. What *did* race down the path was a horse. The beast was running too damn quickly to get a good look at it, but I could tell by the golden coat that it was likely a Palomino. And the fact that it was loaded up with riding gear told me that it was a tamed and owned horse, not one of those wild mustangs I'd seen around before.

The sight brought questions to mind. Namely—what the hell had happened to the rider?

It looked like the horse was headed in the direction of Wheeler Ranch, a good few miles away. Best guess if I wanted to find who'd been on top of that beast was to head the opposite way. I looked up at the darkening clouds and the storm on the horizon.

“Let’s go, Bud,” I said, following my words with a sharp whistle. “Let’s get moving, see what we can find.”

I’d already been out for a few hours. My legs were aching in that good sort of way, the kind where you knew the relief would be instant the moment you plopped your butt down. I’d been looking forward to getting back to the cabin—putting on a fire and spending the rest of the night reading—with some whiskey close at hand while the snow came down outside, Buddy curled up on the rug in front of the fireplace. Nights like those were about as close to heaven as I could imagine.

Eager as I was to get to it, there wasn’t a chance I’d be heading home without checking the trail to make sure no one was there. With what I’d seen of the horse, the odds were good I’d find some poor SOB lying hurt and cold.

Buddy and I made our way through the woods in the direction of the trail and it didn’t take long before we were on the path and heading up. The snow came down harder, the intensity greater than I’d expected. I pulled my coat tight, glancing down to make sure Buddy was close as we continued up the trail. Good boy that he was, Buddy remained right at my side.

The snow had accumulated enough that it began to crunch under my boots, my breath puffing in the air in front of me. It was getting cold enough that staying out in the open would quickly become a real danger.

I kept my eyes fixed forward on the trail, following its winding path up the hill.

Right in the middle of my trek, Buddy let out a sudden and sharp bark before tearing off ahead.

“Bud!” I shouted, watching him disappear over the horizon. “Where the hell are you going?”

I picked up the pace, moving into a jog as I hurried after my dog. He wasn’t the sort to get distracted by a rabbit or some such nonsense, he was too well-trained for that. Another bark cut through the air as I continued on as fast as I could.

“I’m coming!” I called out.

I reached the top of the slope, my lungs burning from the run and the cold air.

That's when I spotted her.

She was curled up on the forest floor, her body covered in a fine layer of snow. She was still, her legs flopped over to one side and her arm draped over her chest.

“Ah, shit.”

I hurried over and dropped down to my knees, slipping my hand slowly and carefully behind her head. As I turned her toward me, it was impossible not to notice right away how damned beautiful she was.

Her beauty was striking, in fact. It was enough to make the windy, snowy and cold world around me vanish. Her face was heart-shaped, with delicate cheekbones, a pert chin, and a small nose. Her lips were so damn full and ripe that all I could think about was kissing them, as insane as that might've been to think about in a situation like that.

I shook my head, coming back to the moment and focused on the important matter before me. It was hard to tell her age for certain, but I guessed that she was somewhere in her mid-twenties. She was slender and slight, her jeans clinging to her curves and pulling my attention back to things that I shouldn't have been thinking about. But damn if she wasn't a beauty.

A bit of blood seeped from the back of her head, the scalp red and raised. I only knew basic first-aid, but it didn't take a damn doctor to put together what might've happened. The horse was probably hers and got spooked somehow, tossing her off and giving her head a nasty knock. She was still alive, her chest rising and falling at a steady, slow pace. In her gloved hand was a phone, the screen cracked beyond use or repair. All the same, I took it and tucked it into my back pocket.

I stood and glanced to the right at Wheeler Ranch down below in the valley. There was a possibility that the girl was from there although there was no way to know for sure. Even if she was, the ranch was miles away. Not a good idea to hoof

it down the mountain carrying her in the inclement weather. Besides, my truck wasn't far.

“What do you think, Buddy?” I asked, giving the girl a once-over. “Up for some company?” Once the girl woke up and told me who she was and where she was from, I'd take her home straightaway.

Buddy barked, as if giving his approval of my decision. I lived alone—aside from Buddy, of course. I liked it that way. Didn't need company, especially after the kind of life I'd lived. All the same, there wasn't a chance in hell I'd leave someone unconscious out in the cold.

I bent down, scooping the girl off the ground. She was light as a feather, and I was able to fireman carry her with no problem.

“Back to the car, big guy!” I called out to Buddy. “Get a move on!”

My dog wasted no time taking off into the woods, staying within eyesight as I carried her through the snow. The temperature dropped lower as we made our way, the snow accumulating by the second.

I held the mystery woman against me, her body curled into mine. She was still warm, her shearling-lined coat soft. Even though I was focused on getting her to safety, it was impossible not to notice her scent, the way she felt in my arms. I pushed that out of my thoughts as best I could, focusing instead on bracing against the cold and wind, and completing the task at hand.

It took about ten minutes of trudging through the woods until I was able to spot my truck, the '95 cherry-red Ford F-150 that I'd been driving for the last few decades. Like me, she was getting up in years. But also like me, she still knew how to work her butt off.

Buddy was already there, waiting patiently at the truck's side. I approached, opening the door of the extended cab and gently laying the girl down. Once she was taken care of, I opened the passenger-side door for Buddy. Seconds later, I

was inside, the engine growling to life and heat flowing out of the vents. Relief took hold at knowing the girl was safe and warm for the time being, but there was still the matter of getting her home.

The Ford handled the snow like a champ, the old girl barreling and rumbling over the rough forest floor.

My place was a little ways off, but it wouldn't take long to get there. As I glanced at the beauty in my backseat, I started wondering what the hell I'd gotten myself into.



END OF PREVIEW

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

K.C. Crowne is an Amazon Top 10 bestseller.

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