

A DAD'S BEST FRIEND
SECRET BABY ROMANCE

A DOCTOR DADDY

for Christmas

SOFIA T
SUMMERS

A DOCTOR DADDY FOR CHRISTMAS

A DAD'S BEST FRIEND, SECRET BABY
ROMANCE

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DESCRIPTION

My legs shook when I saw my dad's best friend a decade later.

And I could barely breathe when Callum touched me again after stomping all over my heart.

To be fair, it wasn't his fault.

I was the boss's daughter, and my overprotective father had warned him against dating me.

And since I wasn't in the mood to have my heart broken this holiday season, I only had one option.

Shut him out.

But the weather had other plans.

My annual Christmas fundraiser got snowed in, leaving Callum and I to confront our grudges.

We did all that... *and a lot more.*

So much more that I had to rush to the grocery store and buy a pregnancy test.

That news was sure to infuriate my dad.

But Callum's Christmas miracle was for the taking.

If only he had met the three-month *little* old secret that I'd been keeping from him...

PROLOGUE

Ellen

I spent all morning baking these cookies and I don't even know why. After Dad's speech about how Callum may be promoted to director and that it would force me to give up my career, I felt crushed. Callum wouldn't honestly believe that for a second, though he would definitely want to respect my father's wishes—especially after Dad chased him off nine years ago, before my marriage to Roger.

Standing at the kitchen counter, I wrapped a sheet of plastic wrap over the warm cookies and watched it fog up from the steam. Mom said a way to a man's heart is through his stomach, so this was akin to attempting bribery. I didn't care. I'd bribe Callum into my life every day, all day long if it meant he would actually be in my life. I was uncertain of whether it was even what he wanted.

I carried the plate to the front door where I set them on the table and turned to the closet for my coat. December's blustery winds were at an all-time high that day. With Christmas two weeks out and winter's grip in full swing over New York state, a coat was essential. I took my leather trench out and put it on, shoving my hands into the gloves after meticulously buttoning each of the black buttons. My hair was decent today, so no hat, but I had used remote start to warm my car. And hopefully, the wind wouldn't destroy my coiffed locks.

The driveway was icy—almost took a spill getting to my sedan—but I made it safely with the cookies, my purse, and

my keys. The car was barely putting heat out, though, which told me exactly how cold it was. Near zero with wind chills near negative twenty. I couldn't complain, though. I'd seen areas of the world in all my travels for work where people had it far worse. I was thankful for my warm clothing and fancy car.

I headed across town to the hospital. Callum wasn't expecting me. I knew he'd be at work right now because he told me he was pulling doubles for a few weeks—shifts from early morning to almost midnight. With the way he'd been ignoring all my calls and text messages, I figured it was the only time I'd get with him. I didn't relish the idea of having this conversation during his workday, but avoiding it wasn't working for me.

The parking lot was full except for a few spaces as far away from the door as possible. Figured my luck would be as such. I felt like it had been drained for years, anyway. When good things happened to me, they were truly highlights and blessings. Anymore, the random frustrating things—like having to walk all the way across a parking lot in bone-chilling temps with wind—I took in stride. That was one good thing about the divorce. It taught me to be more resilient.

As I walked toward the door, my collar turned up against the wind, I thought of those days in the lodge when we were snowed in. The entire city of Evansville had been blanketed in a few feet of snow, but in the mountains it was worse. They closed off everything, trapping us in, and Callum and I had the chance to really connect for the first time in years. I planned every detail of that so well—us hooking up again—that I had actually neglected some minor details about the event and Chandra, my partner, went scrambling to ensure everything was perfect. No one was the wiser, except me.

I put off my job for him once, and I'd do it again if he asked. I'd even sign it all over to Chandra to let her have full stake. It wasn't worth it to me to have a company and all that money, travel the world, have the fame and reputation, but have no one to truly share it with. No family, no legacy to leave except reputation and stocks. I thought Roger was that,

but it fell apart, and I blamed myself. Which was why I was trying twice as hard to make this thing with Callum work. Roger wasn't worth giving up everything for. I knew it when I married him, which is why I pursued my company.

Callum was, though. He was worth every last breath I had in me.

There were a few of my father's friends near the elevator, so I chose the stairwell. Callum worked on the third floor, so it wasn't like it was a huge climb, and the bit of exertion proved to warm me up a little. On the way up, I sent Callum a text.

Ellen 12:19 PM: Thought I'd stop by. I made cookies.

I tugged my gloves off and shoved them in my pocket, waiting for him to respond. I was nearly at his floor when my phone vibrated.

Callum 12:21 PM: Sounds good. Come on up to my office.

So far, so good. He wasn't rejecting me or ignoring me this time, not when I had the ability to make a scene. Not that I would. I was a professional and had no desire to humiliate or embarrass him. So I opened the door to the third floor and stepped through it, balancing the cookies on one hand, then the other while I shrugged out of my coat. Callum's small office space here was down the hall from my father's, and a coat rack near the breakroom was the perfect place to leave the heavy trench coat. I hung it there then headed to his office to wait.

It was dark when I walked in. I flipped on the light and peeled the plastic wrap off the cookies and tossed it in the trash, then sat down at his desk and waited. The cookies smelled so good I almost ate one myself, but I felt jittery, too anxious to eat. I'd been back and forth for weeks on whether this was even worth pursuing because I knew what I felt about my ability to maintain a relationship. Today was the day for the decision.

Callum walked in, dressed in his tweed pants, white button down, and lab coat. He looked a bit tired and rough around the edges, like he hadn't shaven in a few days. "Hey," I said,

trying not to allow any of my frustration to seep out in my tone.

“Hey,” he replied. “Thanks for the cookies.”

I shrugged. “You never called.” I slid the cookies across the desk and waited. He sat down, and I would have sworn I saw him squirming. Putting pressure on him might be the only way I’d get to the bottom of things, so I was only doing what I had to.

“I know I haven’t been the easiest person to deal with lately,” I began, my eyes never leaving his, “but I wanted to talk to you about what’s been on my mind.”

Callum nodded, taking another bite of the cookie as I took a breath and continued. “It’s about my father,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper. “I know you spoke with him the other day, and I just wanted to know what he said.”

Cal took small bites of the cookie, as if procrastinating. If he thought he was getting out of this conversation without answering me, he was wrong. I wasn’t going to move a muscle until we faced it head on. I loved him. He knew that. And I knew he loved me too, even if he was on the fence about respecting my father’s wishes. I just wanted him to see that I was in my thirties now. I’d been a world traveler for years. I didn’t need my father’s permission to date someone.

“He made it clear that he doesn’t think we should be together.” He avoided eye contact with me as he said the words, like he was ashamed to admit the truth, or maybe he was ashamed because he agreed. I was angry. I knew why my father didn’t want us together. He felt Callum would hold me back, keep me from fulfilling my destiny or something. I didn’t care. My life would be so much better with Cal in it.

“I don’t know what to do.” My hands shook as I spoke. “I love you, but I don’t want to disappoint my family. They mean everything to me.”

Callum reached across the table for my hand, but I didn’t take it. “I love you too, Ellen,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper, “but your father is right. You have worked so hard

to build your company, and it would be wrong of me to come into your life at this point and have you give all that up.”

Something sparked inside me, a little angry voice that had been there for years, since Dad practically forced me to date Roger just to get over Callum leaving me the first time. I didn't know at the time that Cal was only doing what my father said. All I knew was that someone was trying to make decisions for my life without my consent, and I hated it then, and I hated it now too. “I can't believe you're just going to give up on us like this,” I whispered, my voice breaking.

“I'm not giving up on us. I just think that we need to take a step back and reevaluate things. You've come so far, Ellen. I'm trying to make the right choice for your future.” I saw the hurt in his eyes, but his words didn't line up with what real love looked like. It wasn't pushing someone away so they'd be happier without you. Real love rose to meet the challenges and conquered them.

I was furious in a way I'd never been with Callum. I stared into the plate of cookies, trying to control my facial expression. I was perfectly capable of making my own decisions for my future, and I didn't need anyone to tell me what to do. I longed for his love and support, even his partnership and advice, but if he was no different from my father—from my ex-husband—I wasn't sure this was what I wanted, either.

“You know what, Callum? Maybe you're right.” I stood and squared my shoulders. “It's always best that other people, specifically men, make choices for my future.” He rubbed the back of his neck as I continued. “Because I'm just a helpless woman who knows nothing. I can't make decisions for myself or possibly know what my heart feels.”

“Ellen, please.” He sat forward, which only angered me further. I had nothing more to say to him. If the past several weeks hadn't shown him how perfect we were for each other, my words in this moment never would.

“I'll talk to you later, Callum.” I picked up the plate of cookies and walked out. I didn't want to give up on us. I didn't

want to walk away, but if he wasn't willing or didn't want to fight for us, there was no point in my doing it either. I wasn't about to carry a relationship on my back like I did with Roger, making myself believe it was all my fault. I had done that once, but this time, it wasn't me. I wasn't giving up. He already had. I was accepting the consequences of his choices, and it hurt.

I found my coat, dumped the cookies into the trash bin, and walked to the elevator. I was a fool for thinking he would ever really choose me. My father was right nine years ago. Callum Andrews will never change. He wanted a fling and his career. With the directorship hanging in front of him, I didn't stand a chance. He was going to choose himself over me every time, and that wasn't the type of man I wanted to be in a relationship with.

Ellen

The decorations were mostly finished, the lodge shut down to the general public as of yesterday. My family had owned this ski resort as long as I could remember, and I'd heard tales of my parents meeting here and falling in love when my grandparents owned it before them. It seemed such a fitting location for our yearly Christmas fundraiser for Hudson Medical—an event I'd chaired every year for more than a decade now. This year, however, would be different.

I hustled over to Chandra, my business partner and best friend. She was hanging strands of lights with lodge staff and volunteers. This year, we planned a weekend lock-in sort of event rather than a one-day event. It was meant to boost giving, and in exchange for the free stay at the resort, folks got a good time and a weekend getaway, along with the knowledge that they would be supporting their community hospital.

“Looking good!” I whistled and patted her on the shoulder and she turned to grin at me. Her dark curls and chocolate eyes glistened with joy.

“Thanks. We've been working so hard to make things just perfect.” Chandra always took over décor, while I stuck to admin logistics like security, registration, and the lot. She had the artist's touch, not me.

“I'm continually amazed at how good you are at this. I can't believe you shut down your fluffing business to join me

and raise funds for hospitals instead.” She had a good side gig of decorating people’s homes for holidays and turned a great profit at it until she decided to hit the road with me. We spent no more than six weeks out of the year here in Evansville. The rest of our time was spent traveling to odd locations to host events much like this one.

“Yes, well, I’m making better money. I get to travel with my best friend, and best of all, I get to see the world.” She snickered as she walked away, and I followed her toward the check-in desk where soon, folks would stream into this place and take in the sights.

The event was a Christmas-themed casino. Not only would folks shell out money on slot machines and beverages, but they would buy tickets for some great entertainment and they had a shot at winning prizes too. I’d had this idea for years, but I never had the place to host it until my father volunteered the lodge for this year’s event. It was perfect.

“So, the hot doctor?” She waggled her eyebrows at me and grinned, and I felt my cheeks warming. Of course I told her about Callum Andrews—one of my dad’s friends from way back. Callum and I had history, a pretty steamy one. I was totally in love, but to him, it was probably nothing but a fling. Still, I was heartbroken when my father stepped in and chased him away from me.

“He’ll be here. Dad is dealing with Mom’s treatments right now and couldn’t make it. So Callum offered to be the security guy.” Words could not express how thrilled I was to be spending the entire weekend alone with Callum in this lodge. I hoped to rekindle the flame we had more than a decade ago, before my marriage, before that horrible miscarriage and the unraveling of said marriage. Callum was likely always the one for me, and now I knew he was still single. All this time, and he’d never settled down.

“But you said he’s older?” Chandra rounded the end of the check-in desk and picked up a pair of scissors and a roll of ribbon.

“Yeah.” I hated that she judged me simply because I liked an older man. She’d already told me how it would go—he’d get old and die before me because the age gap is too large, and I’d die alone and miserable. I didn’t care. If having thirty good years with him before he died was all I’d get, at least my heart would finally be where it had always wanted to be since I was twenty-three years old. “But I told you I don’t mind.”

“I’ll be right back. Need to take these to my gift wrappers.” She winked at me as she walked away, and I was glad for the distraction. I didn’t like having to explain myself to her. I knew she’d let up when she saw how amazing he was. I just had to get her to see that.

Turning, I noticed a sight for sore eyes. It had been a week since Callum had volunteered to help, and I had been anticipating this moment ever since. He strutted into the room wearing a thick, puffy jacket. Snow dusted his shoulders and fell to the ground as he pushed his hood back. He didn’t see me. His eyes scanned the room. I stood expectantly, waiting with a smile on my face for him to spot me and approach. My heart fluttered, and I felt my hands growing sweaty.

A look of recognition crossed his face as his gaze met mine, and he moved toward me. For years, we’d done this dance, meeting awkwardly at this fundraising event and avoiding the chemistry we felt. But two years ago, my life changed drastically. The issues festering in my marriage came to a head and we ended things. It was just after Christmas, and that encroaching anniversary meant a season of harsh memories that ruined Christmas—like last year when I was present in body, but my heart was so devastated.

This year, I wanted to change that. This year, Callum was going to know how I felt about him. Because I never wanted to spend another Christmas alone, not depressed and hurting like the past two years.

“Hey, Ellen.” He unzipped his coat and smiled. “It’s really coming down out there.”

“Hmm, yes, well, it’s New York in winter.” My cheeks were so hot just from the way he smiled at me. How on earth

would I react if he actually turned the full weight of that stormy gaze on me with the intent I desired?

“Might want to watch the forecast. It could get slippery.”

“Well, I have the best security guy around.” Or the hottest—I didn’t say it but I was thinking it. “I’m sure everything will be fine.”

“Looking like it’s going to be a big crowd?” He stuffed black leather gloves into his pockets and ran a hand through his salt-and-pepper hair—mostly salt now that he was fifty. I didn’t mind at all. Men only get more attractive as they age, especially men who take care of themselves.

“Yes, it is. But I’m more interested in the *who* of the crowd, not the *how many*.” And the “who” to whom I referred was right in front of me. I leaned my head down, batting my eyelashes. “You know, we’ve had some interesting fundraisers over the years, but nothing this fun.”

“Yes, you’ve outdone yourself this year.” He slipped his coat off and draped it over an arm. “It looks promising.”

“And the best part?” I leaned over the check-in counter and my shirt dipped. I’d planned this moment for days—the outfit, the look on my face, the words I’d say. God, if he rejected me, I was going to cry.

“What’s that?” Callum’s tone was curious but cautious. I knew my father had warned him off me, telling him to stay away. I just didn’t know how serious he took that warning.

“Well, I’m single now, and we’ll be cooped up in this lodge, alone, all weekend.” There was no mistaking my intent. I watched Callum’s eyes flash with lust as his eyebrows rose and his chest puffed up ever so slightly. That was not the body language of rejection.

“You don’t say?” He was really good at masking his feelings, so I pressed a little.

“May or may not have made sure our rooms were adjacent.” I smirked at him and felt that smirk slide into a grin.

“Ellen, I—”

“Ah, back!” Chandra burst into the conversation, and I straightened, making sure my cleavage was more modest. “I’m so excited! Oh, you must be Dr. Andrews.” She held her hand out to shake his. Callum’s eyes lingered on me for a second as he shook her hand then he turned to her.

“Yes, Callum, please.” God, I wanted him to devour me with his eyes like that just a bit longer. “You two do such fabulous work, I couldn’t say no when I heard you needed volunteers this year.”

“Well, it’s so good to have you.” Chandra nudged me with her elbow, and I snapped out of it. “We aren’t quite ready for you, though, so like all the guests who have arrived early, you can have a seat in the lodge bar or restaurant. We’ll call you in when it’s time for security, but you’ll still have to check in like everyone else.”

“That sounds great, Chandra.” Callum read her name tag, as she’d neglected to introduce herself, something she did regularly.

“Oh, have you talked to the lodge security guy?” I had been so preoccupied with how incredibly good-looking he was, I hadn’t even done my job properly.

“I did on the way in. He has things covered until check in. Then he asked me to report to the office, and we’ll go over our plan again.” Callum winked at me. My God, my panties were so wet. Then he walked away, and I felt my chest physically ache because he wasn’t near me anymore.

Chandra nudged me again. “My God, girl, did you see the way he looked at you?”

I almost squealed and giggled. “Didn’t I tell you he’s hot? And God, he’s so amazing too, not just good-looking.” I hoped she was starting to give me the benefit of the doubt.

“If he’s so amazing, why did he just vanish from your life when you were so in love with him? I think I’ll reserve my judgment until we see what the weekend holds.” She walked off again, this time carrying rolls of wrapping paper, and I watched until Callum walked out the ballroom door. It didn’t

matter what happened in the past. The good in someone can coexist with dark things too—it didn't negate his goodness. It just meant he, like me, had things to work on. After all, if my marriage failed because of me, there were things I'd have to do differently and get right in order to make a new relationship work, right?

He deserved the same benefit of the doubt that I did, and I was going to give it to him. I just hoped my demons left me alone so I could enjoy him.

Callum

Ellen had really gone to great lengths this year to make this weekend special, and I got the feeling it wasn't just about the fundraiser. The way she looked at me, her cheeky flirting—Ellen was on the prowl. I knew she had gotten divorced a few years back, but I also watched her struggle with it from a distance. She wasn't even at last year's event. I was surprised last week when I walked into her father's office at the hospital and discovered her there. Not to mention the way she came on to me.

I walked out of the lodge ballroom toward the little bar that served lodge guests. I'd never been to their family lodge. I knew Allen and Karen owned the place. He'd told me years back when his father passed away that he'd inherited the entire thing. One day, Ellen would be charged with caring for it and her children after that—if she had any. I knew her divorce followed right on the heels of a devastating miscarriage. Such a tragic thing to happen to such an amazing woman.

“Hey, Dr. Andrews!” A bright young nurse from Hudson walked past and smiled at me. I almost ran into her before I realized where I was going. I was so lost in my thoughts about Ellen, I wasn't paying attention to where I was going.

“Hey, sorry about that.” I smiled at her and continued on toward the bar, this time with a little more focus. Everything about the lodge screamed “mountain getaway,” from the antler chandeliers to the thick logs stacked upon one another to

create the structure. And with the snow falling and the thirty or more Christmas trees erected and decorated around the foyer, ballroom, and down every hallway, the lodge was a magical sight.

My coat was damp with melted snow, so when I found a spot at the bar, I draped it over the back of my stool and shoved my accessories down the sleeves, an old trick my mother taught me decades ago to avoid losing them. The bartender, busy with about ten other customers who had arrived early for the event, looked up at me and nodded, indicating he had seen me. I leaned on the smooth, polished mahogany and gawked at the hundred or more bottles of liquor on shelves behind the bar.

With the way the weather had sprung up, my presence here would be even more important. Ellen's father typically handled security and safety for event attendees, hiring one firm or another. But this year, he would be absent, caring for his ailing wife. I felt a bit cornered when he sprang the news on Ellen in his office last week, but I stepped up. Deep down, I knew it was a chance to be around Ellen. Her gravitational pull always sucked me in even though I knew she was untouchable.

When Allen chased me off nine years ago, I took him seriously. He wasn't my boss back then, just a friend, but since then, I'd taken the position of head of internal medicine and it wasn't something I wanted to mess up because of another fling. Ellen was every bit as gorgeous at thirty-four as she had been at twenty five, though. My hormones raged against what I knew was the right choice—respect her father's wishes and leave her alone.

“Hey, Cal. It's been a long time.” A familiar voice broke through my thoughts, and I turned over my shoulder to see Killian Waters have a seat next to me. His sandy hair hung in his eyes like usual. A bit younger than me, he still had the looks of a thirty-year-old and the spunk to match it.

“Hey, Kill. What's going on?” I hadn't realized Ellen's event drew doctors from outside of Hudson, but it made sense. Hudson was the only hospital in Evansville and the entire valley, and it was growing all the time.

He shrugged out of his heavy coat and hung it behind him on his chair then leaned against the bar. “Well, you know, it’s going okay. Patty left me, but I’m managing.” The fine lines around his eyes were growing deeper. At forty, divorce was a big deal, especially after fifteen years.

“Wow, I’m sorry to hear that.” Reason number one I never got married. Divorce. Well, that and I liked sampling the menu a little too much back in the day to ever settle for one woman. Ellen, however . . . if it hadn’t been for Allen’s insistence that I was far too old for his twenty-five-year-old daughter, I might have taken a chance on her.

“What are you gentlemen having?” The bartender interrupted our small talk to take our order.

“Just give me whatever’s on tap.” Killian tapped his finger as he spoke and I sighed.

“I’ll just have a rum and diet. Make it light. I have a job to do this evening.” I smiled at the man, and he walked away and I decided to change the subject. If the aim of the weekend was to be light-hearted and fun, talking about Killian’s divorce wasn’t setting him up for that.

“So, have you been to one of these events before?” I hated small talk, but Killian and I had known each other for twenty or so years. We met when he was still in medical school and I was chief resident at the time. We weren’t extremely close, but I could have told him when he met Patty that it wouldn’t work out. I heard she ran off with her yoga instructor who was ten years younger than Killian.

“Actually, no. I’m here to give some money toward the new trauma unit that’s going in, but I am hoping to rebound, pick up a few phone numbers. It’s been six months and I’m ready to get back into the saddle.” He winked at me as the bartender set our drinks in front of us.

“Compliments of Ms. Davies.” He nodded at the door where Ellen stood speaking with someone. She looked up and grinned, then waved and walked out.

“Ah, someone has an admirer.” Killian lifted his beer glass to his mouth and sipped as he smirked at me.

“Hmm, you think so?” I tried to play it cool. If word got back to Allen and Karen about the way Ellen was flirting with me, Allen would definitely think I was instigating it.

“I know so. Isn’t she Ellen Peters-Davies? She organized the whole event.” His penetrating stare was unnerving, threatening to unravel my poker face. If I was going to make it through this weekend and maintain my self-control, I had to have someone to talk to, so why not him?

“Yeah, she is. Off-limits Ellen, I like to call her.”

Killian chuckled at me and set his glass down while I sipped my drink. “Off limits? Since when is that a thing? Is she married?”

“No, divorced two years ago. But she’s sixteen years younger than me and my boss’s daughter. And he made it clear a decade ago that I was to stay away.” I sighed. “Back then, she was twenty-five and I was forty-something. I understood his caution. Ellen and I had a fling, crazy sex and a few dates. Nothing too serious. But Daddy Dearest stepped in and ended that. She got married, but it didn’t work out. Personally, I think her father set her up with the man. No thinking woman would date Roger Davies.”

“*The* Roger Davies?” Killian asked, narrowing his eyes. “The investment banker?”

“Yeah, I guess he helped fund her startup.” I gestured around the room and nodded. “Her company runs fundraisers for charity worldwide.”

“So why leave all that money? Did he get rid of her?” Killian seemed far too interested in Ellen. It made me a bit jealous that he took such a liking to her. She was gorgeous and she was off limits, but I still held some strange possessive thoughts over her. Why?

“Not sure of the exact reasons, but I know she also lost a baby during that time. She’s probably carrying a lot of pain inside that heart of hers.” I wasn’t about to indicate that Ellen

was damaged goods. She wasn't. While I didn't have all the details about the divorce, I knew enough about her to know it wasn't her fault. But if Killian read into that comment, all the better.

"Hmm, well maybe one of us will get her number. She seems to have yours." He downed the rest of his drink and tapped his glass on the bar to indicate he wanted another.

"Yes, that she does. I'm helping with security." I stood, having lost my interest in the drink. "You can finish that if you'd like. I'm going to go see if it's check-in time yet and report to the security office. I'll catch you later."

I picked up my coat and headed out of the bar without waiting for his response. Killian was a good man, but not good enough for Ellen. Still, I couldn't have her, so why did I feel this strange need to protect her?

Ellen

“**T**hank you for coming.” I slid the guest passes and room keys across the counter to yet another happy couple checking in for our Christmas in Vegas-themed fundraiser. Owen and Harper Thorpe were two elite members at our family lodge, and Owen’s deep friendship and close working relationship with my father made him all the more familiar. I hadn’t met his wife until just now, but she seemed to be a wonderful woman.

As they walked away, I glanced down the line of folks waiting to check in, recognizing a few faces, including the ones right in front of me. Dr. Ben Wilks and his wife, Georgia, were close personal friends of mine. Unfortunately, I’d had to witness their wedding only across social media since my job kept me out of the country most of the time.

“Ben, I heard about your promotion to head of Pediatrics.” I couldn’t help myself. I hurried around the end of the counter and offered a quick hug to each of them.

“Yes! And it came with a decent pay rise too. I’m ready to hit the slot machines and support a good cause.” Ben was a lively one, always ready to banter and have fun. Georgia swatted at him playfully then rested her hand on a growing stomach. She looked at him out of the corner of her eye as she spoke.

“Yes, we’re here to support this awesome cause.” Then she turned to smile at me. “But we’re also expecting a little one

soon. Babies are expensive.”

I chuckled and took my spot behind the counter again. Chandra had her own line of folks to check in, and I couldn't stand talking for too long. It was important to get all of our guests into their rooms in a timely fashion so we could keep our schedule of events.

“Well, I'm just happy you could make it.” I typed on the keyboard, bringing up their reservation and finding their keys. I could actually see myself doing this job daily. I enjoyed it that much. I had done it when I was a teen for a while and earned a job every ski season, but I had grown up to do bigger and better things.

“It's really snowing,” Ben said. “The roads were getting really slick.”

“Yeah, there were a few slide offs that we noticed.” Georgia shivered, and I couldn't tell if it was the cold or if she was frightened. If the weather got too bad, that would put a damper on our entire event. I tried not to think about it.

“Well, it's nice and warm in here.” I imprinted their keycards and slid them across the counter with a packet of information. “Here is our list of events and your keys and guest passes. You don't want to miss the shows. They're going to be lots of fun.”

“Good to see you, Ellen.” Ben escorted Georgia away, and a man stepped up in the spot where they'd just been standing.

I didn't recognize him from previous events, but I did remember seeing him with Callum at the bar earlier this evening. His sandy hair and blue eyes were attractive, and he seemed to be checking me out, but when he opened his mouth, I wasn't expecting what he said.

“So, you're the woman who planned this entire event?” he asked, looking around then back at me. “Callum had a lot to say about you.”

I was taken aback by his mentioning Callum. The fact that he had spoken of me at all was flattering, but with a man over drinks? I looked down at the computer, trying to maintain my

composure and not gush like a teenager asking what they spoke about.

“All good things I hope, Mister . . .?”

“Killian Waters.”

“Yes, I have your reservation here, Mr. Waters.” The name didn’t even sound familiar. This handsome stranger really was a stranger. I looked up at him as I swiped his keycard through the machine to imprint his information. “Your first time?”

“Yes, it is.” He grinned at me as if he knew me personally. “I hope this weekend is a fantastic success for you, and may there be a bit of matchmaking involved.” He winked, which I found odd, but he took his packet, pass, and keycard and walked away, leaving me wondering what on earth he was talking about.

I handled a few more attendees checking in, Dr. Derek Holt from Yellow Springs and a few more folks I knew, and the line of folks slowed to a crawl. I was grateful for the break. I took the time to sit and have a drink of water. It would be a long weekend and I already felt fatigued, but when Callum headed our way and Chandra offered to check him in, I protested, shooing her away with a snicker. She was just out of earshot when he approached.

“How is security going out there? I hope there are no issues.” I was more interested in how he’d feel when he knew I booked our rooms side-by-side, but that part was still my secret.

“Everything is going fine for now.” He looked nervous, though, like everything wasn’t going fine. Instead of feeding into my insecurity, I pulled up his reservation and prepared his room key and pass.

As I slid it across the counter, I kept my fingers pressing it tightly to the polished wood and said, “I think we may be neighbors.” I knew we were neighbors. I’d planned it that way myself.

He reached out to take the items and his fingers brushed against mine. I felt the electrical charge and lingered there as

he tried to take his things. His eyes walked up my arm to my face and I grinned at him. There was an exchange of energy as he slowly showed a look of understanding.

“Well, I might just have to stop by and say hello to my neighbor, then.” He took the card and pass as I pulled my hand back, but he held my gaze as he continued. “It’s promising to be a very cold night. It’s the neighborly thing to check on folks nearby to make sure they are nice and warm.” My hand tingled where his fingers had touched me.

“Mm, yes, that’s a good idea. You wouldn’t want them to go cold or hungry.” Hungry was just the word to describe me. I’d tasted Callum’s fruits and I still held intense feelings for him. Some days, I thought it was more of an infatuation bordering on lust because he was so incredibly sexy. Other times, I knew it was love—the type of love you can have for someone where you only watch them grow and change at a distance because that’s all you’ll ever have.

When Callum and I dated, I’d fallen for him hard. We knew each other for years before that Christmas, and that entire December felt like magic to me. Like the Christmas gods had smiled upon me and he finally took notice. Our first touch, first kiss, first time we had sex—all of them confirmed to me that we were meant to be, and when he just stopped calling me, stopped answering my messages, I was hurt. Only after my father told me he’d chased Callum off did I understand it was my father’s doing, not Callum’s. But then there was Roger and the prospect of someone who would support my business and the pressure from my parents to date him. I was forced to move on.

Roger and I had a spark, but we didn’t have true love. That place in my heart was reserved for this man standing in front of me. It always would be. I was never unfaithful to Roger—it wasn’t in my nature—but a love as deep as the one I had for Callum never went away. It remained buried in my heart waiting until some day, if fate allowed it, it could express itself. Today was that day.

Callum stood there looking into my eyes for so long I thought time had stopped. “Exactly how cold is it supposed to

get?” I asked.

“Below negative ten, so cold the trucks won’t be able to de-ice the roads.”

His comment was a blow to the supercharged atmosphere, but I pushed on, flirting with him to drive my point home. “Well, you know they say the best way to cure hypothermia is to lie naked with the person beneath the covers and share your body heat.” Oh, God, how I would love for him to lie naked with me. My body ached for just that, to feel his arms around me again and this time for no one to ruin it.

Memories of his hands all over my skin had been on my mind for weeks now as I anticipated this event. Callum was the best lover, made me feel things I’d never experienced anywhere else. Just imagining it made my body stir and my groin burn.

“Ms. Davies, I am deeply flattered by this string of conversation, and you are making my cock throb, which won’t be good for my concentration levels.” I held in a chuckle, but I let the smile beam on my face. He was right. Work first, play later. But as I opened my mouth to reply, he spoke first.

“I, uh . . .” He cleared his throat and continued. “We do have a massive storm system moving in. It’s worse than the meteorologist forecasted. They predicted four inches, and we already have four inches on the ground and the storm hasn’t even really hit yet. The amended forecast calls for up to twenty-four inches in the pass and another foot over the next seventy-two hours.”

Callum dropped the news like a wet blanket on our fire and it took the wind out of my sails. “Seriously?” I turned immediately to the computer and searched the internet for the local forecast. He was right. The storm had stalled directly over us, and forecasters were saying it was a strange polar vortex that would rotate overhead like a hurricane of sorts, staying stationery and whipping up blizzard-like conditions. I’d never seen anything like it.

“Yes, so I do need to get back out there and make sure the team is working hard to keep things running smoothly. But

tonight?” He backed up a step, tapping his keycard on the counter as I glanced up.

“Yes, tonight,” I said absently, realizing the bad weather would mean a poor turnout. My focus turned entirely to the computer screen, and I read with horror how parts of Upstate New York had already been shut down. I sank into the chair and clicked over to the event page where I typed up a short update to our guests that the event would still be happening, urging folks to arrive early to ensure they were able to traverse the roads and asking them to use caution while traveling.

It was just my luck that the one time I planned such a large event, the weather would preclude its success. I’d had to fight tooth and nail to make my company a success, and even with Roger’s financial help, I’d had to work to make a name for myself. When he left me high and dry, I almost lost it all, but I worked harder, dug deeper, fought longer. This year’s event was supposed to be the biggest yet—a springboard to growing my company to the next level.

The phone rang, and I glanced at the caller ID on the landline to see it was my father’s number. I knew he was anxious about the weekend as well, given that he was hospital director and the funds raised here would directly impact the hospital’s growth and its ability to serve the region with better care. I picked up, knowing he had probably seen the updated forecast and was calling to alert me.

“Hey, Dad.”

“Ellen, have you seen the news?” He didn’t sound panicked or scared, but he did sound concerned. Dad was a worrier too, prone to think the worst at times. I got that horrible trait from him, though I tried not to be.

“Just now. It’s awful.” We already had donations coming in, so I knew we would end in the positive and have money to give to the hospital, but our goal was lofty. We needed millions in order to fully fund the new trauma unit.

“Well, I just wanted to ensure you were safe there and that you plan to stay put until the storm moves out and they have roads cleared.”

We had talked about my popping in on Saturday evening while Chandra held down the fort so I could sit with Mom after her chemo infusion. I hated that I spent so much time abroad and that my mother was suffering from lymphoma. When I was in town, I wanted to be by her side every second, but Dad insisted my place was here at the lodge for this weekend.

“You know Chandra handled it very well last year. And with Callum here working too, I’m sure I could just come home before the roads got bad.” Of course, that would ruin my plan to rekindle the flame I had with Callum this Christmas, but Mom was sick. If she didn’t pull through the way the doctors said was possible, I’d never forgive myself for not being there when I could. My place was with her.

“No, Ellen. You worked too hard to build this business. The storm isn’t going to last a month, okay? You stay there. Mom is fine. I’m fine. We’re handling things just fine.”

Fine. I hated that word. I could never tell if he was actually okay or if it was his code for “not fine”, but he’d never admit it. Dad was prideful too, a man with an ego the size of an elephant and hard to put up with sometimes.

“Dad, I—”

“Please, honey. I’ve already spoken to our lodge director. You’re in charge of everything. You stay there and raise some funds, okay? Mom needs me now. I have to go.”

I tried to protest, but he said goodbye and hung up before I could. Mom and Dad had such a close bond. I wondered if I’d ever have anything close. Roger and I never had that intimate friendship. We had great sex, and we had a great business relationship, but he was never on my level emotionally. Sometimes, I wondered if that was my fault because I longed for the intimate love of the ages, romance, baring my soul to someone who never judged me.

Roger wasn’t like Dad, so I never felt safe to truly expose my heart to him. Callum, however, was exactly like my father in every way. That was why I craved his presence so very much. I was so thankful he was here. He was calming and

worked me up at the same time. As I hung the phone up and sat back in the seat waiting for more attendees to sign in, I felt my stomach tighten.

Callum was perfect. Not like Roger. But I'd managed to screw things up with Roger anyway. How was I going to manage anything with a man so amazing to be my soul mate when I'd wrecked my marriage and wound up alone at thirty-four? Maybe I was kidding myself and all I'd ever have would be a life littered with broken relationships.

Or maybe Callum would be the one to help me see I wasn't so broken.

Callum

The magic show was fantastic, a man and his assistant wowing the audience of around a hundred and fifty people with amazing optical illusions and such. I wasn't much of a magic man myself, but it was entertaining. I made my rounds too, not avoiding Ellen but not searching her out. I knew what she had insinuated about this evening, her desire to meet with me and my assumption that it would not be an innocent meeting in any way.

I'd made a promise to Allen to steer clear, and he was a good friend of mine. I didn't want to jeopardize that relationship for a quickie. Still, Ellen was a grown adult now who could make her own choices. She should be able to decide whether she wanted to have sex with me or not. Just the thought of that aroused me, so I decided to just focus on my duties as security and safety—not how amazing I remembered sex being with her. Or sex in general, for that matter.

I hadn't dated a woman in a few years, and I'd stopped playing the field years before that—just after Ellen, really. My career took off, and I had to focus on it more, which left little time for anything more than self-pleasuring in the shower, and I would be embarrassed to admit it to her, but she was the fantasy I played to every now and again. The best sex I ever had, and I'd definitely jump on the chance to have it—except for that promise I'd made to her father.

When the guests were mostly in their rooms, apart from a few who lingered in the bar area, I headed toward my room. I'd only stopped in long enough to bring my bags in from my car and set them at the foot of my bed. The entire evening had been filled with answering questions, giving orders, and watching the storm as it intensified. The groundskeepers were having a difficult time keeping up with the parking lots and entry drive, and there were five of them for this small parcel. I couldn't imagine how road crews were doing on hundreds of miles of roads with so few of them.

As I approached my room, I passed by another door, and I swore I heard crying. It made me pause and listen for a second. If one of the guests was in danger or pain, it was my job to make sure they were taken care of. I felt awkward doing it, but I pressed my ear against the door and tuned my ear to the sounds. I definitely heard crying, so I knocked softly.

"Security, is everything okay?" I waited a second there, hovering by the door, and then I heard the locks click and the door swung open.

Ellen was there, wiping her mascara-streaked face with some toilet paper. "Callum, I'm sorry. I was just . . ." Her words hung in the tense space between us.

"What's wrong?" Above all others in this place, my duty was to her. Not only because she was in charge of the whole shebang but because she was a friend. Maybe more than a friend, but that part wasn't easy to express.

"Oh . . ." she said, then sucked in a deep breath. She looked ready to cry again before she shook her head and walked over to the bed and plopped down on the foot of the mattress. "It's bad."

I glanced down the hallway. No one was in sight, so I stepped into her room and lightly shut the door. With the mood in here like a wet blanket, I felt certain she just needed some encouragement. I sat next to her and waited. Her room was decorated exactly like mine except the beds were on opposite sides of the room. Same warm green and mauve colors, same

Berber carpet. Same view of the mountain with the snow blanketing everything.

“Need to talk?” I asked, nudging her. She picked at her fingernails and sighed.

“We’re getting donations coming in, but we have half the number of people we’re supposed to. I know some of it is just that there were people planning to arrive tomorrow, but some of it is that there are people who are unable to get to us now because of the roads. If they shut things down, then we’ll end up negative. I don’t want this to be a flop. Especially since I chose to be here instead of at my mother’s side when she’s going through chemo.”

I looked at her and noticed for the first time since I walked into the room that this was not the happy, confident Ellen I had flirted with this afternoon. She carried a lot of stress in her body, slumped over and shoulders curled in. She was weighed down by this a lot, and it hurt my heart to know she was hurting.

“Hey, we’ll make the best of it. We will get some volunteers to set up live streaming on your event’s Facebook page. Maybe we can turn the lodge office into a call center. There are like four phones in there. We’d just have to share the numbers on the event page and the live stream.” The idea would take some effort to pull off, but if it meant salvaging the weekend, we could make it happen. Besides, I wasn’t one to give up easily, and though I knew Ellen wasn’t either, she needed a reminder that there is always a way forward even when it looks bleak.

“Yeah?” she asked, looking up at me. I made the mistake of brushing a tear off her cheek. It sent a jolt of electricity into my body. We’d always had excellent chemistry. That was why I always kept my distance, because the urge of attraction typically outweighed the measure of self-restraint I had.

“Yeah,” I said, swallowing hard. Our eyes met and she held my gaze.

“That’s actually a great idea.” She blinked hard, and a few more tears streamed down her face, which I wiped away with

my thumb. She held my hand there to her cheek, and I felt my body tense, as if I couldn't move or like time stopped. "I miss you," she whispered. "A lot."

I had two choices—break her heart by getting up and leaving so I could keep my promise to her father, or go with it and pray the gods overhead were shining on me. The right choice was obviously to respect Allen, but the urge to kiss her was so intense I could hardly fight it. I found myself in freeze-fawn mode, indecision paralyzing me.

"Callum, I'm going to kiss you . . ." Ellen didn't wait for a response, and I couldn't have given her one if I tried. Her lips brushed over mine lightly before she parted them and let her tongue trace along my upper lip. I forgot what a good kisser she was.

My mind was spinning with desire as Ellen's tongue danced with mine. I wrapped my arms around her waist, pulling her closer to me. My body was on fire, and every nerve ending was tingling with pleasure. I had wanted this for so long, but I knew it was wrong. Ellen was Allen's daughter, and I had promised him that I would keep her safe.

But at this moment, I couldn't resist her any longer. I had to have her.

I broke away from the kiss, panting heavily. "We can't do this," I whispered.

Ellen looked up at me with a mixture of desire and frustration in her eyes. "Why not?" she asked.

"Your father—" I started to say, but Ellen cut me off.

"My father doesn't need to know," she said, pulling me back toward her. "We can keep this a secret." She was addictive and aggressive, her hands pawing at me greedily.

I knew I shouldn't give in to her, but I couldn't resist her any longer. I kissed her again, harder this time, as my hands roamed over her body. Her body was soft and warm under my touch, and I felt my desire for her growing with every passing second. Ellen moaned softly into my mouth as I unbuttoned her top and spread it, exposing her creamy chest. I laid her

down on the bed and quickly undressed myself, my eyes never leaving hers. She watched me hungrily, her own hands beginning to caress her skin. She slid her slacks off and tossed them, leaving her lying in just her bra and panties as I climbed onto the bed.

“Take me,” she whispered and spread her legs.

I didn't need to be asked twice. I began to kiss my way down her body, stopping to pay attention to every sensitive spot. She writhed under me, her hands gripping the sheets tightly as she moaned my name. Her skin was salty and sweet, moist with perspiration and taut with anticipation. My fingers smoothed over her curves, searching them out and finding her ticklish places. She jolted and giggled, and I kissed further down her torso.

Finally, I reached her warm, soft mound, the scent of her desire oozing into my nostrils and making me hunger for her even more. I slipped her panties down and ogled her beauty, exactly how I remembered her. The curve of her thigh, the way her pussy dripped with nectar. I wanted to drink from that fountain.

“Callum . . .” Ellen moaned, her hands sliding into my hair as my mouth hovered over her. I moved my head back and forth, letting the tip of my tongue brush over her clit. She moaned loudly and pressed her hips toward me, her desire clear.

I slipped a finger inside her, massaging the sensitive inner walls of her pussy. Ellen's moans became louder as I began to work a second finger inside her. I sucked on her clit, alternately licking and sucking until I felt her begin to tense. I continued thrusting, eating her pussy as she clawed at my back and neck. I missed this feeling of having this power over a woman, but this woman in particular had gotten in my head years ago. Having this power over her was different, magnetic—like it was meant to be.

“Callum!” She screamed out my name as her orgasm overtook her. I continued to work her pussy, not wanting to miss a single drop of her juices. I wanted to drink her in,

consume every part of her. I wanted to own her, and I wanted her to know it.

Her pussy clenched and contracted, her upper body jerking off the bed with each wave of climax. She must have muttered “Oh, God” at least thirty times, and her nails clawed at my scalp, but I didn’t slow my ministrations until she had relaxed back and was calm.

I began to kiss my way back up her body. Ellen was panting, her chest heaving as her hands ran through my hair. I felt her stiffen as my lips brushed over her stomach and toward her breasts. She looked at me with lust in her eyes as I undid her front-clasp bra and teased her nipples with my tongue. She was exquisite, an image of beauty and strength. I’d restrained myself for years every time I saw her at this event. Because she was off limits, then because she was married, then because she wasn’t even here. This year, she was mine for the taking, a ripe fruit ready to be plucked, and God, was I hungry for fruit.

“Mmm, I really don’t think we should do this,” I told her, nestling between her knees. The thought of Allen finding out and what that might mean for my friendship with him and my job played in my mind, making me nervous. Ellen reached down and stroked my dick, precum already beading on its head.

“I really think I want this, and I really don’t want to feel disappointed because you reject me. We’re made for each other, Cal.” She craned her neck up and kissed me again, and I let her, moaning into her mouth as she stroked my cock. Then I remembered the condom in my wallet and pulled myself out of her grasp. I leaned over the edge of the bed and grabbed my jeans, pulling my wallet from the back pocket. I folded it open and slid the condom out, dropping the jeans.

Ellen’s hand found my dick again, stroking me as I tore the wrapper open and rolled the condom onto my length. Even then, she was eager, squeezing me and pulling me toward her entrance. Her expression was frantic, eyes covered in a thick lust haze. It was like she had been waiting all this time for me to come along and satisfy an urge only I could.

“Ellen,” I said, moving between her legs again. I gripped my dick and ran the head along her slit, searching for her entrance. I found it easily enough, the heat of her body radiating against my tip. Then I thrust my hips, sliding into her. She gasped, her eyes widening as I began to thrust.

“God, you’re so tight, Ellen.” I wanted to take my time, to tease her, to draw this out as long as possible, but the feeling of her strong muscles wrapped around my dick was too much. I slid in deeper, burying myself to the hilt. She was incredible, clenching around me and tensing.

“Oh . . . Cal . . .” she moaned and clawed at my sides.

“Yes, Ellen . . .” I slid a hand under her butt, tilting her hips to me, and increased the speed of my thrusts. I knew she was close to another orgasm. I could feel her muscles tensing as her climax approached, and I was determined to give her one more, to bring her over the edge again.

I slid my hands down her body, cupping her breasts, then reaching down to the junction of our bodies. Her clit was already hard and swollen, slick with her juices, and I could feel the wetness pouring out of her. I ran a finger along her slit, gathering up her juices as I thrust into her. Gone was any thought about my promise to her father, and it had been replaced by the need to hear her call my name out.

“Cal, I’m going to come again.” The sounds she made became increasingly frantic, moans and whimpers. “Please . . . Oh, God, please . . .” Her body moved beneath me in a serpentine motion, grinding upward against me.

“God, you’re beautiful,” I whispered.

Ellen jerked as she came, calling out my name. I could feel her pussy clenching around me, milking my cock as I thrust into her. It was all I could do not to explode. Not yet.

I slowed my thrusts until I was almost still. Then I pulled out of her and hovered above her. I needed this break or it was over for me. She was breathing heavily, her chest heaving, and her eyes were closed. I kissed her lips, then her neck. I ran my tongue over her collarbone, and she shivered beneath me.

She rolled her hips under me, pressing her entrance against my dick. I could feel my cum boiling in my balls and knew I wouldn't last long at all. I pushed her back to the bed, then slid into her. She moaned and pulled on my hips, sucking me in deep.

“Ellen, God . . .” I thrust into her, each time harder and faster than before. She wrapped her legs around me, digging her heels into my backside, urging me to thrust deeper into her. “You feel so good.”

“God, I never want you to pull out,” she panted, her breathing labored.

“Never,” I promised her, and if I could keep that promise I would. The pleasure I felt in that moment both in my body and in my mind were so great that I could live in it with her. Pause this moment and never leave it.

“Oh, God,” she moaned, her voice growing in pitch. I could feel her pussy vibrating around my dick. She was coming again.

“Come for me, Ellen.”

I could feel her muscles tightening around me, and then she screamed, her muscles clenching and spasming. I thrust into her a few more times, then felt my orgasm building. It started at my toes and raced up my spine. I let out a groan as I came, filling the sleeve with my cum as she continued to convulse around me. When we were both spent, I pulled out and rolled to the side, flopping onto my back. I wasn't sure if she wanted me to stay, but I needed to catch my breath for sure.

What on earth was this woman doing to me?

Ellen

Never in a million years would I have dreamed that reunion sex could feel so amazing. Callum really was incredible. I lay there panting, trying to get my bearing as the weight of post-orgasmic relaxation sank into every muscle in my body. Warmth and giddiness flooded me, and I let my eyes shut for a second. When the bed shook, I thought Callum was leaving, and my eyes popped open to watch him slip his full condom off and tie it shut before tossing it. He didn't even need to use it. I knew I'd never get pregnant—not after my fertility issues. But everything happened so quickly, we didn't even talk about that.

“Stay?” I asked, patting the bed as he turned to look down at me.

“Of course.” He climbed back into bed and scooted closer to me. I took no shame in tangling my legs with his and lying on my side facing him. It might have been nine years since we were in this position, but it felt like no time had passed. Every bit of emotion I'd felt for him years ago was tangible now, floating to the surface as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“You felt amazing . . .” I didn't know where to start the conversation. It wasn't like we'd spent time catching up and filling each other in on how life had changed us and we'd grown. That was raw, passionate sex that stemmed from the

strong chemistry we had. We couldn't keep our hands off each other, and it showed.

“You weren't so bad yourself.” He brushed a few strands of my light brown hair out of my eyes. I studied him up close. He'd gotten grayer over the years and maybe a few more wrinkles had appeared, but he was sexier than ever.

“I really did miss you.” I toyed with the hair on his chest, swirling it around a finger. It had been a long nine years to ache for someone, especially when for six of those years I had been taken by another man. It only lasted five years after our period of dating, and I still blamed myself, mostly because I knew my heart was never Roger's to begin with.

“I thought about you so many times.” Callum kissed my forehead and cupped my cheek, forcing me to look up at him. “Every time you were home, I wanted to say something, but you had moved on. I thought everything with Roger was perfect.”

I shrugged and turned to my back, snuggling into him. His hand splayed on my stomach and his thumb rubbed over the edge of my ribcage.

“Roger was okay. We just never gelled. Not the way you and I did.” It was true. We had a lot going for us, just not that deep, passionate connection and spark. Besides the fact that I wanted a family and he only wanted his career and a wife on his arm.

“This may be a horrible time to ask considering what we just did, but why did it fall apart?” Callum pulled me more tightly against his side. He was easy to talk to, like confiding in your best friend your deepest, darkest secrets. I sighed and took a deep breath.

“Well, it was never perfect, but after about year three, it got bad. I wanted children. He didn't. We never used protection, but only because I had been deemed infertile. Doctors told me there was a one in seven thousand chance I'd conceive. I found it devastating, but Roger was relieved. He hated using condoms anyway, and I refused to get on the pill because I don't want fake hormones ruining my body.”

I remembered those arguments all too clearly. Marriage wasn't supposed to be full of arguing and anxiety. It was supposed to consist of hard work, communication, and respect. Only, the respect I offered Roger was never reciprocated. "The longer we were married, the angrier and more distant he became. Until one day, I found out I was pregnant. I was thrilled, and I hoped he would be too, that somehow, he'd miraculously change his mind and want the baby, only he urged me to abort. He said it would ruin my body, it would destroy our potential future and eat up our money. He called the baby 'it' and never allowed himself to grow attached.

"One day, early in my third trimester, when I knew things between Roger and me were a total loss, I started having stomach pains. I asked him to take me to the ER, but he didn't come home from work. I'd been abroad for several months, and it was time for me to stay home to have the baby. I know we would have worked things out, that eventually, he'd have come around and enjoyed our child, but I miscarried that day. I gave birth to a stillborn baby boy, named him Harvard Roger Davies. When Roger never came to the hospital, I knew it was over.

"When they let me out, I went straight to my parents' house and recovered there, then I left town and never looked back. We handled the divorce completely via email and fax. I never imagined he'd hate children so much that he'd leave me like that, in such a horrific way. That the love he supposedly had for me wasn't enough to be there and comfort me when I was hurting."

I turned and curled into Callum's chest as tears welled up. "That's horrible, Ellen. I'm so sorry that happened to you." I felt so comforted and safe there with him. I never wanted to leave.

With moist cheeks, I tried to push away the fear that it was all my fault. If I had announced the pregnancy in a different way, or if I hadn't fought him so hard, maybe it would have turned out differently. Maybe if I had been more compassionate about his workload and respected his time more, he would have come around and seen the miracle of

what it meant to have a baby with me. I never got pregnant on purpose, but that didn't mean I didn't want it. I felt like he blamed me somehow, like he thought I did it just to spite him. It was all my fault.

"Hey," Callum said, kissing my temple. "I'm here. I know you're hurting, but I want you to know that wasn't your fault. He sounds like a real piece of work. I'd never do that to any woman even if I didn't want children." He rubbed my back until I stopped crying, then I pulled away and rubbed my eyes.

"I think I'd like a shower. Would you like to join me?"

He looked hesitant for a moment, but he nodded. Showering with someone was a different level of intimacy than sex. A lot of people just bang one out and don't care about the sex, but being nude and washing each other is vulnerability, an intimacy I craved with Callum.

He followed me to the bathroom and I started the water. He stepped in first, offering me a hand to steady myself. At times, I'd felt conscious of my body size, not that I thought myself fat, just that Roger had always made comments about showering with me, specifically that there wasn't enough room. Which only furthered my insecurities. Callum, however, drank me in like I was the most gorgeous woman he'd ever seen, smoothing his hands across my curves and thick thighs like they were irresistible.

He lathered me up and tucked me beneath the steamy flow of water to rinse me, kissing me the whole time. I felt like a goddess, empowered and wanted. I'd never felt like that with Roger. Even sex was just carnal and raw, but this was sensuous and transparent.

"Why did you marry him?" he asked, turning again so his body was under the water. My form pressed against his, feeling the overflow of the hot water stream between us.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, why if he wasn't the one for you, did you marry him?" Callum's eyes were intense and dark, boring into me.

“You stopped responding to me.” I shrugged and looked away, still hurt by that. “It wasn’t just some fling to me, but my dad told me you were a player. He said you were a kid and that you’d never grown up.” I looked back into his eyes and draped my arms around his neck. “I loved you so much, Callum. I thought you were it for me, but you just stopped responding.”

“Your dad made me leave you alone. He said I was too old for you and that I’d only break your heart. He pretty much demanded I keep my distance with ultimatums that would have jeopardized my job.”

I knew those things too, but I had to learn them from my father a year into my marriage with Roger. When things were good with him, Dad felt like he’d won the war, like his behavior of driving Callum away had been the right thing to do. I was angry with him and I didn’t speak to him again until I learned my mom was diagnosed with cancer the first time. Then nothing else mattered but family.

“I didn’t know he made you leave. I just knew you were gone.” I let my chin drop, and I leaned against his chest, letting the water wash over my head. “I settled for Roger because we had things in common. The sex was good, and he was supportive of my career. You know, even after the miscarriage, I might have taken him back. Until I learned he had cheated on me every time I went out of town. That’s why he was content to let me travel so much. He had skinny women in his bed. He never did love me the way I was. If only I would have just worked out more or something—”

“No.” Callum firmly pulled my chin up to meet his gaze again. “Never think that about yourself. He doesn’t get the right to make you feel that way. You are the most gorgeous woman I’ve ever met, inside and out.” His hand slid down over my chest to my hip and gripped me. “If you didn’t see what that body of yours did to my cock, then you’re blind. You are so hot I can’t keep my hands off you.”

I blushed and smiled. I believed it in my heart, but I still blamed myself for things failing. I was confident the way I

was, but if my husband didn't like it I was supposed to be different for him, right?

“Well, whatever the case was, he left and I'm not with him. And I am a grown woman. I can make my own decisions. And I want you, Cal Andrews.”

He leaned down and kissed me, grinding his pelvis against my thigh. “God, this is so wrong. I promised your father, my very good friend, that I'd stay away from you. But I want you so badly, Ellen. You know, you changed me. What I thought was just a fling with you literally changed my entire perspective on life. I am a different man—a better man—because of you.”

His lips covered mine again, and I felt hope welling up. It had been so long since I felt this hope. I had it momentarily when I learned I was pregnant, but Roger squashed that pretty quickly. Here, though, in Callum's arms, I knew the world would be okay, that everything would be right, even if we had to fight for it.

“Let's go lie down,” he whispers, and I can't wait to be held by him. The weekend started out a bit bumpy with the weather, but tomorrow was a new day and I couldn't wait to start it with him.

Callum

I blinked my eyes open, being awakened by the sound of the toilet flushing. It took me a second to realize it was in a hotel—the lodge—and that there was another person in the room with me. It all came flooding back to me as I lay there letting my body slowly wake up. Ellen and I had incredible sex, then lay awake talking for hours. I had forgotten how fascinating her heart was, how interesting I found her personality. She was incredible.

My gaze raked across the room. Flashing alarm clock—power went out at some point. Towels strewn about from our shower last night. A giddy grin stretched across my face. I had waited and ached for a moment like that with Ellen for years. I never realized how many feelings I'd harbored for her until we sat and talked about the past nine years and what we had been up to. God, had I missed talking to her like that.

I sat up and realized quickly that I was still naked, which only proved to increase the size of my grin and my morning wood. I didn't even see my pants, which meant they were on the other side of the bed. So I grabbed the white towel draped over the back of the chair at the desk next to my side of the bed. As I stood, I wrapped it around my waist, concealing my morning wood but leaving a peak at the hair growing south of my navel.

Ellen hummed a tune, her voice floating into the room from the bathroom. The door was open, so I felt no shame in

leaning on the door jamb and watching her until she startled and giggled.

“I didn’t see you there.”

She was stunning, wearing only a lacy white bra and matching panties. I knew her code. I’d learned it years ago. Mismatched bra and panties meant stay away. Matching panties and bra meant I might get lucky. If they were lace it was basically a command to bend her over and have my way with her. She’d spelled it out to me and I had never forgotten. This woman was basically throwing herself at me.

“I wouldn’t mind waking up to this every morning.” I ran a hand through my hair and then across my beard. She looked over at me with a smirk, and her eyes scanned the length of my body before she reached over and pulled my towel loose. It dropped to the floor at my feet, revealing my stiff dick.

“I wouldn’t mind falling asleep in your arms every night like that.” Ellen moved toward me, lipstick tube in hand. “I also wouldn’t mind what we did before we slept all night, every night, the rest of my life.”

I laughed heartily, knowing that was impossible. “You’d get sick of me after one week.” I never doubted my ability to screw her into the sheets as often as she wanted, but no woman wanted sex around the clock.

Ellen set her lipstick down and grabbed my cock, stroking it. “Think you’d like to start the day right? We have a huge weekend ahead of us still, and there is a lot to think about. You’ll probably feel better if you’re nice and relaxed.”

God, this woman was under my skin. “Fine. How would you want to start the day, then?” I leaned against the counter as she leaned toward me, licking her lips.

Ellen leaned in and kissed my neck. “I’d love to start the day with your cock inside me,” she whispered.

I moaned as she reached around and grabbed my ass. “You’d love that, huh?”

“Mmmhmm.” She kissed my neck and nipped at my skin. I knew there was so much more to a successful relationship than

just sex, but I wasn't good at those parts. I was very good at sex, though, which is probably why I didn't feel horrible when she found Roger. I thought she was happy with him. It angered me to know I'd been wrong, that all along, she'd wanted me. I wasn't about to make that mistake again, so if sex was what she wanted, then sex was what she got.

I let her back me toward the bed, and I unclasped her bra as we went. I hardly enjoyed her gorgeous, huge tits last night. I toppled backward, and she slid out of her panties. As I scooted backward and reached for my wallet, now on the nightstand, she straddled me. Before I could flip the wallet open, she grabbed my cock and slid it inside her. I groaned loudly and grabbed her butt cheeks, not a good idea because she started to move.

Ellen was a bit more aggressive than I remembered. Her nails dug into the skin on my hips. She tried to get me to move, but I was enjoying her ride. She moaned and panted above me, her tits bouncing. I closed my eyes and focused on the incredible feeling of her pussy. She was so warm, wet, and tight. I wanted to enjoy this forever, but I also wanted no accidents.

I rolled, turning us over on the bed, and she gasped and giggled. "God, you're strong."

"No, just hungry," I joked, ready to devour her. As I started to slide out, she stopped me, pulling on my hips.

"I want to feel your skin." Her eyes pleaded with me, but I felt hesitant. I could humor her for a while, but a condom was a must. "Make me come."

I slowly thrust in, working the wallet with one hand and balancing on the other. I pulled my last condom out and laid it on the bed, tossing the wallet to my pillow.

We both groaned as I slid in, and we lay there for a moment, getting used to each other again. She finally looked up at me. "Say it." There was such a desire in her gaze, it compelled me to speak.

I closed my eyes and tried not to move, but she was squeezing me so tightly I couldn't hold still. I breathed deeply and tried to concentrate on a nice, calm place. "I want you," I said. And God, did I want her, more than ever.

"Again."

"Ellen, I want you so bad." I opened my eyes and stared down at her. Something about her was so energizing. I felt like a kid again. "Can I make you come now?"

She giggled and nipped at my ear. "Yes, please." She arched her back, forcing me deeper into her. I hissed loudly and grabbed her hips as she started to rock against me. I didn't want to move, but I knew if I stayed still for much longer I was going to lose it. She felt so incredible around my bare cock, her heat and wetness more intimate than last night.

We moved together, and I watched her face as I thrust into her. She was biting her bottom lip and her eyes were squeezed shut. Her breathing grew shallow and fast. I knew she was close. She grabbed my arms and closed her eyes, her nails digging into my skin. I groaned and thrust into her, trying to prolong the feeling. Her hips started to buck against mine, and her moans and pants became constant. She started to whimper, and I knew she was about to come.

As she finally came, I felt her heat surround my cock. I groaned and fell into her, her nails digging into my back. Her body convulsed beneath mine, rhythmically contracting around my shaft. I knew if I didn't pull out I was going to flood her, so I pulled my hips back and replaced my dick with two fingers, working her G-spot as I tore the condom wrapper open with my teeth.

When she calmed, I quickly rolled it on my already-wet cock and positioned myself to enter her again. "Tell me you want it," I whispered.

"I want it," she moaned. She grabbed my ass and pulled me into her as far as she could. "I want you inside me."

I started pumping in and out of her. I'd never felt this way before. My cock was so hard it hurt, and her lips were so soft

and warm. She was moaning and writhing beneath me, urging me on. I leaned down and kissed her neck, loving how she moaned when I nibbled on her earlobe. I started to grind into her, unable to thrust. I was so close to coming.

“Do you like that?” I gasped into her ear. Her hips rocked against mine, crushing her clit between our pubic bones. I could tell she liked it. She loved it, and so did I.

“Yes!” she cried. “I love it!” Her hands were on the back of my head, holding me in place. Her fingernails dug into the skin of my neck. “I love how deep you go, I love it when you grind into me!”

I groaned and grabbed her butt and pulled her up hard against me. “God, you feel so good!” I growled as I slapped her butt cheek and buried myself inside her. She cried out, but I didn’t stop. “You feel so amazing!” I didn’t recognize my own voice. “I’m so close, and I’m gonna come!”

“Oh, my God, oh, my God, oh, my God!” she cried. “I’m gonna come again, Cal . . . Do it. Make me come again.”

I thought we were so loud the entire lodge would hear us. I pushed as deep into her as my cock could go as I felt her come for the second time. The walls of her pussy pulsed and contracted around me. I growled and held her hips and ground into her. Her body was on fire, coated in a light layer of sweat. She was getting a workout.

“Oh, my God, Cal!” she cried. “I love how you feel inside me!”

“I’m gonna come!” I grunted, pounding into her. I groaned and felt my cock start to twitch. I exploded, thrusting into her as hard as I could and filling the condom. It felt so amazing I almost closed my eyes, but hers shot open in an expression of shock. I continued pumping, sliding in and out of her as she shook her head.

“What?” I asked, unsure of what was wrong.

“I think the condom broke. I felt you blow in me. It’s hot . . . it feels very wet.” She was breathless, panting as she spoke, but I instantly pulled out, severing us from the pleasure.

“Oh, my God,” I said. The condom was all twisted, and rather than intact on my dick, it was split open down the side and dangling.

“Did you just come in me?” she asked, her eyes wide. Then a grin started at the corner of her mouth.

“I’m sorry! I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to!” I rushed to the bathroom and grabbed a towel, forgetting about the torn rubber on my cock. When I rushed back, ready to wipe her clean and help her to the shower to wash, she was snickering. I was confused. “What’s funny?”

“You mentioned feeling like a kid again . . . Well, here we are.” She rolled to her side, my cum still draining from her pussy. She started to snicker, and her nose scrunched up.

“The condom broke . . .” I stared at her, towel in hand, baffled.

“It’s okay, Cal.” She scooted back and patted the bed. “I’m clean. You’re not getting any diseases from me, and I trust that you’re clean too.” Ellen positively glowed with giddiness. “I’m not going to get pregnant if that’s what you’re worried about. After years of trying with Roger, we had all but given up. That one in seven thousand shot at having a baby has passed. Okay?”

I wondered if my fright put her off, made her not want me at all anymore. I wasn’t frantic over getting her pregnant as much as I was over her reaction to not protecting her. I sank onto the edge of the bed and shook my head. “Are you sure it’s okay?”

“I swear. Look, you can relax. I’d have told you that you didn’t need a condom if you’d just have asked me. Alright?” She looked so calm and reassured that I trusted her. I wasn’t afraid of her getting pregnant. If she did, I would care for her. I just didn’t know what she wanted. And it wasn’t like we were together. With the threat of her father finding out looming over me and my job, I didn’t know what this would even turn into.

I relaxed and lay back on the bed, and she pecked me on the lips. “Now, I hate to kiss and run, but I have to get

downstairs to start the events soon. And you need to get out and check on the parking lots.”

“Okay, just let me enjoy this afterglow for a moment.” I closed my eyes with a grin on my face and almost forgot about the broken condom still hugging my cock.

Ellen finished getting ready and left, and I lay there thinking about the sex, this morning and last night. It felt like I was in another world, not merely a few-hour drive from home. And the promise I’d made to Allen seemed less important now after connecting with her. She wasn’t the twenty-six-year-old woman I was chased away from. She’d been married and divorced. She was a successful entrepreneur. And she was fiercely independent. Eighty-five percent of her time was spent working overseas. Allen had little say over what choices she made now.

I climbed out of bed and dressed, then locked up her room and let myself into mine. My things still remained in the suitcase from yesterday, so I quickly unpacked and washed my face, brushed my teeth, and shaved. There was so much to do. I couldn’t linger on thoughts of Ellen all day. If I did, I’d be letting her down, and I didn’t want that.

Now if I could just banish the irrational thoughts of her father finding out and firing me, that’d make the rest of this weekend go much more smoothly.

Ellen

Chandra ate her chicken salad while I stewed over my pork roast and vegetables. The restaurant here made excellent food, but even that wasn't enough to lighten the mood. The entire bar-slash-restaurant was packed, every table full. We planned lunch shifts with Chandra and me eating at the first one so we could assist in serving the following two shifts. I didn't have much of an appetite after hearing the latest weather news.

“At least we got a few stragglers up the mountain . . .” Chandra sounded as glum as me. Our total attendance was down by more than thirty percent of what it was supposed to be. Folks couldn't get through the pass before the sheriff shut the roads down. Now the storm was circling overhead, refusing to move, dumping more than even the adjusted forecast had projected.

“We'll be buried in here for days.” I pushed the meat across the Corelle plate and let my fork drop. “This isn't good for our numbers. People who are here will be upset.”

“Well it's not our fault the weather hit.” Chandra took a bite and looked thoughtful. “I'm sure they understood the risk when they saw the forecast.” She was always the sensible one, sticking to positives and not getting pessimistic like me. I needed her for that, but sometimes, it wasn't reassuring.

“You know, Callum suggested a call center. I think it might be time to get something organized. If we wait any longer, we

won't make our donation goal. I know the folks who were prepared to come and had reservations will have their donations set aside. We just have to give them a way to get those funds to us."

"A call center?" Chandra asked, wiping her mouth but still chewing her last bite. "That's a great idea. We can talk to the lodge director and get the numbers for the office phones. I'm sure we can get a few volunteers to man phones in shifts. I'll get an online giving portal set up and it will be amazing." She was getting entirely too excited about the prospect, but her energy cheered me up a little.

"Yeah, you're right. It's not a complete loss yet. If we just keep putting effort toward our goal, we'll get there." I stood, not having even eaten a bite of my food, and picked up my tray. "I think I need to get to work right away. I'll take this with me."

Chandra stood with me but said nothing. She followed me through the busy dining room toward the check-in desk where I sat to call the front office. The burger didn't appear any more appetizing than it had moments ago, but at least my hope was growing. I set the tray down and pushed it to the side, reaching for the receiver to call the head office across the grounds.

When I picked it up, the line didn't even have a dial tone. I pressed the button a few times, but it was useless. I looked up in discouragement just as Callum—dusted with snow and a red face—walked in with his gloves in hand. "Oh, no . . ." My heart sank further in my chest, and Chandra leaned against the counter with concern scrawled across her brow.

"What's up?" she asked, crossing her arms over her chest, and the words left my mouth at the same time Callum said them, jumbling together.

"The phone lines are down." I felt the hope whoosh out of me and watched his grimace grow worse. This wasn't good.

"Everything is shut down in the county. The sheriff called a level-three snow emergency, so even if we wanted to get out, we're stuck. Snow is nearly two feet deep in some places."

The creases in his forehead did nothing to restore the embers of a good mood that had just escaped me.

“So, no phones means no call center either.” Chandra’s announcement was an obvious given, but it didn’t make that blow any easier to deal with, either. No call center meant no giving by phone, which meant donations would still be down. This was a catastrophe. Even if we’d had a one-day event like years past instead of this weekend-long gig, we’d still have been canceling. The entire region was under the storm cell.

“Well, this really stinks.” I covered my face with my hands and sighed, but I felt Callum’s icy fingers wrap around my wrist.

“Look, everyone is here and safe, so that’s a good thing.” He was always the optimist, and I had to give him credit for that. I was so focused on the loss of what we expected that I didn’t take into consideration that it could be worse.

“You’re right.” Taking a breath, I stood and watched him across the counter. “I just wish I didn’t feel so powerless right now. We’ve done so many events, and none of them have been this challenging.”

Callum reached into his pocket and produced a walkie-talkie, holding it out to me. Chandra stood next to me and watched on as he explained how to work it. “This is how we’ll communicate until the phones are back up. Cell service isn’t very good up here either, but at least we have satellite internet. As long as the power holds, we’ll be able to keep live streaming.” He looked thoughtful for a moment. “And we could use Meta’s Business Messenger service to continue accepting donations. You know, that might honestly be better than phones. You just need to invite volunteers to be moderators of the messages and teach them how to share the donation links. People hate phone calls these days.”

“Oh, gosh, that’s genius. Why aren’t we doing this for every event, Ellen?” Chandra nudged my elbow as I fiddled with the walkie-talkie. “Callum, you are a godsend. Thank you for that amazing idea.”

I looked up into his eyes and offered a smile I hoped warmed him to his core. “Yes, thank you for that wonderful idea. I think we can definitely manage that.”

“I’m going to go see if I can get some volunteers. I’ll be back soon.” Chandra dashed off, and Callum’s cold fingers slid from my wrist to my hand where they laced between mine.

“Are you okay?” he asked, rubbing the back of my hand with his thumb. His gesture indicated nervousness.

“My ability to remain positive and hopeful is being challenged.” I didn’t know why I used such a professional tone other than we were in a room where folks passed by every few seconds. After what Callum and I shared last night and this morning, I knew we were on far more familiar terms than this.

“I’ve seen you get through worse, Ellen. And I’m here this time. We are going to make this event the biggest success you’ve seen. Not to mention you are already getting new strategies to implement into your future events to increase donations. You’ll see, this will be amazing, and if you top your goals with just the online donors and sixty-percent attendance, think what you’ll do with a full event and live giving online?”

He brought my hand to his lips and kissed my fingers. “Do you have plans tonight for dinner?”

“I, uh . . . No. I was supposed to go home this evening to be with Mom for a few hours. Chandra is going to hold things together here. With the weather, though, I may as well just work.”

I saw a fire light in Callum’s eyes. “Then join me. We’ll have dinner, walk the casino to rub elbows with a few folks, maybe we can sit in the pergola and watch the snow fall. I hear they’ve been keeping the grounds as cleared as possible. I might be able to convince them to clear that off.” He winked at me, and I relaxed a little more.

“That sounds nice. I look forward to it. What time?” He pulled his hand from mine and took his phone from his pocket, thumbing through his calendar.

“Looks like I will be done around seven tonight. I can have Tom keep me posted if I’m needed out there. How does that sound?” His eyes sparkled with excitement and it was contagious.

“That sounds perfect.”

I watched him walk away, still feeling torn between the desire to wilt and obsess over everything going wrong and the energy his presence brought me. If this was what being Callum’s life partner was like, I wanted it. I wanted every single second of my life to be filled with hope and joy, and the man exuded it at all times.

God, I was so in love.

Callum

I stood in the entrance of the lodge with its massive oak logs holding up the awning loaded with snow. When the sun set, the winds had died down substantially, reducing the amount of drifting happening, but light snow still fell. Our crew had worked round the clock on the drives and lodge parking lots, but they were nothing but compacted ice now, making it dangerous for those whose rooms were in separate facilities. One of the men drove a small tractor pulling a wagon to shuttle event attendees across the ice to the other buildings to avoid slip and fall accidents.

“Never seen a snow like this in my life,” Georgia Wilks said, hugging her shawl around her shoulders. She and her husband Ben—a good friend of mine—stood with Killian and me, watching the powder stack up. “I mean, I used to live on a cruise ship and this is only my second winter here in the Hudson Valley.”

We chuckled at her as she continued. “I remember the first time it snowed, I felt in awe, like a woman in one of those Hallmark Christmas movies. I thought it was illegal to drive on snow.”

“Oh, gosh, that’s hilarious. Ben, your wife is too funny,” Killian laughed, batting a hand at Georgia. Always the flirt . . .

“Well, this is pretty normal for here in the mountains. About once a year, we get a load like this. Never before Thanksgiving, usually, but always at least one time each

season.” I sipped a hot coffee, steam piping up into the frosty air around us. “Thank you guys so much for stepping up to help out. Georgia, I know Ellen is so thankful you signed up to help with the donations. And Ben, with the parking lots so icy, your idea of a shuttle was genius.”

“How’s Ellen doing?” he asked, folding his arms across his chest. His puffy coat made him look twice his normal size, but out here it was essential to avoid frostbite. Even Georgia had a thick wool hat with an attached scarf that she wrapped around her neck.

“She’s feeling the pressure. I think she’s concerned about the online giving not being as successful. And of course, if people are trapped here after the event is over, it’s up to her to keep them from growing restless.” I glanced up at the sky as the breeze kicked up and tossed snow from the roof into the air, creating a spectacular display of dancing flakes. “And God help us if we lose power.”

“No way. There are seventeen generators out there ready to be fired up and used.” Killian jerked his head, gesturing toward the tented area where they’d staged the emergency generators. They would run the power for most of the lodge, though the rooms would only have heat after events were over. That might force folks to stay and attend events, or it might make them cranky if their rooms had no heat. There was no telling what would happen.

“Well, we’ll have to wait and see.” I sipped the coffee again and checked the time. It was time to meet Ellen for dinner as planned. I was looking forward to the time with her, though I knew a lot of it would be helping her remain calm. If it were my company on the line, I’d feel the same way, so I understood how she felt and only wanted to help her relax.

“If the worst happens, we’ll help out.” Ben shifted on his feet, pushing his hands into his pockets.

“Yeah, I’m an entertainer. I’d be happy to volunteer my time for a show or two. And we could host a talent show too, let people sign up and charge a small fee to do so. It could

really be fun.” Georgia grinned and hooked her arm around Ben’s. “What do you think?”

“Those are amazing ideas, guys.” I felt warmed by their hope and helpfulness.

“Yeah, and we could do a stand-up show. I’ve been known to be pretty funny at times.” Killian grinned stupidly and nodded his head, and Georgia laughed at him.

“I love it. You guys throw some ideas together and message them to me. I’ll share them with Ellen later this evening. It looks like if the weather doesn’t break overnight, we’ll need at least one more day of entertainment, maybe a few.”

“Don’t worry, Callum. We’ll all bind together to make this a success. Ellen’s company has done so much for so many over the years. It’s time we give back.” Ben slapped my shoulder.

“Guys, I have to run. I have dinner with a beautiful lady.” I shook Killian’s hand and thanked them for the offer of help.

“Ah, tell Ellen we said hello.” Georgia grinned at me and laid her head on Ben’s shoulder.

“Will do,” I told them, heading inside. I hung my coat on the rack and made my way toward the restaurant. For as late as it was in the evening, it was still busy. When I walked up to the host stand, the young man working there nodded at me knowingly.

“Mrs. Davies is waiting on you, sir. Right this way.” He picked up the menu and started off, hardly giving me time to keep up. I followed as closely as I could, weaving in and out of tables, until he presented me at Ellen’s table—a little booth in the far corner where the light was dim and the sound of the chatting crowd could barely be heard. “Here you are.” He laid the menu on the table and walked away, and I sat across from her.

“Hello,” she cooed, batting her eyelashes at me.

“Hey, how has your day been?” I reached out and took her hand. I knew she felt stressed about things, but I hoped my

suggestion to use online giving had been helpful.

“It’s been chaotic. All the shows have gone off without a hitch. We have two more for tonight, which Chandra is seeing to, and then tomorrow is supposed to be checkout for our guests, but we got word that the roads aren’t opening tonight. I’m not sure what that means for our guests.” Ellen looked weary, as if the event was weighing on her. It must have been difficult being back in the area after the past two years had been so hard on her—the miscarriage and divorce. And the first event she hosted here after that proved just as tumultuous.

“The shows going off without a hitch is a great thing. I think you’ll see as the evening shows progress that online giving is going to soar. You’re reaching a wider audience, and since the storm is hitting everything in a four-hundred-mile radius, you’ll have so many captive viewers. They can’t do anything but sit at home and scroll.”

“How do you do that?” she asked, smiling. God, she was so beautiful. Her warm brown hair had been let down, framing her heart-shaped face. Her chocolate eyes twinkled with affection for me. I could look into this woman’s eyes every day the rest of my life if it worked out. I just didn’t know how her father would take it.

“Do what?” I leaned forward across the table and pulled her hand to my lips, kissing each finger. She was warm, and I was frigid. I felt bad for touching her, but I couldn’t stay away. I wanted my body to be connected to hers as much as possible, even if it was only just holding hands.

“You stay so positive all the time. You always have a cup half full and ready to be poured out to others.” I loved the way her fingers curled around mine, perfect manicured nails sparkling in the dim light.

“I have no choice. Why be negative? It only makes you feel down, like you’re going under. Who cares if things go poorly? You and I will never get this moment over again, and I don’t want a single second of that ruined by the inconsequential things that make the event more difficult. Not to say I don’t care but that I care about something else more.” I

held her gaze for a moment. I wouldn't come out and say I loved her—that was a very strong word which I had never said to a woman in my life other than my late mother. But if I cared about any other woman more than Ellen, I didn't remember it.

“I . . .” She looked flattered, her eyes fluttering as she searched for words, and the waiter interrupted us.

“What are you two having tonight?”

It was torture tearing my eyes from hers, but I looked up at him and asked, “What's on special?”

“Beef tips in a thick, buttery glaze with green beans and onion strings, served with rolls or biscuits.” The young man held his pen ready to write down our order, and Ellen responded to him.

“One for each of us.” She turned to look at him and then back to me, and I smiled thinking I was about to say the same. The waiter must have gotten the point that we wanted to be alone because he vanished and left us to gawk at each other.

“I think it is incredible that after all these years we are both finally free to unleash all the pent-up feelings we've had for each other. You know how many times I wanted to approach you and tell you how badly I missed you?” The self-restraint it had taken was nothing less than otherworldly. The only thing that stopped me was the fear of what Allen would say—though I was certain any advance made toward her while she was married would have been met by resistance on all sides.

When she came on to me, I had been skeptical, then intrigued. And now I was smitten. The fates had aligned to bring us back together. Both of us could see that. I just had to convince her father of that, which even to my optimistic brain seemed like an astronomical feat.

“I think that's incredible too, though I may have played a role in some of that as much as fate.” She chuckled and squeezed my hand. “Cal, I want us to give it a shot, you know? It's not often that second chances happen for people like us. You're fifty now. When are you going to find another woman you connect with more intimately than me? And I'm old

enough that my clock is ticking. I want a family with a man I love deeply, even if it means invitro or adoption.” Her eyes searched mine. “Say you want the same thing, that you think it could be possible with me?”

My heart wrenched. Yes, I wanted all of those things with her. For the first time in my life, I found a woman I wanted forever with. I’d been the player, flirted and messed around, and I’d even dated a few women more than once, but I’d never had this feeling. It was like Ellen was my other half, like she knew me as well as I knew myself. Better, in certain ways. But her father . . .

“I think I do.” I said the words with hesitancy, but they were received with joy. She beamed as she stood and slid into my side of the booth, wrapping her arms around me.

“I am in love with you, Cal.”

I didn’t get a chance to respond at all because she kissed me hard. I wasn’t sure what to say back, anyway. Did I love her? I didn’t know what love was. What I did know was that I wanted to know how far this would go, where I could take it. I didn’t want it to end. I wanted it to stay this magical and strong for the rest of my life. I just didn’t think that would happen when the event was over and we went home. Not with Allen watching over her with me under his thumb. She might be an adult who could make her own decisions, but he was my boss, and my future was on the line—my friendship with him too.

Ellen

Callum escorted me around the entire casino after dinner. I personally thanked most of our largest donors as they played the slot machines and tables. By nine p.m. I was exhausted and my feet hurt. The show was still going on, but after checking in with Chandra, I decided to retire to my room.

“Thank you for a wonderful evening, Cal.” I hovered by my door, hand on the knob. The day had been long, and after the news of our extended stay—at least by a day—I was emotionally spent. The morning would come with challenges of its own, so the only thing I could do was rest well and wake up ready to plan a day or two more of activities. Callum’s ideas for more events shared over dinner were promising. I couldn’t wait to dig into them and make some concrete plans.

“I don’t want it to be over.” He leaned in and kissed me softly, and I knew what he wanted. I smiled against his mouth.

“What do you have in mind?”

“Oh, well, you complained your feet hurt. What about a foot rub?” His nose rubbed over the end of mine, and I unlocked the door behind my back and let us in. The room was slightly messy, our towels still draped across furniture and the bed left unmade, but he didn’t seem to mind as I turned the deadbolt and he backed me toward the bed.

“Foot rub, huh?”

“I mean, I’ll rub something,” he said, grinning as he came in for another kiss. The entire night was magical with him. We talked for an hour over dinner. He hadn’t even batted an eyelash at me when I told him I loved him, and it was true. What I had with Roger didn’t hold a candle to the way I felt about Callum.

“Yeah? I think I like the sound of that . . .” I let my sweater slide off my arms and drop to the ground as I stepped out of my heels, and he started taking his pants off too. He pushed me onto the bed and crawled on top of me, his lips meeting mine in a heated kiss. His hands traveled down my body, cupping my breasts through my clothing before sliding down to my hips.

I moaned as he ground his hips against mine, his hard cock straining against his boxers. I reached down and rubbed him through the fabric, feeling him grow even harder.

He pulled away from me, and I sat up, pulling his boxers down to reveal his thick, pulsing cock. I licked my lips in anticipation as he lay back on the bed, his hands behind his head.

Callum watched as I stripped my clothing off and tossed it. It felt so natural, like we’d done this a million times. My body was taut with anticipation of how he’d make me feel. I laid down and started kissing his neck, working my way down his chest and across his hard abs until I reached his waist. I kissed his hip bones and his cock jerked in response.

I grinned up at him and took it in my hand. I licked my lips, then closed my eyes as I took him into my mouth. He was so hard, his head already glistening with precum. I slid my mouth over his shaft, taking as much of him as I could. I sucked on him hard, bobbing my head up and down. I gripped his shaft with one hand and massaged his balls with the other. I slurped and sucked as I slid his cock in and out of my mouth.

I glanced up at him and he was watching me intently. His eyes were locked on mine as I took my time pleasing him. I slowed down, making him moan and writhe beneath me. I slid

my lips back over him and got to my knees, repositioning myself so I could straddle his face.

Callum's tongue pushed into my slit, tasting me and flicking my clit. I felt a jolt of pleasure run through my body as he started to taste me, his tongue lapping at my juices. I moaned and pushed my hips forward, grinding my pussy against his mouth. He slid a finger inside me, crooking it just right, and I could feel the pressure build inside me. I rocked my hips back and forth, writhing against his face.

His hands grabbed my butt, holding me in place as he licked me, and I continued sucking and stroking him. I reached back and started rubbing my clit. I got closer and closer to coming with each second that passed. The sensations were incredible, tingling and pressure. I couldn't hold on any longer. It was incredible how fast he could bring me to completion. I leaned back, groaning and gasping as I came. My pussy clenched around his fingers and my whole body shook with the force of my orgasm.

I couldn't even focus on sucking him anymore as wave after wave of orgasm crashed over me. I gripped his cock firmly and rode it out, letting him thrust his fingers into me as my stomach spasmed. When it was over, I collapsed on the bed beside him, breathing heavily. Callum crawled toward me, kissing me, tasting my juices on his lips. "That was incredible," I said, kissing him back.

"You're incredible," he said, grinning against my mouth. I felt his hard member against my thigh as his hips slowly rubbed against me. "I don't have a condom."

"It's okay," I said, kissing him again. "I told you, I'm basically infertile. Besides, it's not the right time of the month."

He nibbled on my ear and ground against me hard, rubbing his cock on my leg. "Still, I'd feel better if I pull out."

"Whatever makes you feel better. Just get your dick inside me before these delicious juices dry up." I snickered, spreading my legs.

Callum nestled himself between my knees and lowered his hips to meet mine. With a single dip of his pelvis, his cock slid into me. It wasn't slow and gentle. It was fast and hard. I gasped and arched my back, feeling him fill me up. He started moving in and out of me, looking into my eyes. I smiled at him, biting my lip. I was pinned beneath him, held in place by his strong arms. I gasped every time he thrust his cock into me.

“God, Cal,” I hissed, wrapping my legs around his waist and hooking my ankles together. He pounded into me harder, and I felt another orgasm building. The way his pubic bone hit my clit was incredible. “Just like that,” I moaned.

His growls rumbled against my chest, his face buried in my neck.

“Yes . . . Oh, God, yes . . .” I couldn't stop moaning. I clawed at his back, trying to get him closer to me. I wanted to be as close to him as possible. He felt so good inside me. I could feel every inch of him. He was filling me up. It was almost too much.

I could feel my orgasm building just as quickly as the one before. He was balls deep inside me and it felt so good. Callum started to shift his hips, moving them hard and fast. “Oh, God, Cal . . .” I groaned, quickening my breathing. My head fell back, and my hips moved in time with his. It was like a dam was about to break, and I was going to flood him with pleasure. I arched my back, pressing my chest into his and squeezing my eyes shut. “Oh, God . . . Oh, God . . . Oh, God . . .” I repeated over and over in time with his thrusts.

Callum gripped my thighs tightly and thrust into me one more time. He leaned in close to me, his hot breath on my neck as he grunted. “I'm coming,” he whispered, and I panted.

“Yes . . . now . . .” My body spasmed and jerked as I touched my clit. He grunted harder and harder until he finally pulled out of me. Callum leaned back on his knees and jerked his cock, squeezing out a few spurts of cum onto my stomach. Spurt after spurt of hot, sticky cum landed on my skin. I

gasped and stared at his dick, rubbing my clit to help the sensation.

Slowly, my body came down and he lay down beside me. I could feel his seed dribbling from my pussy and knew he had gotten it in me. As I slowly slid my fingers into my soft folds and touched it, my suspicion was confirmed. I sighed and grinned and lay back as he reached for a towel.

“I think you didn’t pull out fast enough.” I snickered, wiping my hand on the towel as he handed it to me.

“God, I’m sorry. You just felt so amazing.” He pulled me against his chest as I wiped my stomach clean.

“It’s seriously okay. I’m telling you, Roger and I had unprotected sex for years. I’m not going to get pregnant, and I promise you I was tested for everything. I’m clean.” I tossed the towel away and turned to face Cal, wrapping my arms around him. It felt right to lie with him and feel his arms wrap around me.

He sighed and kissed my forehead. “Ellen, I am so thrilled we got this time together. I have enjoyed every second of it. And while having road closures means the guests may be cranky that they’re snowed in, I think it’s a blessing. It means more precious minutes with you before reality comes back to slap us in the face.”

I wasn’t exactly sure what he meant by that other than potentially, we’d both be busy with life, but I agreed. He looked at the silver lining of this entire weekend and that was that we had been able to reconnect. All the years passed by with just an empty feeling of being unfulfilled felt like just another pathway to the future of happiness and contentment, because I could see a future for us where we were both fulfilled in each other.

“Stay with me tonight? Sleep here? It’s cold and I don’t want to sleep alone.” I snuggled deeper into his chest and kissed it, tasting his salty sweat.

“Of course.” Callum pulled the covers over us and curled himself around me as I closed my eyes.

“I love this feeling. I don’t want to go to sleep alone ever again.” I sighed peacefully, still feeling the effects of orgasm relaxing my muscles. “We fit so well together, Cal. It feels so right. Why have we waited so long to be real with each other? Who cares if you’re older or if my father doesn’t really like that fact? Lightning only strikes the same place once. We need to see where this takes us. Don’t you think?”

I waited for a response but none came. I looked up at him just as light snores started to reverberate from his chest. I smiled at him. I was so in love with this man and nothing had even dampened that love—not the years apart, not my marriage to Roger, not even the way Callum had vanished. I knew he hadn’t done it to hurt me. And I believed in my heart that he felt the same way.

Nothing short of an act of God would keep us apart. Except my inability to keep a man happy.

That thought sank into me like a pair of cement boots in a swimming pool. What if I didn’t keep him happy the way I didn’t keep Roger happy? What if the reason Callum left me years ago was because I didn’t keep him sexually satisfied? What if I woke up one morning and he just left me too?

My mind did that thing again, where I blame myself and overthink about everything. I lay there awake for hours with him holding me, wishing I knew exactly what went wrong in my marriage to make Roger hate me. If only I knew, I could fix myself before I ruined things with Callum.

If only . . .

Callum

I wasn't sure what time it was when I jolted awake. The lights flickered and the clock radio hissed and crackled before turning on. Then the power went out abruptly, plunging us into darkness. Moonlight lit the room, and I felt the bed shake as Ellen sat up. She reached around the bed, and I caught her hand and kissed it.

"It's okay. I'm here . . ." I pulled her down into my arms and felt how cold her skin was. Her arms must have been out of the covers for a while. From what I could tell, it was well after midnight, the moon already at its peak.

"What happened?" she asked, rubbing her eyes. She tucked her arms between our bodies and cuddled closer to me as she shivered a little. Her skin against mine was heavenly, flooding me with emotion. I loved waking up with her like this, though I'd rather it not have been to a power outage.

"Power's out." I kissed her forehead again. "Don't worry, the guys will have the generators on soon enough."

"Ugh." Her soft sigh puffed on my chest and I got the faint hint of the wine she drank at dinner. "Yet another hit for the event. People aren't going to like this at all. This whole weekend has been a disaster."

Ellen sounded defeated, and I couldn't really blame her. This event had suffered so many setbacks from the beginning, starting with her father's absence, which was one setback I didn't mind dealing with. Maybe Ellen and I would have still

ended up connecting like this, but we would never have had last night. Dinner together and such a great time in the casino would have been viewed by Allen as downright sinful.

“Most of them will never know it’s out. Maybe it will be restored before morning. I’m sure it’s just a downed line because of ice or something.” I did my best to try to comfort her and keep her positive. I didn’t think for a second that she was too negative, but I knew she’d been through a lot. Fighting through trauma like she had endured sometimes made a person less able to see good things. I only wanted her to see the good because I knew she would be happier that way.

“You’re right. I’m just feeling like a punching bag hung by karma. You know?” She shivered again, and I thought I heard her teeth chatter. “I’m cold. I think the heat is already escaping.”

“I think you just had your arms out of the comforter so you feel colder than you’d like, but never fear. I know a great way to warm you up.” I held her more closely and kissed her temple, then her cheek.

“What’s that?” she asked, and I could hear the smile she spoke through.

“Friction always produces heat,” I growled into her ear. My dick was already growing hard. At fifty, I never imagined my dick would get such a good workout or that I’d be up for the challenge of so much sex in one weekend, but Ellen was so hot, I had no problem performing. In fact, I wanted her more. I’d have stayed in bed and had sex every hour, on the hour, if she wanted.

“Oh, friction sounds delightful.” She snickered, turning to face me. “And this time, no blowing on my stomach. It’s too cold for that.”

“Mmm,” I moaned into her mouth as I kissed her and rolled on top of her. “So where do I put it?”

Ellen spread her legs to let me slide my cock against her mound and whispered, “I want you to blow inside me, warm me from the inside out.”

It sent a shiver down my spine. I loved the thought of giving her my hot seed.

“You’re playing with fire,” I growled as I kissed her neck. “I’m the one with the hot cum.” She gasped as I slid my cock against her slit. “If you want to play with fire, I’ll give you a blast of fire.”

I slowly pushed into her and groaned.

“Ooh,” she gasped.

“Is that too much?” I growled.

“No,” she replied, “it feels so good.”

I pumped into her slow and hard, making her moan and shudder with pleasure. I loved the sound of her moans. The moaning came like waves upon waves, rhythmic and full-bodied. She opened her mouth wide, letting out a long, drawn-out sigh, like an orchestra might let out at the end of a symphony. She was so loud, I thought our neighbors must hear her.

I kissed her and drew my tongue over her lips. They parted, and I slipped inside, kissing her deeply as I pushed my tongue against hers. They were warm and soft, and I groaned into her mouth as we kissed. She tasted of the ocean and jasmine and the pleasure of lovemaking. It made me want to drink from her, lap the juices her body made.

“God,” she grunted as my dick glided in and out of her. “Your dick is so long. Go deeper.”

“Ah, I’m glad you like it.” I could only imagine one way of going deeper into her. I pulled out and said, “Turn over.”

Ellen groaned but obeyed, getting to her knees. We were both warm from the grinding and thrusting. The cool air on my skin felt refreshing. Her backside in the moonlight was hot too. She had a beautiful round ass that I loved to grab and squeeze, and I wanted to slide my dick inside her from behind.

“Oh, God,” she gasped as I spread her and dived in, sucking and licking up her juices. “Oh, God, oh, my God.”

Ellen's panting continued as I pushed a few fingers into her and started thrusting, slow at first but then quicker, until I pumped with a frenzied action, trying to get her off. She panted, groaned, and cried out, "Oh, wow. Oh, God," as she came, squirting juices onto the comforter and my hand. Her pussy pulsed and clenched. I'd never made a woman squirt before, and it was incredibly arousing. The moisture dripped from my wrist as I pumped into her.

"God, you're hot," I growled, smearing her moisture around on her pussy and across her other hole. I'd claim that too, but just not tonight.

"I want you to come in me, Cal. Do it . . . please." The way she begged me was so sexy. I rose up behind her and continued to play with her back hole as I pushed my cock into her pussy. She hissed and bucked against me as I started thrusting.

"Oh, God," I grunted, and I slid in and out of her, and she began shaking as I stroked. I could feel her trembling. I grabbed her hips and pulled her back into me, and she let out a loud moan. The sound was filled with pleasure.

"God, yes. Like that. You're so hot." I felt her fingertips tickling my balls as she massaged her own clit, then I brought two fingers on my right hand to my lips and sucked them, moistening them more.

"Like this?" I asked, touching her hot entrance. The tight ring of muscles resisted me, but I pushed hard and she gasped.

"Oh, wow! Like that," she yelped, so I thrust my fingers into her tight hole as my hips continued pushing against her. My cock felt so tight, my balls so high that if she didn't come soon, she wouldn't get a chance because I was going to blow.

"Oh, God." She cried out, and I felt her pussy begin to tighten around my cock.

"Mmm," I moaned as I exploded inside her. I thrust until her spasms ended and I'd emptied inside her. Then I collapsed beside her and slid my hands around her waist, holding her close as the sweat began to cool on our bodies.

“That was incredible,” she sighed.

“You’re incredible . . .” I pulled the blankets back over us as the heater kicked on, and I knew the generators were working. “And I think I found something you really like.”

She snickered and held my arm against her stomach. “I might. Maybe you’ll have to try again sometime, only with your dick.”

I chuckled and closed my eyes. I liked the way she thought.

Ellen

“**O**nce again, I do apologize for this difficult inconvenience. Fortunately, the crews have already restored power, so your rooms are warm and toasty.”

I glanced at the clock—twelve minutes past four in the afternoon. The day had been nothing but one complaint after another. The entire mob of attendees milling around the ballroom was upset or frustrated in one way or another, and who could blame them? Four days before a major holiday and they were trapped in the lodge until at least Tuesday now.

I stood on the stage with the mic in my hand, staring at grumpy expressions. Chandra dealt with her own load of stress and frustration at the checkout desk where folks complained because upon hearing the roads were shut, Victor Patrisko hired a helicopter to fly him and his wife off the mountain. I was at a loss.

“But we have a family Thanksgiving this week. How will we get back to our families?” A middle-aged woman I’d seen before but didn’t know well stood with her hand in the air.

“Yes, and if we’re not leaving until Tuesday, how will we get our grocery shopping for the holiday meal done?” Another woman—a smidge older than the first—stood with her hand up too. They were honest questions that I couldn’t answer. Luckily for me, Mom and Dad would handle the holiday plans which would likely be reduced to TV dinners of turkey and gravy due to Mom’s chemo. Still, I felt their frustration.

“I’m so sorry that things are challenging. We are all in this together, though, and if we stay positive, I’m sure this will be a time to look back on and laugh. I want to thank everyone once again for their donations and support. My family will handle all the financial burden for meeting your needs the next two days as we wait for road crews to clear the mountain of snow.”

More questions were shouted out and more grumbles of disapproval met my ears. I scanned the crowd, hoping to see Callum’s face. He had a way with people. I knew he could tame this angry crowd and help them see that it wasn’t the end of the world that we were stuck here for a few more days. Unfortunately, I didn’t see him anywhere. In fact, I didn’t see any faces I knew well. Most of these people were so new to me, I wondered if I’d ever met them. Where were Ben and his wife? Dr. Marshal and Dr. Holt?

“I want you all to know that we are at ninety percent of our goal, and with the continued online giving, we will far exceed it. In fact, we had a very generous donor offer to donate nearly a quarter of a million dollars. It was done anonymously, and I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart. The entire Hudson Valley region will benefit greatly from the new trauma unit in Evansville thanks to your generosity.”

There were grumbles and complaints still, and I felt like I was losing them. No one wanted to be stuck here on the mountain, but the sheriff had shut the roads. There was nothing we could do except be patient and thankful. There was a positive side to this, though, and I hoped it would make a difference.

“Additionally, you’ll note that the ski lifts are operational, and with the fresh layer of powder, the slopes are open! You can all enjoy a free lift pass for the remainder of your stay. Lessons and rentals are all on the house. And you can warm up after your trip down the mountain with a cup of hot cocoa, also free.” I got a few claps out of that, and overall, people looked a bit more lighthearted. But when Callum waltzed on the stage wearing a pair of red trousers with black suspenders and boots and nothing else on except a Santa hat, the crowd got lively.

I blushed at seeing him like that. His pecs pushed the suspenders out. His silvery hair beneath the drooping hat was sexy. Red was such a good color for him, and half-naked was the way I liked him. I took a step back as he approached, feeling my face flush. He gestured at the mic and I grinned, not sure what he was doing. Women in the crowd whistled and men chuckled, but he took the mic and faced the crowd.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he started, using a loud, sexy voice, “Santa has come to town.” He waited while a round of applause and cheers went up, then he continued. “All you gorgeous gals out there can come sit on my lap and tell me what you really want for Christmas.” There was giggling, and a loud rumble of “boo” came up from the men. I chuckled as he looked at me.

“If we’re lucky, gentlemen, Mrs. Claus will make an appearance too.” He wagged his eyebrows at me and turned back to the men. God, he was a genius, though I wasn’t sure about dressing up like sexy Mrs. Claus. “Now I’ve heard there is a bit of a disturbance here, so I wanted to let you know, we’ve got a few amazing shows planned for you over the next few days.”

Slowly, the crowd started to move closer to the stage. People looked less angry and more content. Derek and Cameron—two doctors I knew from Mercy in Yellow Springs—walked onto the stage. They, too, were shirtless with suspenders, but each wore a pair of black slacks instead of red. Callum introduced them as his elves and promised that everyone would have a holly, jolly good time at the talent show.

“We’ll be singing and dancing. I hear Maggie is going to yodel for us, and there is a nurse here, Harper Thorpe, who may be great at juggling knives. So you don’t want to miss this. And the best part is, thanks to your generous donations, the shows tomorrow and Tuesday are all free. No tickets to purchase, and you can get a free round on me!”

The crowd cheered, clapping and whistling, and I stepped off the stage thankful that Callum had taken over and was pleasing them.

My feet hurt and my back hurt. I weaved my way to the back of the room where Chandra stood, now without a single guest complaining to her. She looked relieved too.

“How’d you get him to do that?” she asked, watching as Callum broke into song with Derek and Cameron.

I shrugged and laughed at the sight of the three men performing Christmas carols. “He did it all by himself, and boy, am I glad.”

“Well, maybe I was wrong about him.” She nudged me and joined the captivated crowd. I watched for a while then decided to go have a seat at the check-in counter. Today had been so stressful, and I just wanted to rest. Moments after sinking into the chair and rubbing my aching feet, Callum walked out of the ballroom. He was still half-naked and handsome as ever, and the music in the ballroom continued. I heard a woman’s voice now, but it didn’t seem to disappoint the crowd. Not a single person other than Callum left the room.

“Young lady, what do you want for Christmas?” he asked as he walked up to me. I stood and wrapped my arms around his broad shoulders. God, he was so hot.

“Honestly?” I asked, kissing him gently.

“Yeah, be honest.” His lips were so sweet, like he’d been drinking cocoa.

“I want you to talk to my father about us dating. I want this to go somewhere.” I kissed him again, but this time his kiss was dry, his shoulders stiff. “What?” I pulled away and studied his face.

“Ellen, you know how your father feels about us.” His hands rested on my hips, and it felt uncomfortable all of a sudden.

“My father isn’t my boss anymore, Cal. I am quite happy to date you, maybe be your wife someday. Have children. Start a family.” Each word I said only made his features grow colder. What was going on?

“He is my boss, literally in charge of my career. I can’t anger him.” He sighed. “It’s not like I can just waltz in there and announce we’re dating. We have history. That’s sensitive and challenging to bring up. He doesn’t understand it.”

I stepped away from him feeling a little dejected. I knew this was an issue in the past, but I didn’t see why it was a big deal now. Callum’s personal life was totally separate from his work life except for in the case of my father, which I understood. I also understood why my father chased him away years ago, and this resistance to making our relationship official only made me wonder if he was still just playing me.

“So, you don’t want a relationship with me?” I asked, feeling hurt.

“No, Ellen.” He grabbed me and turned me to face him and wrapped his arms around my waist. “Of course I do. More than anything. It’s just tricky.”

“You can’t just date me without telling people. I’m not going to be a secret lover. I want a real relationship. We aren’t sneaking around behind his back, and I think it’s the right thing for you to tell him, not me. Because you’re his friend.” He kissed me hard, taking my breath away, and I couldn’t protest.

“I think we should keep it between you and me until we see where it goes. Look, I have to go back in there and keep the fans happy.” He winked at me and backed away, and I couldn’t help but feel like he was just rushing away to avoid the conversation. It hurt my feelings as he rushed off and blew me a kiss.

Part of me thought maybe he was right, that making a fuss about everything before we knew how compatible we were was foolish. I could very well end up being nothing but a disappointment to him the way I was to Roger. I sank into the chair with that thought on my mind, that maybe Callum feared that too, which was why he wasn’t willing to fight for me and tell my father the truth. Did he think I’d ruined my marriage too?

Maybe he was hesitant to commit to me and take the risk of angering my dad and losing that friendship because he thought I was damaged goods.

Or maybe I just *was* damaged goods.

Callum

I stood in the back of the ballroom after doing my second performance and watched the show for a while. Ellen never did return to watch any of the volunteers as they performed, and when I walked to the check-in desk to see how she was faring, she was gone.

So I made my way upstairs to the corridor of rooms and found hers. For a moment, I stood outside her room, hesitating to knock. We had that strange interaction before I had to take the stage again, and it rubbed me the wrong way. Ellen wanted me to talk to her father about our being serious, but we'd only just sparked. This weekend might have been lingering longer than she expected, but it was impossible to tell after three days of flirting, banter, and sex whether we would make an honest couple out of each other. Besides, if I were going to take that risk, it would be based on something very serious and strong, and I wasn't sure a weekend away was enough to prove to me that it was worth putting my job on the line.

Still, I felt badly for upsetting her, which it was obvious to me that I had. She was tucked away in her room already at nine p.m. and I felt like it was my fault. So, still wearing only my Sexy Santa suit, I knocked on her door and waited. It was possible she was in a shower or asleep already, and it took a few seconds for her to get to the door, but when she opened, it took my breath away.

Ellen had on a silky red night robe that hugged her curves. Her warm brown hair was down from its earlier tight bun and hung around her shoulders, framing her face. She looked tired and a little sad, and I reached for her instinctively.

“Hey, is it okay if I come in?”

She reached too, taking my hand and nodding. “Sure.” She stepped aside as I walked in and shut the door, then we walked together into the room where she sat at the foot of the bed. “How was the show?”

“Oh, it’s still going on. I just didn’t see you and I wondered if you were okay.” I sat beside her and put an arm around her as she slouched and nodded.

“I’m okay.”

Her voice was low and soft. I looked around the room. She’d been here long enough to clean up the mess. Previously, our clothing and towels had been lying around the room. Now, things were organized, and the bed was even made. The TV was on but the sound was muted. It was a rerun of an old *American Pickers* episode, and the stars were digging through someone’s old barn. I didn’t realize she liked this show. I loved it.

“Why did you leave?”

Ellen shrugged a shoulder and scooted back on the bed until her toes weren’t touching the floor anymore. “I guess I felt confused.” I turned to angle my body so I could look at her. “I thought we were really hitting it off, Cal.”

“We are . . .” I reached for her hand, but she folded her fingers, together so I rested my palm on her knee. “We are totally hitting it off.” So much so that I felt like the weight of the past ten years was lifted now that she was here, because we were alone. I just didn’t know how that would change when our lives went back to normal and her father was watching everything we did.

“Hmm . . .” She untied the belt to her robe and slid it off her shoulders and then shifted her weight until it was free from her body. She tossed it onto a chair and then lay down. I joined

her after kicking my shoes off. We lay on the bed facing each other for a few minutes in silence as she picked at her fingernails. She had washed her makeup off, but she was just as radiant with bare skin as she was with all the fanfare of perfectly contoured eyeshadow.

“Things have really changed over the past few years. I’ve changed.” Her arm slid up beneath her pillow, propping her head, and she looked into my eyes with such innocence and hope I felt drawn to her.

“I’ve changed a lot too. I know I used to really mess around and not take relationships seriously . . .” Admitting that I knew I was a player back in the day was hard, but it was the first step to admitting that I was falling in love with this woman and that I might actually want a future with her if it were possible.

“You haven’t changed a bit in the sack,” she said with a smirk.

“Mmm, but you have. More delicious than ever.” I grinned at her and rested my left hand over her right hand on the comforter. “But in other ways, you’ve stayed exactly the same. You’re still just as beautiful, funny, and strong. You inspired me to be a better person. Meeting you and having that fling radically changed my view on relationships. I got serious and grew up because of you.”

Ellen’s piercing gaze glistened with emotion. “It wasn’t just a fling for me, Cal. I loved you, and when everything happened the way it did, I was gutted. I moved on only because I felt it was hopeless. I thought we’d never have a chance.”

“So now . . .” I couldn’t finish the sentence. My heart felt like it was a giant electromagnet and she was the sexiest piece of steel I’d ever seen. I wanted her on me all the time, and not just sexually. I wanted her heart fixed to mine forever, and I couldn’t work out how to do that in the world we lived in.

“Now, excuse me if I don’t fight with everything inside me to make sure we do get a future.” Her forehead creased, and I knew she was going to ask me to talk to Allen again, but I had

no way of explaining to her how impossible that seemed. The timing had to be perfect, and not only that, if I went through all of that and talked to him and then it didn't work out between us, I might lose my job for nothing.

"Ellen . . ." I spoke so she couldn't, though what I had to say would only make her think things were settled between us, and I didn't want that. But I blurted it out so she wouldn't ask me again. "I am in love with you." Her eyes lit up, forehead softening a little. I wanted to add, *But love isn't all you need. You need support from your family, mutual respect, time to build a relationship of trust and intimacy, and you need to be close together.*

I couldn't say those things to her. They'd crush her because her job would take her away from us. Her father would take her away from us. And she'd never trust that I wasn't just about to play her again, especially after I ghosted her by obeying her father's orders.

"But . . ." I heard the disappointment in her voice and I had no response. "If you love me, then you'll take this seriously. You'll tell him that you're dating me and whatever he does will just be what it is."

I felt my chest tighten. I hadn't spent twenty-plus years of my life building my career to watch it get thrown in the trash over a bad conversation. If I just marched into Allen's office and told him I was dating his daughter, he'd end me. It wouldn't be easy. He'd have to search for any mistake or flaw in my job performance, but I knew him. He was a stern man, not vindictive or spiteful, but when he said something, he meant it. And he never forgot a single thing, either.

This entire conversation was grating on my last nerve. I didn't want to think about problems with her. We had a few days left to be ourselves and express our desire and affection for each other without prying eyes. I wanted to enjoy it and soak it up.

"Can we just enjoy the time we have? I don't want to talk about that right now." I squeezed her hand, and she frowned but she nodded.

“Sure.”

Ellen climbed out of bed and folded the covers back, then glanced at the door to the bathroom. She looked down at me and sighed, then walked to the bathroom and stood in the doorway.

“Coming?” she asked, but I knew by the tone of her voice, all she wanted was a shower. I let the fleeting desire for her melt away and pushed myself off the bed. This night was one of only a few left. I resolved to make it beautiful for her and to memorize every inch of her body because when we returned to Evansville, all this would be gone.

Ellen

Callum and his friends did such an amazing job with shows and entertainment yesterday that we never even got a chance to speak. He woke up and left the room to get dressed and start his day, and mine took me to the phones which came back on in time to have a fully functioning call center set up as we live streamed the shows. They did singers and jugglers, comedians, and even a knife thrower—courtesy of the chef’s kitchen knives. Everything was such a hit.

This morning, I found myself tired and sluggish. I should have been happy the roads were being cleared, but instead I was ambivalent. I wanted to stay here cooped up in this little lodge with Callum, discovering new things about each other and reminiscing on ways we’d missed each other over the years. I sat at the front desk waiting for calls to come in, but my heart was with him. He was so tired that before the last show last night, he kissed me goodnight and hit the sack. When I got to my room, he wasn’t there, just a sweet note saying he was sleeping in his bed and that he looked forward to breakfast.

Unfortunately, breakfast came and went without me because Chandra and I had so much paperwork to do. The donations received far exceeded our total goal, and we had to scramble to find a worthy cause then clear it with the Board in order to continue receiving more funds. It was tricky and stressful, and I’d been up since four a.m. trying to make it all work, so when Callum came to knock on my door, I was

already here. He sweetly brought me a cup of coffee and let me work.

Though, I did see a look on his face. The same look Roger would give me when he wasn't pleased with how much I worked. Roger was rude about it most of the time, but Callum seemed understanding. Still, it only inflated my fear that somehow, I was going to mess things up with him before we even got started. Maybe that was why he was so hesitant to talk to my father on our behalf. He probably wondered if things would even work, if it was even worth the effort to talk to him.

The phone in front of me rang, and I picked up, ready to take on more donations. The already bursting purse strings could split wide open now. We had a children's charity to pour into.

"You've reached the Christmas Casino hotline. This is Ellen."

"Ellen, they put me through to your number." My father's voice instantly made my heart race.

"Is it Mom? Is everything okay?" With Mom's chemo treatments and my missing them, I couldn't help but be on pins and needles.

"Mom is fine, sweetheart. I'm just calling to check in. How are things going? Are folks doing okay?" Dad was sweet to check in, but his surprise calls made me jumpy sometimes.

I breathed a sigh of relief and let the former joy of being above goal sink back in. "Things are great, Dad. We've exceeded our goal. With the excess, we've decided to funnel extra into the at-risk youth fund. They go into schools and do health screening on underprivileged kids. It's a really worthy cause."

A few people walked past the desk and smiled at me. The lodge was stirring as everyone started waking up. People had been flooding in and out of the ballroom, waiting for the first show and hitting the slot machines as breakfast was served. I waved and listened to Dad's response.

“That’s amazing, Dear. I can’t wait to see the final numbers. I also can’t wait to have you home again for a few weeks. Christmas is my favorite time of year because you come home.” He sounded cheery, which meant he wasn’t lying. Mom really was doing well. When she wasn’t and he was trying to cover it, there was always an edge to his voice. This would be the perfect time for Callum to speak with him. Life was good. He was in a happy mood.

“Thanks, Dad.”

“How did you manage, anyway?”

“Well, Callum and a few of his friends got together while I was sort of freaking out. They planned a talent show and a few concerts. I guess one of the doctors who works for you has a wife on Broadway. She was able to use some streaming service to get music to sing to. She’s fantastic. Has a beautiful voice. The crowds love her. And we set up a way to give through a link, so when phones were down, we used online giving and live streaming. It couldn’t have been better, and I owe it all to Callum.”

“Hmm, yes, well . . .” There it was, the sour turn in his voice. But it was true. Without Callum’s help, it wouldn’t have been the same. “I’ll have to thank him for that.” Dad didn’t sound as pleased as I was, and I wondered what his comment meant, but he’d get his chance to talk to Callum in a few days when he returned to work.

For a moment, I thought about just telling him myself. I was an adult and I could make my own decisions. I didn’t rely on his financial backing or help, so it wasn’t like he could punish me like a bad child. Besides, he was my father. He’d be displeased, maybe, but eventually, he’d come around. But something inside me gripped me, and I bit my tongue. Dad and Callum were friends. I didn’t dare disrespect that or ruin their friendship by inserting myself into that. The only right thing was for Callum to talk to him.

I saw Chandra with a huge, beaming smile, sashaying up to me, and I had to cut off Dad’s story of how much snow they

had on the ground at home. “Uh, Dad, I have to go. Chandra needs me. I’ll call back later tonight, okay?”

“Sure, dear. I’ll be up late. I love you.”

“Love you too, Dad. Bye.” I put the phone on the cradle as soon as Chandra squealed like a giddy teenager, clapping her hands.

“What?”

“You’re never going to believe this!” Her warm brown face positively glowed. If she was wearing makeup, I’d never know it. The blush on her cheeks was radiant.

“What? Guess what! Tell me.” I felt excitement building in my gut.

“Well, first of all, the roads are clearing and the sheriff plans to lift the emergency first thing in the morning tomorrow.” She squealed again and grinned so much I couldn’t help but grin too. I stood, ready to hear her news.

“Just tell me already. What is it?”

“We just got the biggest donation of our life, and it’s not for the fundraiser. It’s for Arms of Hope.” The minute she said the name of our company, I felt warmth spread across my body resulting in a rash of goosebumps.

“Yeah?”

“Yes! They donated three million dollars with only one stipulation. It’s to build the company and advance our efforts. It’s a check to your name personally. There is a six-month buffer, so we can’t cash it until May, but after that, it will be guided by the board as to how it’s spent and how we use it. Some snippets in the donation letter state it’s to expand the company by adding a new philanthropic service. But heck, that’s a lot of money!”

Her words went by in a whirl of excitement and I had to sit down. I was so moved by the generosity of our donor I didn’t have words. I felt tears of joy moistening my eyes, but all I could do was sit there and smile.

“This is real?” I asked, gawking at her.

“As death and taxes. Babe, we are going to make our ten-year goal into like two or three years. This is amazing.” She walked around the desk and pulled me out of the chair, wrapping her arms around me. We bounced and laugh-cried over the donation, and all I could think about was rushing to Callum to tell him the amazing news.

“Oh, wow, this entire weekend has just turned around, hasn’t it?” I let go of her and held her at arm’s length. “I’m overwhelmed. I can’t wait to get home and celebrate. Margaritas on Friday?” I asked her, and she squealed again.

“Heck yes!” Her hands rose in the air in a joyous cheer as she walked away, positively giddy.

I sat back down, completely stunned, with my hand over my mouth. Never had my dream of building this company seemed more alive. If we really did move my ten-year plan to a three-year plan, it meant I’d be here more, home and able to have a real relationship. It made the thought of being with Callum become all the more real to me, which made me burst into tears.

I pushed the rolling chair backward through the office door until I was hidden and covered my face and sobbed. Emotions started pouring out of me I hadn’t realized were buried there. I was furious with Roger. He had hurt me so badly. I was terrified of failing Callum but now energized that maybe it could work. I wouldn’t have to travel so much. Sure, the first few years could be rough, but after that, life would be good. And I was anxious about how Dad would respond.

All of that melded together into something I didn’t even know how to feel or express, and the only thing I could do was cry and pray to God that I could just hold it together, be strong enough to make it happen. And most of all, that I just didn’t fail anymore. I needed a win now.

Callum

I stood backstage, waiting in the wings as Georgia belted out yet another powerful rendition of one of her favorite show tunes, and I was brooding. With less than twenty-four hours left until heading home, I felt frustrated and ambivalent. I wanted nothing more than to dive into whatever this was that was happening between me and Ellen. I also felt the pull of my friendship with Allen and the weight of what it would mean should I truly upset him. My job could be on the line, but my relationship with him definitely would be.

I'd been obsessing over it all morning. Ellen and I had barely spoken since Sunday night, only in passing. She seemed a bit distant too, as if she were also thinking of what it would mean for us when we went home. I wasn't avoiding her, per se, but talking to her when I felt so uncertain only seemed like a bad idea, so I poured myself into maintaining a good flow in the shows we'd scheduled.

"Hey, man," Cameron Marshal said, slapping my back. He'd been on my case all day, asking me what's wrong. I'd dodged his question a number of times simply by positive redirection and my set responsibilities, but this time I felt cornered. There was nowhere to run or hide, and Georgia had the stage for the next hour.

"Hey, Cam." Cameron worked across the state at Mercy General in Yellow Springs. We met years ago at a similar function and hit it off. Every year, we share a beer and catch

up on each other's lives. It wasn't too long ago that he met and married the love of his life after having spent years alone. I had to admit that made me a bit jealous, but I focused on my career and let the emotions pass.

"You've been muddling something over all day, haven't you? You seem focused on something elsewhere, distant . . . And you're moody." He chuckled as he handed me a beer and sipped one of his own. Our obligatory drink had come, and I realized I'd spent most of the weekend with Ellen and hadn't taken time to talk to him much, which was likely why he'd been hounding me.

"Hmm . . ." I ignored his question and sipped. After I swallowed, I said, "Man, Wilks's wife can sing. I can't believe she's on Broadway." I whistled through my teeth quietly and smiled, but he wasn't buying it. And neither was Killian, who approached carrying a glass of eggnog.

"Don't give me a load of crap. Something is bothering you. What is it?" Cameron wasn't about to let me off the hook, and now that Killian was here, I knew I was in for a frustrating conversation.

"It's that woman, isn't it? The one who runs the charity heading this up?" Killian called me out because he'd started his weekend by calling me out. "You had a good weekend with her? I saw you holding hands the other day."

I sighed heavily and pursed my lips. I understood they were just trying to be good friends, but I didn't appreciate their butting into my personal space. What was going on between Ellen and me was not only very delicate but very private. I knew rumors would fly around the hospital when we returned, and there was a chance Allen would confront me anyway, but being faced with it already was annoying.

"Look, guys, I appreciate your trying to help unburden me, but I'm fine. Really." I sipped the beer and listened to Georgia sing. The warm melancholy of her voice as she sang a tune from Phantom resonated in my chest. The crowd was captivated, Ellen on the front row with wide eyes and a hand

pressed to her chest. She couldn't see me, but it was clear she was feeling the grip of the haunting melody too.

"That's her?" Cameron asked, nodding. Everyone had seen Ellen a number of times. There was no mistaking that the beautiful brunette on the front row was none other than the leader of this entire event.

"Yeah." I stared at her, mesmerized by her beauty. Things shouldn't be this hard. I shouldn't have to fight my urges like this. We belonged together and we both knew it. Anyone I talked to thought so, including Killian. But I promised Allen and I didn't know how to go to one of my oldest friends and tell him I was breaking that promise.

"So, what's the go?" Cameron's gaze bounced from me to Killian and back.

"Hmm. She's off limits. I'm close friends with her father. He made me promise years ago to leave her alone." The beer in my hand just didn't taste good this year. I'd gotten too enamored of the flavor of cherry lip gloss on Ellen's lips for alcohol to do anything to me.

"Off limits? You're grown adults." Killian scoffed and tipped his cup up and slurped from it then grinned. "You should just do you. Forget her dad. Take it from me. You only live once. Just go get her and deal with the consequences."

Killian's sentiment was brave and well-noted, but it wasn't my personality. Besides, Allen and I not only were friends, but we worked together. And he was a very stern person, prone to ensuring everyone around him knew what sort of person his coworkers were. No, I had no interest in being on his naughty list.

"I disagree, Cal." Cameron finished his beer and tossed it in a bin just behind us. "You're right for wanting to respect her father. Killian has a point in that you're both adults, and if she chooses to date you outside of her father's wishes, you can probably make that work. But ticking off the in-laws before you even get started." He patted my shoulder and sighed. "Good luck."

Cameron headed farther backstage, probably to set up for his magic show, and I decided I needed to rest. I excused myself from Killian, who had no business backstage, but like a fly on fruit, he remained. And I headed out to find a spot. The show went off without a hitch, then the one after that, and before I knew it, it was evening and I was exhausted.

I hid myself away in my room when Ben Wilks promised to wrap up the shows for the evening. We'd all be headed home tomorrow, and it would either be time to end things with Ellen—which I loathed the thought of—or confront my fear of speaking to her father about it. Neither option sounded good in my opinion, and not even a stiff drink would help. It would only make me sleep sooner, which would make morning come sooner.

I had no more than taken my clothes off and climbed into bed than someone knocked on my door. I knew it was Ellen, and I wasn't quite ready to have another serious conversation, but I craved her. I put my boxers back on and headed for the door. I opened to see her in a nightgown and robe, hair swept over one shoulder, makeup washed off.

“Hey . . .”

“Hey, Ellen.” I stood there hovering, not sure what to say. She seemed to not want to barge in, so I invited her. “Want to come in?”

“Hmm, yes.” She smiled softly and padded past me, and I shut and locked the door. She smelled like cinnamon, perhaps from the eggnog she'd been drinking or the wreathes she'd handed out as door prizes. Not a single bit was wasted in this event. Even the decorations were parting gifts. “I heard we got the final all clear. Roads open at first light. We can go home.” She stopped by the foot of my bed and turned to face me. One last night with her sounded just about perfect.

“Yeah, that's great.” I followed her, standing a few feet away. I wanted to touch her, but given our recent conversations and her pressuring me to speak with her father, I didn't know where we stood.

“And we exceeded donations. Chandra and I even got a special donor offer of a huge amount to expand the company.” Her words sounded odd, delivered in the melancholy tone she used. I’d have thought she’d be excited about those things.

“You don’t sound so happy.”

“Oh, Cal.” She sighed and sat on the foot of my bed. “I’m not ready for this to be over, for us to return to our day jobs and the mess of what my father will think.” Her head dropped. “You’re good friends with him and you promised him. I get that. I understand how difficult it might be to speak to him, but I’m begging you to consider it.”

I knelt on the floor at her feet and rested my hands on her thighs, and she looked me in the eye. “I’m wrestling with things, okay? Don’t give up on me.” Her eyes welled up with tears, and I scrambled for something to say that would stop that aching.

“Are you staying with them?”

She nodded and swiped at her eyes. “Yes, it saves me hundreds on a hotel to stay there. Besides, it’s Christmas, and with Mom’s treatments, I want to be there as much as I can.”

So the possibility of visiting a hotel room to rendezvous was out of the question, and asking her to sneak away to my house was too. Her mother and this difficult time definitely came first. Even I knew that.

“Well, what if I talk to him” —her eyes lit up— “but he is still completely against us dating?” Then I watched her gaze drop again. Her shoulders even sagged. We both knew there was a possibility of that happening, and her reaction told me she feared it would. “Ellen, I know how close you are with your parents. If we defy them, even though we’re adults, it’s not setting a very good foundation for a relationship. Think of Christmases, Mother’s and Father’s Days. Our wedding . . .” My chest tightened as I said the word. I would marry this woman in a heartbeat if I knew it wouldn’t end in heartbreak.

“Can we just enjoy tonight?” she asked, taking my hand. “And not think about this?”

I stared into her eyes, fully in love and so overcome by indecision that the only thing I could do was nod. She leaned down and kissed me, and I felt the weight of her worries lift off my shoulders. Our lips moved in sync, our tongues dancing a familiar dance. I pulled her closer to me, feeling the heat of her body against mine. My hands roamed over her back, feeling the curve of her spine through her nightgown and robe. She moaned into my mouth, and I knew she was as desperate for me as I was for her.

I broke the kiss and trailed my lips down her neck, nipping at her skin. She tilted her head back, giving me more access. I licked and sucked at her neck, leaving marks that I knew would be visible the next day. I felt her fingers tangle in my hair, pulling me closer to her. I moved my mouth lower, kissing the tops of her breasts that were peeking out from her robe.

“God,” she breathed out, and I could feel her nipples hardening under my touch. I pushed open her robe, letting it fall off her shoulders. The pink negligee she wore had lace trim that dipped into her cleavage. I found myself swelling with desire. “I wanted to wear something . . . pretty for you,” she said, her hands still tangled in my hair.

“You look beautiful,” I said, my eyes roaming her body.

“You have no idea how much I want you,” she said, her voice a whisper. I pulled her to my lips, kissing her again. Her hands made their way down my back, her fingers digging into my skin. I wanted her to touch me everywhere, to make me feel like I was on fire. I slid the straps of her nightgown down until she shimmied her arms out of them and the thin, silky fabric puddled around her waist.

“Please, Cal,” she murmured against my ear.

I groaned, my hands moving to her breasts. I could feel her hard nipples against my palms. I squeezed them as she arched into me. I pulled my hands up, pinching her nipples to the point of near pain. She let out a gasp, and I watched her face flush. I kept my hands there, not letting up, my fingers pinching harder and harder. She let out soft cries and pressed

herself against me. I pulled her into me, my mouth covering hers.

I moved my hand down, sliding my fingers beneath her nightgown and into her panties. Her mouth opened against mine, letting out a soft sigh. I licked her lips and pushed my fingers into her. She was already so wet, her juices coating my fingers. She moaned into my mouth, arching into my touch. I moved my fingers in and out of her.

“Never have I felt . . . this way about anyone,” I whispered against her lips.

She nipped at my bottom lip, her fingers digging into my shoulder. I let out a soft groan as she did it again. “I want to feel you . . . inside me,” she whispered, her voice breathy, and she didn’t have to ask again.

Ellen

Callum stood and pulled his boxers down. His cock caught on the elastic and bounced as he forced the cotton garment lower. I'd seen him a dozen times this weekend, but it hadn't gotten old, the rush of adrenaline when I knew he was about to take me. He held a hand out toward me, and I took it and stood. My nightgown slipped off my body and fell to the floor, and he tugged my panties over my hips and let them fall too.

"I want you so badly." I draped my arms around his shoulders and rose on my tiptoes to kiss him.

"I want you too, Ellen." We both stood there naked, lusting after each other, and he nipped at my lower lip. My body flushed with heat. He grabbed my hips and pulled me closer until there was barely a breath between us. "I can't get enough of you." He ran his hands down my back and cupped my ass, pulling me against him. He took my breath away with desire.

"I feel the same way." I sighed when he kissed me again. He was hard against my belly, and I wanted him inside me now. I yelped when he pushed me and I fell onto the bed. He climbed on top of me and slid his hands up my thighs and then lifted my legs over his shoulders. As he bent to kiss me, my knees folded to my chest. I felt his fingers play at the edge of my entrance, teasing me.

"You're so beautiful, Ellen." His body weight on me pressed me into the mattress. I could feel his cock between my

thighs, rubbing my pussy.

“Oh, God, Cal . . .” I wanted him inside me, but he had other plans. Callum guided my fingers to my clit, and once there, forced me to start massaging it. His hand relinquished its grip on my wrist then, and his fingers entered me, thrusting slowly. “Mmm . . .” I tried to straighten my legs, but they were firmly pinned between his chest and mine. The way it opened me up left me completely vulnerable to him. Even my arm was crushed between us so the only thing I could do was massage my clit.

“You like that?” His voice was husky, and I felt his cock twitch between my butt cheeks.

“Yes.” I panted. He thrust his fingers faster, and it wasn’t long before I felt the tension in my thighs and the familiar building of pressure in my belly. I clenched around him and gritted my teeth.

“Come for me, baby.” His words pushed me over the edge, and waves of pleasure washed over me. I cried out as my body shook. My wetness slicked down my entrance, and I was dimly aware of him still fingering me. Each pulsing thrust across my G-spot sent jolts of pleasure through me. “You’re so beautiful when you’re coming.”

I grinned and felt every sensation, his fingers, his dick touching me, the hint of moisture I felt on the head of his cock. “Oh, God, I want more. I want you in me.”

“I want to be inside you.” He sat back, and I relaxed my legs down onto the bed around him. I was still panting when he spread me wider and settled in between my knees. I felt the tip of his cock press against my entrance, and I lifted my hips and invited him into me. He moved in slowly, and I felt every inch of him until he was fully buried. I felt so full and stretched. He rocked his hips slowly, teasing me.

“I’m ready, Cal. I need you.” He pulled out and thrust into me again, faster this time. “Oh, God, yes.” I groaned.

He lay across me, and I felt him smile against my neck when he kissed me. He slowed down again, but his thrusts

were harder. “Do you like that?” he grunted.

“Yes, mmm.” My body was still sensitive from the orgasm, and the feel of him moving inside me was incredible. He was close now, I could feel it. I put my arms around him and clung to him as he pounded into me, his cock filling me over and over. “Fill me, Cal. Let me feel you explode inside me.”

“Ellen, I . . .” His growls of pleasure tickled my ear. The way his body rubbed my clit each time he was as deep as he could go sent shivering sensations of pleasure through my groin. I felt another orgasm building.

“Oh, God, Cal. Yes.” I dug my nails into his back again and pushed my hips up to meet his. I was lost in the feelings bubbling up inside me, the way he moved inside me, and the way he held me. The waves of pleasure built, doubling, tripling. I panted and clawed at his back. “I’m so close, Cal, I can’t . . .”

“God, I can’t wait to fill you,” he whispered in my ear. The sound of his voice and the feel of his body sent me over the edge. I came hard with a keening cry. My muscles contracted around him, pulling his cock deep inside me. Every muscle in my body was on fire. I swam in an ocean of lava so intense and penetrating I couldn’t breathe.

Deep, guttural sounds gurgled out of my throat as I convulsed, and he pounded me into the sheets. The bed shook, the headboard banged on the wall, and I got lost in the bliss. Never before had a man made me feel this intoxicated just with his body.

“God, Ellen, I’m coming.” He drove into me one last time, and I felt his cock pulse. He was filling me with his cum. I could feel it, hot and sticky between us.

“Oh, my God, Cal. Mmm.” I held onto him tightly, my arms and legs wrapped around him. I felt as if I would never let go.

I was spent. I stared up at him, my eyes wide. I had never felt this way with a man before—not even my former husband. I fought my feelings for Callum the entire time I was married

to Roger, and for a time I thought I was in love with him. Now I knew what real love felt like, and I didn't have a clue what love was with Roger. I never truly loved him. It was always Callum for me.

He pulled out, and I felt his cum drain out of me, but he rolled me to the side and spooned me. As his arm wrapped firmly around my waist, I closed my eyes. I wanted to savor this moment for as long as I could. I knew the idea of talking to my father was intimidating to Callum. There was a chance he wouldn't even do it at all, too scared of my father's reaction or of being fired. If that happened, I wasn't sure how I'd handle it.

"That was incredible." Callum moved the hair off my neck and kissed me gently. I wanted to ask him again to speak to my father, but to do so would spoil the moment. Instead, I decided to look at things in a more positive light. I would be home for the next four and a half weeks into Christmas before I had to leave for Zurich.

"You're incredible. And you know what?" I tried to push a little happiness into my tone. "I'll be in Evansville until Christmas, so that means we can still see each other." I laced my fingers between his and snuggled back into him as he pulled the covers over us.

"Yeah . . ." Callum sounded nervous about that. I knew he would be. Sneaking around town where my father knew everyone and we might get caught sounded thrilling to me, but it probably made him feel hesitant to see me.

"I have events like three times a week all over the area. We should compare schedules. Most of them are Tuesdays and Thursdays or on Saturdays in the evenings." I traced the wrinkles on his knuckles and hoped he'd say he could make it.

"Hmm, well the entire month of December, I'm pulling doubles Tuesday to Saturday. My weekends are Sunday through Monday. If I get to attend any of them, it will be an act of God." He kissed me again but my heart sank. If we didn't even have time to meet up in public, how would we

ever make a relationship work? And what happened when I had to fly overseas?

The reality of things was starting to sink in and so was my fear that I would be the reason things didn't work out. This time, it wasn't about a baby, though. This time, it would be my job. I felt it in my gut. No matter how hard I tried to make a long-distance relationship work with him, I felt like it wouldn't be enough. At least not enough to make him want to fight for us—what little “us” there would be.

Tears threatened to flow, so I changed the subject again. “Are you still having your annual Christmas Eve dinner?”

“Of course, I always do. You can be my guest of honor under the guise of what an amazing job you've done for the hospital this year. But I'll be sure to catch you under the mistletoe at least once.” I could hear the smile on his lips as he spoke.

“I'd very much like that. Maybe by then, my father will have changed his mind about us.” I was baiting him, and I knew it.

“Maybe . . .” He sighed. “Look, I'll try to make as many of your events as possible. You can always come stay with me a few nights. Tell your dad you're staying with Chandra to make plans.”

My heart ached at his words. He knew my mom was sick and that I wanted to be with her as much as possible. “I don't know . . .” It was all I could say. It was beginning to seem more and more like we were finished before we started, though after this weekend, I realized I had a tendency to be a bit pessimistic. I clung to the hope that he'd talk to my father and this whole thing would turn out amazing.

I lay there in silence so long he probably thought I was sleeping. It was going to hurt like hell when I got on that plane and left New York. So much so, in fact, that I questioned whether I wanted to continue to pursue this company at all. What was life if you had no one to share it with? And what was love if you had no way to be together?

No one takes their career or the money they made to the grave with them. The only thing left behind is the legacy you leave in the form of memories made with people you loved. I loved him more than anything, and even though my job made it possible for hundreds, if not thousands, of people worldwide to receive health care they desperately needed, for once, I wanted to be selfish and choose me.

I'd chosen to believe and trust my father when I married Roger. That turned out horribly. I chose to continue to pursue this company because I'd seen it change lives. Now, I wanted Callum to choose me. I wanted him to speak with my father and make a way for us to be together. But if he wasn't capable of choosing me like that, maybe I should choose myself. Dismantle the company and stay here. There were plenty of worthy pursuits in Evansville and the surrounding area.

But if he didn't choose me, should I choose him at all?

And what if it all fell apart anyway and I lost everything?

The first tear escaped my eye silently, then another. And when I realized I was going to sob and I heard Callum snoring, I collected my things, dressed quickly, shut the lights off, and let myself out.

Callum

I woke up alone. The bed where Ellen had fallen asleep in my arms was cold. It was the wee hours of the morning, before dawn illuminated the mountain lodge. It was peaceful, the sort of quiet that only happens when a thick layer of snow blankets the ground, insulating the earth against echoes. I lay there for a while thinking of going home, what returning to the hospital would be like. I wondered if the doctors and nurses who attended the event would carry the bits of gossip about Ellen and me back to the office where Allen would hear.

Weight held me down despite my desire to just get up and get the day over with, like an invisible cord tethering me to the bed. I'd found the one who completed me in ways I'd never known, but it was complicated. I wasn't a quitter, though I wouldn't have classified myself as a fighter, either. And maybe that was the problem, that I had been fighting for the wrong things my whole life. My career, prestige, money, influence, comfortable living—all things I fought for rather than intimacy. I wasn't afraid of it, I just valued other things above it.

Until now.

Reconnecting with Ellen had made me realize that my whole life, there was a deeper level of living that I'd been missing out on. Like transcending one reality into a new one, richer and fuller than I'd ever imagined. It had never occurred

to me to look for it because the women I'd been with in the past—all of them flings—had never sparked the hunger for more. But Ellen . . .

Pushing myself up from the mattress, I looked down at the cum stain on the sheet where she'd been. I sighed, regretting my decision to volunteer for this event. Sure, the pressure was on when her father asked me to my face to help, but I could have bowed out gracefully. Now, my heart was so intricately connected to hers, I wasn't sure how to untangle it without hurting her—or myself. I didn't regret Ellen at all. I just wished things were different, that I didn't have to feel guilty or anxious about what happened.

I showered, resisting the urge to touch myself when I thought of her. Images of her smile and her beautiful eyes interrupted and consumed every activity this morning, even simply brushing my teeth. I knew she was right next door sleeping. Maybe she was dreaming of me too, the way I was thinking of her. But all I could do was wrestle with the responsibility of my promise to her father and my desire to protect her and make her happy.

For once in my life, I was seeing a woman for everything spectacular and fantastic about who she was. Ellen wasn't a plaything like so many women in my past. She wasn't an object that helped me get off or move through a difficult emotional period in my life. SO many times, I'd used women like that, or they used me. Maybe nine years ago, Ellen was that to me, just another notch in my belt, but this time was different. I'd made a promise to her father to do what was best for her. To think of her.

And I had. I could justify my actions on this trip as taking care of her because I was giving her what she wanted, soothing an ache she'd felt for the past two holiday seasons and helping make this one better, to cast away negative memories in her heart and mind. But I was also selfishly enjoying it to the point that my promise to her father that I would care for her became so much more. And now, I cared for her more deeply than anyone else in my entire life, including myself.

I wanted to make her dreams come true. Hearing her talk about her company and the new donation made my heart beat a little faster. I knew it probably thrilled her to death to think of her company growing. She'd hidden that because of the tension between us, but deep down, she was probably walking on air. I wanted that for her. Even if it meant she was away long-term. I also wanted her to be satisfied emotionally, so I did intend to speak with her father.

My heart was a mess of emotions and stressful thoughts as I dressed and packed up. I wanted nothing more than to knock on her door and ask her to run away with me. I had a lot of money in savings, and my medical license was good for anywhere in New York state. But that wouldn't solve the problem of her wanting to be close to her mother while she was undergoing treatment for cancer, and every holiday season, she would miss her family. I couldn't do that to her.

I had no clue whether we would even be able to work this out at all. But I sat at the small desk in the corner of the room and wrote a letter to her. I took my time to word it as eloquently as I could while not leading her on or letting her down. What we shared this weekend was magical, but that didn't mean it was a guarantee that it would continue when we got off this mountain.

Ellen,

I had a wonderful time with you this weekend. The added few days seemed like a gift from the fates or destiny. I feel like we really connected, and that isn't something that comes easily for me. Thank you for sharing your heart with me so deeply and for trusting me with your tears.

By the time you read this, I will be on my way home. I am going to speak with your father. I give you my word. I have a deep respect for his leadership and friendship. I want you to know that because I love you, I will honor him as your father above anything else. It's the way it should be.

For now, all my love,

Callum

I stared at the sheet of paper for a long time, agonizing over whether it was the right thing to say to her. And when I finally felt at peace with it, I folded it in half and picked up my bags. I put my coat on and headed out. As I passed her room, I carefully slid it under the door and sighed heavily. I hoped she understood what I meant and wasn't hurt by what I had to do. I really did not think Allen was going to be okay with this.

I climbed into my car and stashed my things in the passenger seat. Heading down, the mountain the roads were still snow-covered and slick, but I took it slow and easy to avoid any problems. Winter roads were a normal thing in New York—mountain or not—and I had a lot of experience driving. Though, it was a bit nerve-wracking at times, so I made a pit stop at a small convenience store and gas station to fill up and grab a hot coffee. While pumping, Ellen called, but I declined the call and put my phone on silent. I wasn't sure what she wanted, but it could wait until I was home.

After filling up, I continued home, but the closer I got to home, the more I realized that if I didn't just stop and talk to Allen now, I'd probably lose my nerve. I had a history of not liking confrontation. I handled it well—at least I thought I did—I just didn't relish the idea of making it happen on purpose. Still, she was worth it.

So I drove directly to the hospital and found a parking spot. I was tired from being away, and I'd already arranged to have the day off today. So when I walked in and headed for Allen's office, I found a gaggle of nurses giddy to see me, and all of them bombarded me with questions about the event.

"Dr. Andrews! How was the fundraiser? You got snowed in? Tell us all about it." The cute blonde, probably just out of nursing school, stared at me with doe eyes. She was a flirt, always making passes at me. I was Dr. Charming to the lot, too, and I never worked a day where they weren't batting eyelashes at me.

"Hmm, yeah, Jen, we got snowed in." I leaned on the counter, not really interested in the small talk, but I didn't want to be rude. "The power and phones went out, but with the help of satellite technology and generators, we managed to help

raise more funds than needed and set a new record for funds raised in a single event by the company.” I was proud to talk Ellen up a little even if I couldn’t come right out and use her name.

“That’s fantastic. I heard you played Sexy Santa.” The redhead winked at me, and I chuckled. Word really did travel fast.

“Uh, yeah. I sang some carols dressed as Santa. I’m not sure whether I was sexy or not.” As I was talking, Dr. Peters walked out of his office with his coat in hand and a determined look on his face. I felt my heart leap into my throat and I said, “Excuse me, Ladies. I need to speak to Allen.”

I dodged around them and took a few hurried steps toward where Allen was headed. “Uh, Allen, can I have a moment of your time?”

“Not now, Cal. Karen isn’t doing well. I just got a call from her in-home nurse that she needs me. I’ll have to get back with you tomorrow.” He continued walking as if I weren’t even there, and all I could do was sigh and watch him hurry away. A sick wife definitely trumped my need to speak to him about the potential future of my relationship with Ellen.

I watched him get onto the elevator and turned to see the nurses’ station empty. They’d all moved on to their duties and I was alone. I suddenly realized how much I hated being alone. For a split second, I thought about calling Ellen, but when I reached for my phone, I thought about Karen and how Ellen was probably trying to hurry home to see her mother. I didn’t want to interrupt that. All I could do was go home and unpack and wait for tomorrow. Maybe I’d call Ellen later too.

Ellen

I chuckled and touched Dean Albers's shoulder lightly as he joked. "That's a good one. Yes, Black Friday is a good day for a black-tie event." If I had a nickel for every time I heard that joke tonight, I would be a millionaire, but the event was going off without a hitch, unlike the Hudson Medical fundraiser. "If you'll excuse me, I have a few people I need to see."

"Sure thing, Ellen." Dean let me drift away through the crowd, and I felt like I was floating. The room, filled with black and gold balloons, streamers, and candles, a string quartet playing Christmas music, and women and men decked out in their Christmas finest, made me feel like I was at a ball.

My gown, a floor-length satin number rented from a local dress shop, made me feel almost angelic. The scoop-neck collar framed in a gorgeous diamond drop necklace, also rented, but they framed my cleavage nicely. And the hourglass shape, sweeping out from my legs with a crinoline beneath, only served to accentuate my natural curves. I felt exquisite.

I weaved through the crowded conference center in search of Chandra. This event, hosted to raise money for a group of doctors from Mercy General who travel overseas to give medical aid during emergencies, featured speakers from all over the United States. Chandra had thrown it into our schedule almost last-minute when another firm similar to ours backed out with a schedule conflict. I was grateful to hop on

board and glad I knew a few faces in this crowd from last week's event at the lodge.

“Oh, there you are,” I breathed, happy to finally see my partner in this crowd. I pulled her to the side and glanced around. “When is the meal supposed to come out?” There was a delay on the part of the caterer, and people were starting to talk about how hungry they were. It wasn't a good look for my company, so I wanted to hurry it along if possible.

“They're working on it. I think about ten more minutes. One of the ovens went down, so they were struggling to find a local restaurant to cook the turkeys.” Chandra looked stressed. Normally, I was the one who carried the weight of the stressful moments, but this time, she was running point since she signed on the client.

“Hey, okay. That's not so bad. And everything will go on as planned from here out?” After the generous donation from an anonymous person at the lodge, I didn't want to fail now. It would only cast doubts on our ability to run the business and events like this. These were heavy hitters, donations upward of ten thousand dollars each coming in left and right. We needed to exude confidence, which was the reason for my rented attire and all the diamonds I could find.

“Yeah, I think so. Look, I need to go back to the kitchen again and double-check. I told Jerry to make the announcement so it will quash any more frustrated comments.” She squeezed my arm as she walked away, and I watched Jerry take the stage. Jerry—thirty-something, a single doctor from Mercy who started the philanthropic ministry—was such a sweet man. He had a way of calming everyone's nerves, and that talent did not escape him now, either. He managed to get everyone cheerful and expectant as they headed toward their assigned seating.

I turned, feeling better than ever about the state of my company, and as I entered the hallway and headed toward the ladies' room, I nearly ran smack into Callum. I stopped, frozen in place, as I took in the sight. His silver hair had been slicked back to one side, tuxedo and green cummerbund making him look exceptionally Christmassy and handsome.

“Cal?” I whispered, breathless. He was so incredibly attractive to me on a normal day, but to see him dressed up like this made me swoon. It felt like my wedding day and he stood at the altar waiting for me in my gown.

“Ellen,” he cooed. He took my black-gloved hand—dripping with a giant diamond ring—and lifted it to his lips, kissing the back of it. Then he lowered it and let me go. My heart fluttered at his devilish smile and the way his eyes ogled me. “You look absolutely stunning. And this”— he gestured around the hall— “wow, you’ve outdone yourself again.” Though his words indicated he was talking about the decorations, I knew his eyes were telling me he meant the way I looked.

“Thank you.” I felt my shoulders tighten as I watched my father walk in down the hallway. “Chandra and I worked really hard on this.”

“It really shows.” Callum took a step closer to me, which didn’t upset me at all, but I knew how he felt about my father. I didn’t even know why Cal was here. Evansville was ninety minutes from Yellow Springs. I could only assume that he came only to see me.

“Hi, Daddy,” I said as my father approached from behind Callum. Calum’s eyes went wide, and he took a step away from me. I was mildly irritated by that because it meant he hadn’t spoken to my father yet, or if he had, it hadn’t gone well. The sweet letter that he wrote and slid under my door at the lodge had indicated that he was taking this seriously.

“Hey, Pumpkin.” Dad moved around Callum and touched the bottom of my elbow lightly as he kissed me on the cheek. “Mom sends her love. She’s feeling better but not up for the event. Her white cells are down from the chemo, so she has to protect herself.” Dad eyed Callum then turned back to me. Callum stood there like a fool, saying nothing.

“Not to worry. I’m just glad she’s rebounding. She gave us a scare.” Mom spiked a fever on Tuesday and had to be rushed to the hospital. So soon after a round of chemo wasn’t a good thing, but they ruled out anything serious and gave her a

course of antibiotics. It worried me, and I was glad she stayed home. We were smack dab in the middle of cold and flu season.

“Callum, I’m glad you could make it. This event doesn’t seem like your type.” Dad straightened his tie and looked in Cal’s direction. Callum seemed to squirm a little, like he was trying to decide what to say. From the looks of it, he really hadn’t spoken to my father yet. He had such a guilty expression.

“Uh, sir, I know a few good doctors who work with the group, so I’m here to support them.” He rubbed his wrist and twisted his cufflink. My father wasn’t stupid. He’d see right through Callum’s horrible poker face.

“Yes, well, I have to get to my table. I’m already running late.” I saw the expression on his face, the flicker of mistrust in his eyes as he looked at me. “Ellen, dear, join me?” And there it was—Dad trying to keep me away from Callum.

“Yes, in a moment, Dad. I have to check on the kitchen where one of the ovens went down.” My excuse was sheerly so I could remind Callum of his promise to me.

“Alright. I’ll see you in there.” With one more firm look at Callum, Dad walked away, and I felt my frustration leap out of my throat.

“Really? You haven’t spoken to him?” I couldn’t help but feel irritated.

“I’m sorry, Ellen. When I went to the hospital to speak with him, he had just gotten the call from your mother’s nurse.” Callum looked genuinely sorry, his forehead crinkled and his eyes dimmed, their normal bright blue tinged with gray.

“But he got that call before I was even home from the lodge.” I thought about the sequence of events. Callum had left the lodge before me, which meant he had gotten home before me. That meant if he had gone straight to the hospital, he’d have intercepted Dad. “You went straight there to speak

with him?” Slowly, my frustration melted away as I realized how serious he was.

“I did.” He nodded and raised his eyebrows. “And he got called away, and he stayed home the rest of the week. This is the first I’ve seen him, and tonight is not the time or place to have that discussion.”

“Awe . . .” My heart melted in my chest. “You really went straight there?” I couldn’t help myself. Cal and me, together at this Christmas ball, it made me gush with emotion.

“Yes, Ellen. I really did. I meant what I wrote in that letter.” His face relaxed, and I grabbed his wrist, pulling him into the coat room with a rush of adrenaline. He barely protested as I shut the door and wrapped my arms around his neck.

“You look so hot tonight,” I gushed, planting my lips on him. “You’re like freakin’ Prince Charming.” I kissed him again, and his hands rested on my hips.

“Mmm,” he groaned, grinding his hips against my body. God, if it didn’t make me want to just take him right there. “I have never seen something so stunning in my life.”

“The diamonds?” I asked, snickering.

“You,” he replied, pulling me against his body. I felt like a kid sneaking out of the house at night. He had no idea what he did to me, but I wanted him to know.

“Do you have plans tonight?” Pressing my forehead against his, I rubbed my pelvis against his. He was swelling already. It made me tingle with arousal and excitement.

“Well, I was hoping for dinner with a beautiful woman, but after that, just a long drive home alone.” Callum captured my lower lip and sucked it, nipping with his teeth. His thumbs dug into my hips as he squeezed me and ground on me.

“Mmm,” I whimpered. My groin warmed as a rush of blood chased my arousal. If he didn’t knock it off I was going to have to change my panties before I gave my speech later. “Stay . . .” I whispered against his mouth as he kissed me again.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah . . . Stay here. Drive me to my hotel.” His cock was hard now, rubbing against my thigh. I wanted him so badly. “I’ll let you do very bad things with me.”

“What sort of bad things?” he asked and kissed me again. I had to catch my breath before I responded.

“Anything you want.” I smirked and bit his lip just as the door opened.

“Hey, Elle . . . They’re calling you for your speech.” Chandra had a dumb grin on her face as she caught us. “Oh, hey, Dr. Andrews. I need to steal her. I hope that’s okay.”

Callum blushed and smiled at me, kissing me one more time before letting me go. “Return her in one piece. I have plans for her tonight.”

I giggled like a darn school girl and felt the heat from my pussy rush to my face as I wiped my mouth carefully with one gloved finger. “Am I good?” I asked her, walking toward the door.

“Mmm, just a little smudge,” she said, using her thumb to fix my lipstick. “There . . . good.”

I looked over my shoulder before I walked out. “See you later?” I asked.

“Wouldn’t miss it,” he said, winking.

Wow, I didn’t know if I could wait for later. I just had to make it through the speech without forgetting why I was there.

Callum

After getting the details for Ellen's hotel, I drove across Yellow Springs from the event and waited. She lagged a bit, taking care of things with Chandra, but she gave me her room key and I let myself in. I hadn't planned to meet up with her for sex, but I did fully intend to see her and speak with her. It's why I cashed in a day of my paid time off to drive the ninety minutes to the event. I missed her. It had been only a few days, but it felt like forever.

Now, I lay on her bed wearing only my tie. The sheet draped casually across my hips to conceal my manhood, and I hoped it turned her on the instant she walked into the room. The dress she wore tonight was exquisite, but not as beautiful as her smile. When the lock clicked and she opened the door, I held my breath, bracing for her reaction.

Ellen smiled as she took in the sight of me lying on her bed. She closed the door behind her and walked over, her heels clicking on the hardwood floor. She bent down to kiss me, her lips soft and inviting. I wrapped my arms around her waist and pulled her closer, deepening the kiss. Our tongues tangled together as the heat between us grew.

Ellen broke the kiss and leaned back, admiring my body. She ran her fingers down my chest, tracing the lines of my muscles. I watched her, my desire for her growing stronger with each passing second.

“You look so sexy in just your tie,” she said, her voice husky with desire.

I smirked, feeling confident as I sat up, grabbing her by the waist and pulling her onto my lap. The sheet stayed draped across my swelling cock, but the material of her dress scratched across the top of my thighs. “I’m glad you think so,” I said, nipping at her neck before kissing her deeply once again. My hands roamed over her body, memorizing every curve and dip. I wanted her so badly, and I could tell she wanted me just as much.

“I’ve missed you, Callum.” Ellen moaned as I ran my hands up her dress. My fingers brushed against her panties and I felt her wetness. I wanted nothing more than to bury myself in her.

“It’s been four days.” I chuckled, toying with her clit through the thin fabric. She draped her arms around my neck and kissed me again, harder this time, crushing her tits against my chest. The sequins on the dress scraped my chest too, and it aroused me. I used my free hand to unzip it and work one strap over her shoulder.

“Four days too long,” she whispered, turning her back to me. I kissed her neck, biting her shoulder and sliding the fabric down her arms. Once it puddled around her waist, I stood up and let it fall to the floor. Then I laid her down and she looked up at me, her eyes filled with desire. She was beautiful, and I was rock hard.

“I’ve been dreaming about you,” she said, her voice soft and breathy.

I undid the tie and tossed it aside, then reached up and curled my fingers into the waistband of her panties. Her tits swayed as I jiggled the silky material, pulling it down over her hips. The dress didn’t allow for a bra, so she was fully nude, staring up at me with only heels on. “God, you’re gorgeous.”

“I’ve been looking forward to this all night,” she said, her voice as soft as ever. I climbed onto the bed, kneeling between her legs. I kissed her again and then trailed my mouth down

her body, taking one of her nipples into my mouth. She moaned as I sucked, not wanting to interrupt.

Ellen grabbed the back of my head and held me against her breast as I did the same to her other nipple. I trailed my mouth down her body, leaving a trail of kisses along the way. I stopped at her hip bone and kissed it, then moved down to her thigh. I nibbled on her skin, and she squealed, giggling. The scent of her arousal made me growl with desire. I ran my fingertips down her body, her curves and her softness drawing me in.

“You’re so sexy,” I whispered as I kissed her inner thigh, just above her knee.

“Kiss me,” she said, her eyes half closed. “I need your lips on mine.” I kissed the inside of her thigh before moving back to her sweet spot. I kissed her clit, and she moaned, her back arching slightly.

“You’re so wet,” I said, kissing her again. Ellen gripped my hair, grinding her hips against my face. I moved my tongue around her clit, teasing it before sucking on it lightly. Her thighs shook as I did so. Then, I moved down to her entrance and ran my tongue along her lips, tasting her juices. She wiggled underneath me, wanting more.

“God, Callum. That feels so good,” she moaned, her voice faint. I slid my hands under her back and grabbed her and pulled her toward me. She squealed in response.

“I love the way you taste,” I said as I pulled away from her. “I can’t get enough.”

“I was afraid you’d forgotten.” Her playful tone made me smile.

“Never,” I whispered. “I’ll never forget how good you taste.”

Ellen squirmed under me as I spoke, her arousal growing. I plunged my tongue deep into her pussy. “Oh, yes,” she moaned, her hips grinding forward, pressing her wetness against my face.

“You’re so hot,” I growled.

“I can’t take much more,” she said, her voice low. “I’m so close already.”

I plunged my tongue deeper into her, and she squealed, her hips bucking again. She reached down and grabbed my hair, pulling me into her. I slid my tongue in and out of her as she moaned, my name on her lips. “Callum . . .”

I licked her clit once more, then sucked on it before she screamed as she came. I licked her juices as she shuddered, her orgasm rocking her body. Her hips rose off the bed, and I held her from behind, keeping my lips locked around her clit as she rode the waves. I teased her entrance with my fingers before sliding two inside her. She gasped in delight, pushing against me, wanting more. I increased my speed and thrusts until she was screaming with pleasure again. Her muscles clenched around me as she let go once more into another amazing orgasm.

As she came down from her orgasm, I moved up to kiss her lips. She smiled and kissed me back, our tongues intertwining in a passionate embrace. I nibbled on her neck as we continued to make love, my hands wandering all over her body. She moaned again as I licked and sucked on her nipples, each one getting harder as I teased.

“Hmm, I want you in me,” she moaned, clawing at my back to urge me back to her lips.

“I want to be in you,” I countered, grinding against her. She grabbed my cock and pulled me to her entrance. I slid inside her easily, and she moaned loudly, turning her head against the pillow. I felt her muscles tighten around me as she arched her back to give me better access. I grabbed her hips and thrust into her harder, her breasts bouncing with each one.

“Oh, Cal,” she whimpered. She clawed at my side with one hand and massaged her clit with the other.

“Mmm, Ellen.” It felt amazing. Her pussy milked me so well.

“You feel so good,” she groaned with pleasure as I sped up my thrusts. “I’m so close.”

“Come for me, baby,” I groaned as I pushed into her, my cock going deeper. “I want to feel you come around me.”

“Yes,” she cried out. “Oh, wow!” I felt her tighten around me as her climax ripped through her body. Her muscles squeezed me, and she screamed my name. “Cal, I’m coming!” Her pussy pulsed around me as I thrust into her one last time before I came with her. I came so hard I thought my heart would stop. Her warm juices coated my cock as we shuddered together, both of us breathless.

I collapsed onto her after we came down from our highs, both of us panting. “I love you,” she whispered, and all I could do was catch my breath. I rolled to my side and held her, and she lay there grinning and holding my hand. “That was incredible.”

“Such a perfect end to a great night.” I brushed my thumb lightly over her stomach. The huge diamond around her neck glistened in the light. I noticed she had taken her rings and gloves off, but the earrings she’d been wearing were still there, pinched to her ears. She was glowing.

“So that was awkward with Dad.” Ellen turned to her side to face me.

“Yeah, it was. I think he suspects something.” I pulled her closer, not really wanting to have this conversation yet again. I had tried and he was busy. It would happen, I just need a bit of time to find the right moment.

“But you’re going to speak with him, right?” She rested her hand on my chest and stared into my eyes.

“Yeah.” I sighed, and she frowned.

“Cal, you promised.” The glow of relaxation started to crumple and her forehead wrinkled.

“I told you I will, and I will. I’m sorry that it’s a touchy subject.” I didn’t know how else to explain to her that telling my best friend I wanted to renege on the promise I’d made not to touch his daughter was not easy.

“I’m going to shower now.” She pulled herself away from me and climbed off the bed, then picked up the dress and hung

it in the closet. When she vanished into the bathroom, I sank into the mattress and closed my eyes. Seeing the disappointment in her eyes crushed me.

God, I really hoped Allen understood when I talked to him because I couldn't bear to see her heartbroken if he told me to stay away again.

Ellen

I kissed Callum goodbye, and he headed out the front of the hotel. It was a bit of a somber morning waking up next to him and realizing that we were going home and wouldn't see each other for several days, and if we did, it would be while I was hosting an event. I'd have no personal time to spend with him. My heart was heaving as I approached the check-out desk and slid the key card to the hostess.

"How was your stay?" Her bright smile tempted me into one of my own, though it wasn't genuine.

"The room was nice, thank you." I waited while she scanned the card and looked up my room number. The card was on file, so I just had to sign and I could wait for my Uber. I pulled my phone out to check the app. I had ordered it from the room right before heading down. Unfortunately, there was a notification on the app and that was never good.

I opened the phone and clicked the notification which took me to the Uber app. It was a message from my driver that they'd be running late. It was a special set of circumstances too. Most of the drivers in small towns like this only did local rides. I needed a ride ninety minutes away to Evansville. I was lucky to even get a driver who was willing to do it, and I'd had to apply a major tip just to score this. Waiting another hour was frustrating. I had to get to the bank before they closed, too, and I already looked that up. The bank was a twenty-minute walk—in heels through the snow?

I frowned and sighed as the hostess slid my receipt across the desk. “Sign here,” she said, giving me a funny look. I probably appeared very upset, which I was, and normally, I kept my feelings to myself around complete strangers. It was hard not to complain, but I forced a smile, signed the paper, and picked up my overnight bag.

The frosty air bit down on my skin as soon as I stepped out the door. With no way to make the Uber driver come any sooner, my only option was to walk to the bank and then back here to get the ride. I probably had enough time. I checked my phone and decided it was worth it, trying to look at the bright side. I would get extra steps in today, and I could burn off some calories after all the food I ate last night. At least Chandra was able to take my dress and the jewelry back to the gown shop for me. That would have been a nightmare.

With a sigh that puffed out of my mouth in a cloud of crystalized air, I started down the slick sidewalk. I hadn’t brought a hat with me, but my gloves kept the breeze from making my fingers numb—once I remembered to put them on. I had almost made it to the stop sign at the exit of the hotel parking lot when a car pulled up and slowed to my walking pace. I leaned over as the window went down and saw Callum’s smile.

“Hey, pretty lady, do you need a ride?” His warmth and the way he said it so playfully melted my heart.

“Uh, well . . . My Uber is running an hour late and I need to make this bank deposit at First National on Fourth Street.” I patted my bag and shrugged. “I thought you left.”

“I waited until my car was warm before taking off. I had a few missed calls about patients too. You can’t walk that far in the cold. Get in.” I heard the locks on his car disengage and I breathed a sigh of relief.

Callum to the rescue again. It seemed he had a knack for saving me just when I needed it. My feet hurt already, and the cold air on my bare legs had me chilled to the bone. I should have chosen a better outfit than a skirt with heels, but I didn’t know at the time that I’d be walking anywhere. I climbed into

his car and shut the door, instantly feeling the heater blasting on my frigid toes.

“You are seriously not dressed for the weather.” Callum put his car in drive and headed out while I buckled in and commenced shivering.

“I know. I didn’t realize my Uber was going to be delayed. I thought I’d pop into the bank and head home.” I set my bag on the floor between my feet and rubbed the back of my neck. I felt like an idiot. Times like this made me realize how I was too independent and how I needed people in my life.

“What about Chandra? And why didn’t you just ask to ride with me? Why pay that much for an Uber?” All of the things he was saying made sense to me now, but this morning when we were getting ready to leave, I got the feeling he was tense, probably because I had pressured him last night to speak to my father.

“Chandra had other plans in Yellow Springs this morning, and I didn’t want to wait, so I offered to do the bank drop and she offered to return my gown.” I sighed. “I didn’t ask to ride with you because I thought you were upset with me.”

“Why would I be upset with you?” He put his hand on my knee, and it warmed me. “Ellen, I am not upset. I feel pressured at times, but I know you are eager to see what our future holds. Okay?”

Breathing deeply, I began to feel the anxiety hanging over me dissipate. I’d been wrestling with my demons for days now, worrying that if I put too much pressure on him, he’d snap like Roger had. I knew I had really laid it on thick with Roger about the baby, but when a life is growing inside you, you kind of don’t have a choice. I didn’t want Callum to feel like I was nagging and leave me.

So I did the only thing I could think of—I flirted. “I like the pressure sometimes . . . You know, when it’s just right and it hits all the right nerves.”

He was silent for a moment, almost reflective, and then I saw the smirk creep across his lips. “I like to put pressure on

you, right on the very end of that tiny nub of nerves you like touched so much.” He turned to head up the main thoroughfare, and I felt my cheeks heat up.

“Oh, yes, that sort of pressure is divine. I mean if you’re going to get on my nerves, one of the eight thousand that collect at that exact spot would be the ones to go for.” I laid my gloved hand on top of his and patted it.

“I get on your nerves, do I?” Callum winked at me and turned again, down the road I knew the bank was on.

“I love when you get on that nerve . . .” I snickered at his playfulness and pointed. “There. Thank you so much.”

“Of course,” he said, pulling into the parking lot. He found a spot and waited while I ran in to make the deposit, and when I returned he was jamming to some ’90s rock. I sang along with him, remembering some of the lyrics, but he knew them all. In fact, he knew them so well he sounded like a natural, and the hum of his baritone voice was so enchanting that I stopped singing and just watched him with a giddy smile.

When “*Smile*” by Nat King Cole came on, he crooned it out in a hypnotizing melody that brought me to tears. I remembered when my father sang that song to me as a child. He’d put me on his lap and hold me. It brought me so much comfort and encouragement every time I was hurt or injured. Like balm on an open wound. And Cal’s voice was no different.

After two years of heartbreak and grieving a baby and a marriage, Callum had no clue how badly I’d needed this. I hadn’t even come to my father for comfort, too ashamed that I had ruined my marriage to ask him for help. But this had me sobbing and using the stash of napkins in Callum’s glovebox to clean my face. As the song came to an end, he turned the radio down and rubbed my knee.

“I’m sorry that made you sad. I didn’t know whether I should keep singing or turn it off.”

“It was beautiful, Cal.” I sniffled and blew my nose. “Dad used to sing that to me when I was little, if I got hurt or if

someone broke my heart. You'll never know how special that moment was to me."

"Mmm." He sighed. "Well, I'm glad to help."

For most of the drive, I listened to him sing. Every now and again, he would comment about a song or the commercials would give an opportunity for us to share memories related to songs we listened to. When we pulled up in front of my parents' house and I saw that the house was dark and Dad's car was gone, I got a cheeky idea.

"Want to feel like a kid again?" I asked him. I couldn't help the grin spreading on my face.

"Uh . . ." He chuckled. "Sure?" He offered a confused look and cocked his head.

"Come on," I said, climbing out. I picked up my bag and hefted it, closing the passenger door. Callum got out slowly and rounded the car. Dad had gotten the drive clear of snow and ice, so that was a plus. I didn't have to slip and slide up the steep incline to the house. I let us in the front door and hung my coat and bag on a hook in the coat closet, shoving my gloves in the pocket.

"What are we doing?" he asked. He sounded nervous. I understood why. If they came home, he'd be hard pressed for a logical explanation, but I felt so close to him, and I wanted him to feel close to me too.

"Well, you're going to follow me to my bedroom and we're going to take our clothes off and be very naughty to each other." I took his hand and pulled him through the living room, past the leather recliners Mom and Dad always sat in, and into my room.

"Ellen, this isn't a good idea." Callum, still wearing his thick, puffy coat, squeezed my hand firmly as I shut the door behind us.

"Why not? We're here alone . . ." I slid my hands beneath his coat and found the hem of his sweater and reached beneath it. He jerked and grinned as my icy touch hit his warm belly.

“If they come home? Ellen, I have to talk to him before we get caught like this.” He grabbed my wrists as I tickled him, and he had to stifle a laugh as he pried my cold hands away from his body.

“Oh, you have no sense of adventure.” I rose up on my tiptoes and kissed him, and he didn’t resist me, so I parted my lips and let my tongue wander into his mouth. Callum softened, letting go of my wrists and resting his hands on my hips. He pulled me against his body, and I felt him swelling. “Hmmm,” I moaned, wrapping my arms around his neck. “This is just what I needed this morning.”

“Ellen, really . . . this is risky.” His protests didn’t jive with the way his dick was growing harder than a rock.

“Take the risk. I’m worth it,” I whispered, but I heard the front door shut, and then I heard Dad call my name.

“Ellen, are you home? I saw your coat.”

“Oh, God,” he hissed, pulling away. He wiped his mouth, and his eyes darted around the room, landing on the window.

“Okay, don’t freak out. I’m sure it’s going to be okay.” I locked the door and started pulling my skirt and shirt off, and Callum scowled.

“No, Ellen!” he shouted in a whisper. “This is insane.”

“Just, no . . . okay, just go out the window.” I shimmied out of the skirt and tossed it onto the bed and shouted, “Be right out, Dad, just changing.”

We were both flustered, but he rushed to the window and opened it. I hurried there too, in my bra and panties, and waited for him to turn and kiss me one more time. “Call me?” I asked, and he grumbled some unintelligible response as he heaved himself out the window legs first.

I felt a rush of adrenaline and giggled, blowing him a kiss goodbye out the window as I stared down at the screen lying in the snow. I’d have to fix that when the snow melted, but for now I needed to get dressed.

A knock came at my door as I shut and locked the window.
“You in there?”

“Yeah, Dad. I’m changing. I’ll be out in a second.” I turned and leaned against the window, chewing a nail. That was close, but nothing beats the thrill of nearly getting caught. I needed to call Callum later to make sure he wasn’t upset.

Wow . . . I was totally in love with him.

Callum

I trudged through the knee-deep snow knowing there was no right time or way to tell Allen about my failure to keep my promise. Still, having him find me in his daughter's bedroom when he was out wasn't the ideal way. My feet sank into the deep drifts, shoes getting filled with the white powder that melted and made my socks soggy. I must have looked a sight to any neighbors nosy enough to watch me round the end of the house toward the road. A fifty-year-old man leaping from a window in the middle of winter? When I got to my car, I shook the snow off my pant legs, but they were soggy too. I'd have to get them to the cleaners to make sure they didn't get ruined. I hadn't expected to have to sneak out when Ellen tempted me into the house. I knew it was a bad idea the whole time, but I followed her like a fish chasing bait and now I was paying for it.

As I sat behind the wheel of my car and started it, I looked up at the house. I could have sworn I saw Allen there in the window, watching, but the curtains jostled and whoever it was vanished. My nerves had my hands shaking as I put the car in gear and drove away. Ellen would get the brunt of his anger if it was him, which didn't make me feel any better about the whole situation. It should be me who took his anger, not her.

I drove home soggy and cold from the knees down, and my mind raced with all the "what ifs." What if he saw me? What if she got upset because I hadn't talked to him yet? What if I talked to him and he told me the same thing he'd said years

ago, that she was off limits? There were too many unknowns for me to even think about a future with or without her. And I had never been much for dealing with the unknowns.

At home, I parked my car and made my way inside to warm up. I left my wet shoes by the door and peeled my socks off. I had no bag with me, hadn't expected to stay in Yellow Springs, and my tuxedo might as well be ruined, shoes too. But she was worth it. If she wasn't, I would never have gone into her room with her, or followed her into the house, for that matter. Ellen had a way of making me do things I'd otherwise not do, and part of that was exhilarating.

I smiled as I sat on the edge of my bed and unbuttoned my shirt. I had felt like a kid again as we made our way up that driveway to her parents' house. How long had it been since I snuck in—or out? The rush of nearly getting caught made my grin grow. I chuckled to myself at the thought. I couldn't stay upset about any of it because any woman worth sneaking around for was worth fighting for. I knew I had to talk to Allen soon, and I didn't want Ellen to think for a second that I was procrastinating because I was uncertain of us.

Yes, there were times where I wondered if it was a smart match—her company, my career. It would be tough, but if we truly loved each other, we'd make it work. Besides, anything worth having is worth really fighting for.

When I stripped out of my pants, I dug into the pocket to find my phone and it started to vibrate. I dropped the pants on the ground and turned my phone over to see that it was Ellen's caller ID. My heart clenched, fearing the worst—that Allen had seen me and confronted her. Though, I'd have thought it would be Allen calling, not her.

“Ellen?”

“Hey, Cal . . .”

“What's up?” I walked toward the bathroom. After being nearly hypothermic, I decided a hot shower was in order.

“Dad's acting weird, but he hasn't said anything. Anyway, that's not why I called.” She sounded a bit frazzled. “I just

wanted to say something that I should have said on the drive.”

“Alright . . .” I sat on the closed lid of the toilet and waited. The line was silent for a moment as if she were collecting her thoughts.

“I spent a lot of time really doubting myself after Roger. You know? I don’t like that feeling of insecurity. I think that’s why I’ve been pressuring you to speak to my father. I want to know that I’m worth fighting for because Roger just threw me away. He wasn’t willing to fight through our challenges.” Her words struck my heart, and I found myself feeling an overwhelming urge to protect her, to run to her side and fight for her.

That feeling rose against my fear of speaking to Allen and what would happen. A war raged inside my thoughts and I fell silent. What could I say to her? She really was worth fighting for. I just didn’t want to fight my best friend over a nine-year-old promise.

“Cal?”

“You are worth fighting for, Ellen. Every part of you is worthy of being pursued and loved. And I don’t want you to think for a single second that you’re not. I’m not in the business of badmouthing other people, but I will just say that Roger was a fool. He doesn’t know what he had. You deserve so much better.” Short of trashing him, it was all I could say. He really was foolish for letting her go, because she was such an incredible woman.

“Thank you for saying that. I guess that’s all I wanted to say.” Ellen sounded more relaxed now, and I felt more conflicted, but I’d carry it for her. She didn’t deserve to feel like she wasn’t good enough.

“Okay, well, I’m going to have a shower and warm up now. Maybe we can meet for coffee this coming week? I still work Tuesday to Saturday long shifts. So maybe Monday?” I thought about my schedule. I had a few errands to run, but I would make time for her if she was free.

“Can’t. I’m in the Big Apple all day for meetings with a pharmaceutical company that will supply antibiotics to Uganda next spring. Chandra and I have coordinated a donation of nearly one million doses of amoxicillin.” She sounded disappointed.

“Okay, then, next Sunday? We could do brunch at Antonio’s.” It was a familiar coffee shop here in town—sort of public, but we could keep it professional.

“I’m sorry, Cal. Mom asked me to put up the tree that day since I’ll be at events all week.” She sighed. “We’ll make something work, okay?”

“Hmm, yeah.” It appeared our schedules conflicted a bit more than I realized, which was frustrating. “Well, you tell me when’s a good time for you, and if I can take it off, I will.”

“Sounds good. Go have your shower.”

Before she finished her sentence, my call waiting beeped. “Alright, bye, hun,” I told her as I pulled my phone from my ear. Killian was calling me. I barely heard her squeak out a goodbye before I swiped to change calls. “Kill, what’s up, man?” The man never called me, despite having my number, so this was a surprise.

“Callum, buddy, I have a gig for you.” His energetic voice had me rolling my eyes. What sort of thing was he trying to rope me into now?

“Well, let me have it . . .”

“So I’m in charge of a Christmas concert. It’s put on by the chorale society here in Evansville, and they are raising awareness for underprivileged kids who don’t have access to vision and hearing screening. The main guy just got told he has nodules on his vocal cords and has to rest them and prep for surgery before Christmas. I need a fill-in.”

I’d heard of the concert and had considered attending it since it was for a good cause and I loved a good choir this time of year, but it was on a day I had to work. Saturday afternoon, to be specific, and I had taken so much time off already. Though, if I got caught up on my paperwork this week and

only took off a few hours, I could pull it off. My wheels were turning when Killian interrupted me.

“So, what do you think? You’ll come?”

“Well, man, what does it entail?”

“It’s all well-known carols and he has the lead in all of them. You’ll be a perfect fit. After hearing you sing at the fundraiser, I know you can do this. Just one practice Monday evening and then you’re set.”

My shoulders dropped. If Ellen had plans in the city on Monday, I had free time. And she said she was doing things the rest of the week, anyway. Since it was Christmastime and the season of giving was upon us, I decided to help out. “Sure. I’ll do it. Just tell me what time and where for the rehearsal.”

“Perfect. I knew I could count on you. I’ll send an email with the details. Thanks, buddy.”

Killian hung up before I could tell him he was welcome, and I set my phone to the side. Now, I needed to warm up and get something to eat. I had some thinking to do about how and when to talk to Allen, and I didn’t want to do that on an empty stomach.

Ellen

Holiday music blasted through the speakers overhead. The mall was packed with shoppers and store clerks alike, all here for one reason—the greatest consumer event of the year. Sales signs hung in every storefront. Twinkling lights and Christmas trees decked in gold and silver decorations hugged every wall. It was the time of year to walk ten thousand steps in one shopping trip and spend more money than I was worth to find a few things that may or may not end up in the dump before spring, but I loved it.

The air was even festive, saturated with the scents of gingerbread and peppermint. We walked past the Cinnabon, though it sorely tempted me, and headed for the large department store at the end of the concourse. Chandra and I had been at it all morning. I still had a few things left to buy. I wanted to get Dad a set of cufflinks, and I'd spent nearly two hundred bucks on a beautiful, framed family photo for Mom. I just needed the right bow to go on the package.

“Look, see that!” Chandra pointed at the Brookstone store. “They’ve been out of business everywhere. I can’t believe there’s still one in Evansville.” She seemed positively giddy over it. But she was right. The store had gone out of business in every other mall we’d been to around the globe. So when she darted through the entrance, I followed.

Chandra rushed to the massage chairs, free to test out, and sat down. I found one next to her. I was exhausted from so

much walking, and I feared I may be coming down with something anyway. I'd been so tired lately, so the small rest was a pleasure. The store employees had even set end tables up next to them, just as if they were a fixture in a home. And to boost sales, they had lined merchandise on the tables too, for our viewing pleasure, I was certain.

"These are cute," Chandra said, picking up a set of metal rings. They were a puzzle. I'd seen that sort of thing before but was no good at solving them.

Next to me were a few more interesting things. A digital stylus that worked on any device but also recorded your oxygen saturation and heart rate. It was a gimmicky device, but I could see people buying it as a stocking stuffer. Next to that was a smart watch. It was sleek and handsome—worked on any device. I picked it up and read the box and thought it was a really great idea—it counted steps, tracked heart rate, and even paired with a fitness app. Callum would love it.

"This is so cool," I told her, turning it over in my hand. "I think I want to get this for Cal."

"Mmm, him again? You can't seem to get him out of your system. I thought he was off limits?" She snickered at me and then sighed and leaned into the massaging chair's back.

"I wouldn't say he's off limits. It's just a matter of respect, I guess." His respecting me enough to take a stand for us. We had a real chance if Callum would only speak up for me. I just wished he wasn't so afraid of my father.

"So, are you two officially dating, then?" She closed her eyes as the chair shook her entire body. I hadn't even turned mine on yet, didn't know if I wanted to. My body aches seemed to come from somewhere internal, not because of muscle strain or overexertion.

"Not really?" I wasn't sure if I could call what we were doing "official." At least not when Callum felt the need to sneak out my bedroom window instead of just walking into the living room to speak to my father. We talked to our friends openly about it, though, and Chandra was the only friend I had here. "It's complicated."

“As complicated as it was with Roger? Girl, you need a man who’s not ashamed of you.” She would fight for me to the death. I knew her, but she didn’t know how Cal felt about what my father requested of him years ago. I totally respected it, enough to know it wasn’t my place to push him. Pushing him about this would be like pushing Roger about a baby, and it would destroy us. I had to leave it alone for a while.

“He’s not ashamed of me, Chandra. It’s just difficult.” I climbed out of the chair, not wanting to bicker, and walked to the registers to pay. The watch was a little pricey, but with the generous donation, I didn’t fear for money in my future. Callum was worth the splurge. It was the most expensive gift I’d purchased this year so far, and probably would remain that way.

Once I had paid, I returned to the massage chairs to see Chandra involved in some fun banter about holiday traditions with an older gentleman who occupied the chair I had vacated. He had kind eyes and a warm smile, and he offered to let me have the seat, but Chandra got up.

“We’re heading out now. It was nice chatting. Merry Christmas,” she said to him.

“Happy Holidays.” He grinned, and she hooked her arm around mine and led me out of the store.

“I just love this time of year. Everyone is so nice and happy. Except you. You’re grumpy again this year, and it’s been three Christmases. What can I do to cheer you up?” She laid her head on my shoulder, and we swayed a bit as we walked. “Let’s go get plastered on eggnog.”

“Hmm, while that sounds like a good idea, I am just not feeling up to it. As tired as I am, I’ll fall asleep after one sip.” I jostled her head by raising a shoulder, and she straightened.

“Then ice cream. You can’t go wrong with ice cream.” Her grin won me over.

“But ice cream is cold, and it’s cold outside.” I snickered as she pushed me closer to the food court. The noise of folks talking while they dined was almost deafening. It bounced

round the open area, reminding me of a high school cafeteria during lunchtime. We found an ice cream vendor and each got a scoop and then found a table to sit at. My feet thanked me.

The mall had a large stage set up at one end of the food court. A children's choir was on stage performing their version of *Silent Night*. I took a bite of the ice cream and watched as a young boy about nine years old stood in front of the mic and sang a solo. My little one would have been this age if I wouldn't have miscarried, maybe even been singing in this choir right now. The thought of it brought tears to my eyes. I hadn't cried over my lost child in ages—my failed marriage, yes, but not this.

"You okay?" Chandra asked, touching my arm lightly.

"Honestly? I don't know." I took another bite of my ice cream and blinked away the tears. "I would have had a child that age. I wish I could have carried to term. I want to be a mother so badly. It just seems like it won't happen unless I adopt." I shrugged. "And with the life I live, it's not smart to adopt. I'm always traveling, never have time for myself, let alone to raise a baby." I plunged the spoon into the dish but didn't scoop any up.

Chandra remained silent. We'd had this conversation before, and she never knew what to say. It was okay. I didn't know that anything she could say would make a difference. And even though I had a glimmer of hope with Callum, I knew the chances were so slim even Santa himself couldn't make that Christmas miracle happen. My body didn't work the way it was supposed to, and the odds were, I'd never conceive naturally.

"You know, you're only thirty-four. With this new donation, we can really push to have our home office set, maybe New York City? In less than a few years, we could be living the dream." She took a bite of her snack and tried to console me the only way she knew how. It was the only thing I could focus on to get my mind right most of the time. The company was really important to me, and it meant pulling myself up by my bootstraps more than once.

“Yes, you’re right.” I turned away from the children’s choir and set my dish down on the small green table between us. “That donation is a game changer. We can really start to shift the way we’ve been thinking. I really believe if we start a philanthropic unit on our own, we can raise funds for us. Yes, we can keep raising funds for the places we already serve regularly, but we can expand too, do things our own way.”

“Now you’re talking.” She grinned and pointed her spoon at me. “And when we are settled and just running things from our office, other people will have the chance to travel and live their dream of seeing the world while helping others, and we will have families and a stable place to live.”

That was always the dream, and for so long it seemed just out of reach. Now, it seemed closer than ever, close enough to celebrate it. Almost. I could buy a home or move in with Callum. We could have babies together by the time I was forty, and my dream of having a family would come true. Even if conceiving naturally wasn’t a thing in my future, we could do in vitro or adopt. It wouldn’t be quite the same, but it would be worth pursuing.

Chandra finished her ice cream and took the two cups to the trash, and while she did, I pulled out my phone to call Callum. Now wasn’t the time to talk to him about any relationship issues, but just hearing his voice would be comforting. Unfortunately, it rang through to voicemail. He was at work, and probably very busy, and I didn’t even bother leaving a message since I had nothing to say other than that I missed him.

I put my phone away and turned back to the children’s choir. When my little one was ripped from my life, it devastated me. Roger, however, acted like it was a blessing, which drove me to the edge. To some people, children are a chore or an annoyance, but to those who understand that children are our future, the pain of losing one is incalculable. Oceans couldn’t hold the tears I cried when I lost the baby, nor the ones shed in wishing I could have one.

The mistake I’d made with Roger was being so enamored of the way he treated me and the support he had for my

dreams. My father had spent so much time convincing me that he was the perfect man that I never saw the holes in his façade. I also never asked him if he wanted children. Was I making that same mistake again with Callum? We hadn't really spoken in depth about it, but then again, we weren't even an item yet. If he couldn't approach my father about the promise he made nearly ten years ago, then how would we ever get to the topic of children?

"You ready?" Chandra asked upon her return. I looked up at her and nodded.

"Yes, take me home. I'm tired. I feel like I've aged ten years in the past two weeks. Maybe I'm anemic." I stood and picked up my bags. I was going to wrap gifts when I got home, but after walking the mall so long, I knew the only thing I would do when I got home was to change into something warm and snuggly and crawl into bed. Morning, and the duties I had for our next few events, would come soon enough.

Callum

After six months of probation, Dr. Mindy Scriber was at her thirty-day review period. I was happy to sit across from her at my desk and give her the good news that she was doing just fine. She wore a bright smile. Following a tough circumstance for her, we had worked through some challenges and the review board's disciplinary actions. I was glad she was back.

“So, how is your son?” I asked after finishing her review. We hadn't spoken in a few weeks because of our busy schedules and the approaching holidays. I had a few minutes to kill before I could take dinner, so I relaxed into my seat to chat.

“Honestly, Dr. Andrews, it's been great. He's started to adjust to calling me Mom, though I think it still bothers him at times. But things between me and Jace are great.” Her smile is enough to make the whole thing worth it. She took a huge risk in seeking out her adoptive son, and it made me feel like less of a man for not taking the risk to challenge Allen. Ellen deserved more.

“How are things for you? I've heard the rumors about you and Doc Peters's daughter. She's a catch. How'd you manage that?”

And there it was. I was being confronted with the hospital gossip by someone who knew me well enough to really pry a

little without it being inappropriate. At least it wasn't Killian this time. I sighed and ran a hand through my hair.

“Well, it's complicated, mostly because I'm not wanting to lose my job.” I chuckled as if it were a joke, but anyone who knew Allen would know it wasn't. Luckily for me, Mindy didn't know Allen much at all, only his personality for being a stern but compassionate boss—to everyone in every situation except me with Ellen.

“Ah, well, if your boss is anything like my boss, you'll be fine.” She stood and cocked her head. “So, if there's nothing else, I have to finish rounds. Thank you for giving me a good review and for helping me through this whole thing.”

“Of course, Mindy.” I stood and reached my hand out and she shook it.

“See you tomorrow.”

“Yep,” I said, watching her leave. These double shifts were starting to wear on me, but they'd be over soon enough, and I had a leave of several days planned over Christmas break with no surgeries or major events happening short of any emergencies that came in. Even then, Mindy and the team were well equipped to handle everything and just call me if needed. Our new trauma surgeon of internal medicine started last week too, so they had more than enough personnel to manage.

I sighed and glanced at the clock. I still had a bit of time to kill, but I was wiped. I needed to eat. I shut the light off in my office and locked the door before heading out toward the elevators. It would be a long night of watching a few patients in the ICU who were brought in with internal bleeding due to a car accident. If needed, we'd call on our surgical team to take care of them, but they were my patients to watch over until shift change after midnight.

My stomach rumbled as I pushed the elevator call button and waited. I never realized how hungry I got this time of evening until it was time to eat, and by then I had a ravishing appetite. I tapped my toe, watching the red lights display what floor the elevator was on as it climbed to meet me, and I felt a

tap on my shoulder. I turned to see Allen with a scowl on his face.

“My office, Dr. Andrews.”

At first, my mind raced, trying to think of what I could have done to upset him. As my supervisor, he was responsible for ensuring I did all my duties at work, but I’d done them all without fail and to the best of my ability. I followed him when he turned, but the only reason I could see him having an issue with me was a personal one and that made my chest so tight I had to cough a few times to unlock the tension. I knew the rumors were getting around, but rumors were just rumors. Right?

He walked me right to his office, and as soon as I was in, he slammed the door shut. I took a deep breath and stared out the window for a moment before squaring my shoulders and turning to face him. Ellen had asked me to stand my ground, to really fight for us. I knew what I had to do, though I knew it would be risking my relationship with him and potentially my job.

“You think your behavior has gone unnoticed?” His angry glare penetrated my chest like a laser beam slicing me in two. I wasn’t about to volunteer information, and since I didn’t know exactly what behavior he was talking about, I played dumb and stayed silent, which only served to anger him more. “Say something!”

“Which behavior are you referring to?” I kept my chin high and my shoulders back. The only way to confront someone like this was with confidence. I just wished it wasn’t my boss and friend.

“You know what I’m talking about.” He pursed his lips and jammed his hands into his pockets. The lab coat he wore scrunched up beneath his armpits comically, but I didn’t dare laugh. “You were sneaking out of my house the other day. You thought maybe I didn’t notice that or that I was okay with it because I was out with my sick wife, taking her to doctor appointments and caring for her. But I saw the whole thing. Ellen played dumb, too. So, what the hell are you doing?”

For weeks, I had braced myself for this potential interaction. I had thought of a million things to say in my defense—she was an adult, her divorce made her available again, and she was able to make her own choices. Those things were defending her, proving to her father that she was her own person and could live independently. But those things weren't the things that would make a difference here because Allen never once doubted Ellen's ability to be her own woman.

In fact, he had supported her and championed her so much that she created a multimillion-dollar company and traveled the globe for years. He made her who she was. Of course he knew what she was capable of. If I wanted to challenge his views on our being a couple, I had to target the real reason he was resistant. He thought I wasn't good enough for her, that I would hurt her, and I had to change his opinion of me in relationship to his daughter.

I let my head drop. There was no point being obstinate or angry with him. He was defending his daughter's honor. I was too. I wanted nothing more than to celebrate her the way he did as her father, only with the intimate connection of a partner. He just had to see that I really meant it.

"I love her, Allen." I let the words hang in the air for a moment. I couldn't look him in the eye as I said it. We were friends, close friends. I was the one there for him when he got the diagnosis of cancer for Karen. I consoled him and helped him cope with choosing treatments and balancing work and life. He knew I was a good man.

When he said nothing, I got antsy. He walked around his desk, rubbing his face for a moment, anger still scrawled across his wrinkled forehead. He sank into his chair and rubbed his face more, then left his elbows planted on the smooth wooden surface as he covered his forehead. There was a bone-chilling tension in the room that I wanted to break, but I didn't want to upset him further. He was my friend. Still, I promised Ellen to say something, so this was my time.

"Allen, I know the promise I made you nine years ago. I cannot keep that promise now. Ellen is the most wonderful and amazing woman I've ever met. She is smart and determined.

She is insanely gorgeous, funny, and witty. She is everything any man would ever want and more. I love her. I want to support her and challenge her, and I want to have a family with her.” His head snapped up at the words, and I stopped speaking.

“Do you even know what you’re doing?” His question came without anger or guile. In his eyes I saw the flash of passion he had for life, for his family. Allen was just as determined as his daughter. It’s probably where she got it. He loved fiercely and fought even harder. “Do you not know how hard she’s worked to get where she is? The things she’s had to go through?”

I wracked my brain for why he’d use this line of reasoning against me. Of course I knew what she’d thought, better than anyone. We shared intimate moments at that lodge discussing the things. The pain she went through, her desire to have children. Ellen’s heart was something I treasured above everything else in my life. I wanted her to be happy.

“Yes, sir, but—”

“Sit down, Callum.” He gestured at the chair, and I heard his voice relax. Something was very wrong with him. Why wasn’t he screaming at me? Why was he calm? I walked around the chair and sat down. The knot in my stomach tightened as I watched his eyebrows rise and tears well up. He blinked them away, but I saw them there. This man loved his daughter so very much, and I only wanted to do the same with his blessing.

“Ellen struggled in school.” He started off with some news I didn’t know. I listened to him intently. “She had to fight for everything she ever had. I never handed her anything. I wanted her to be independent and strong. Even when she married Roger and he gave her all the money to start her business, she paid every cent back because I taught her to be independent.”

“Sir, what does this have to do with me?” I knew I could drop the whole “Yes, sir, no sir,” thing, but he was still my boss and I was on the clock.

“She built a Fortune Five Hundred company from the ground up. She is the CEO and chairman of the board. She heads up more than one thousand employees globally and runs more than one hundred fundraising events every year.” He looks at me with a gaze so intense it feels like it burns my face off. My cheeks are hot with emotion and frustration.

“Yes, and I think that’s the most incredible thing in the world. She’s so amazing.” I wasn’t following his train of thought. I could support her company as much as he could. Couldn’t I?

“Cal, let me level with you. Roger broke her heart in more than one way. When she was gone months at a time—and let me tell you, she will be—he cheated on her. No man is able to contain his urges for as long as he had to.”

“I’d never—”

“Listen to me,” he said sternly. I held my tongue. “Ellen has changed. She blames herself for the failure of her marriage.” He took a deep breath. “If she gets involved with you now, she will give up her company. She will want to stay here so the same thing doesn’t happen to her. Everything she has worked so hard for, for so long, will vanish, up in smoke. She’ll lose her company and eventually her confidence.”

My heart sank into my stomach. I knew he was right. That was exactly what Ellen would do. She’d throw it all away to be with whomever it was who was lucky enough to capture her heart because she had so little time left on her biological clock. I couldn’t do that to her. I stared down at my hands, kneading them together in my lap. Then I’d just have to give up my career, go with her. Because I loved her and I wanted to be with her.

“Then I’ll—”

“What? Leave? Quit what you’ve worked your whole life for? What’s next for you here, Cal? Look around.” He gestured and sat back in his seat. I looked around his office like he said, a large corner room with windows overlooking Evansville and the entire Hudson valley. It was larger than my living room at home, but it wasn’t mine. What was he alluding

to? “This is yours, Callum. The board has already announced that when I set my retirement, you are next in line, and with Karen suffering so badly, I’m going to put in my notice next week. I want to be with my family while they are still here.”

“What?” His words slowly sank in. He was stepping down as hospital director and they wanted me to take his job? That would effectively double my pay and cut my work time in half. It was a dream job, the reason I’d stayed here after so many offers to go to other hospitals.

“Callum, you need to do what’s right for her. Follow the path you set out years ago to follow.” Here was a man who spoke such a heavy truth, I couldn’t deny it. I could never choose a job over the woman I loved, but I knew she’d choose me over her job. I couldn’t let that happen. I looked him in the eye and knew what I had to do. Ellen had worked so hard on her company that I couldn’t fathom letting her give that up for me. I wasn’t worth that.

“I understand.” I sat there defeated, hopelessly crushed by the truth of the matter. The entire time I was fooling around with her, I was making it harder for her to return to her life of traveling and working. I put roadblocks and stumbling stones between her and her future.

“I’m not trying to be a monster, Cal. You know I only want what’s best for Ellen. If you love her the way you say you do, you will want that too.”

I stood, feeling empty. “I do love her, Allen, more than you will ever know. And you’re right. I will do what’s best for her. I apologize that I didn’t come straight to you with these feelings. I wasn’t trying to hide them. I just didn’t know how to approach you. Thank you for taking time to help me see how to best care for her. I need to get some dinner. Send Karen my love.”

I walked out before he could say anything else. I didn’t know how to tell any of this to Ellen. She’d be crushed. She’d try to convince me that I was wrong or that we could make it work, but there was no way to make this work. Allen was right and I knew it. She belonged on the road with her company,

and I belonged here, rising to take the position of hospital director.

Now . . . I just had to figure out a way to tell her without breaking her heart.

Ellen

I tried calling Callum several times this week, but each time, it went straight to voicemail. He had warned me that he worked long hours and was pulling doubles Tuesday through Saturday, but I still tried. After having the heart to heart with Chandra, I realized how badly I wanted to have a family with him. I knew it would be challenging to run my company and have a long-distance relationship, which was why I had a plan to back off working a little, take more breaks to come home. With Mom being ill, Chandra would understand.

Tonight, however, I was at Evansville local high school for a Christmas concert. A local charity was hosting it to raise money for some in-school health programs to give vision and hearing screening. It wasn't organized by my company, but there was a good chance of rubbing elbows with donors, and since I had nothing on my schedule, I decided it was a place I'd want to be. There was always time for schmoozing and picking up business cards which would lead to email addresses.

I recognized a few familiar faces in the crowd, namely Killian Waters, Callum's friend I met at the lodge. He was a character then, and I didn't doubt he would prove his colorful personality tonight. He approached me as I was getting myself a glass of champagne. I hadn't even taken a sip when he put a hand on my lower back and snatched the glass from me,

whisking me out onto a small dance floor where a few other couples swayed to the Christmas music.

“How is the lovely Ellen Davies this evening?” He set my glass on a passing tray held by a waiter in a black tux and put his hand up to mine. I rested my palm against his and draped my other arm around his shoulders. He was a handsome man, but not at all my type.

“Very well, Mr. Waters. This is a lovely event. I heard you played a part in it?” My sources told me he was the organizer, and even though it was a low-budget thing, he had done well. Chandra and I would have blown his decorations to bits, but for a local thing, it was well done.

“Yes, well, myself and the PTO here. We just want to make things good for the kids.” He swayed me around the floor, swooshing the full skirt I wore across the gymnasium. “It’s strange to see you here alone. I thought you were dating Callum.”

“Oh, well, that remains to be seen.” I chewed the inside of my cheek and sighed. “Tonight, I’m stag.”

“Ah, well, then I can enjoy more than one dance?” He grinned at me and pulled me more tightly against himself. I didn’t mind the dance. I did mind the physical contact.

“Killian, Callum may not have spoken for me yet, but my heart is his.” I smile at him as he twirls me one more time around the floor, and he nods his surrender.

“Well, then, you will be entirely enamored of the headliner tonight.” He winked, spun me back around until my feet stepped off the small dance floor, and kissed my hand. “I’ll be free if you change your mind.”

I felt a blush rise to my cheeks. Killian was a charmer for sure, but I loved Cal, and I couldn’t wait to see him again. So imagine my surprise when he walked across the stage wearing his sexy Santa costume. Thick black suspenders held up his red pants. the Santa hat dangled across the side of his head, and when he started singing, I swooned. My cheeks were hotter than the Fourth of July.

He belted out a rendition of *All I Want for Christmas is You*, and I couldn't stop grinning. He worked the crowd over, smiling and moving back and forth across the stage. His voice was so pure, his tone so clear, it sounded the way it feels to spread warm butter on toast. I found myself so taken with him that I couldn't look away. I knew he was a good singer, but this felt personal. He sang all of my favorites, even *Jingle Bell Rock*, and I ended up singing along too.

That's when Killian noticed. He was there by my side in an instant with his hand in the small of my back, guiding me toward the stage.

"What are you doing?" I giggled, resisting. I hadn't even had a chance to get a glass of champagne again, and he was ushering me onto the stage. I wasn't shy of public speaking, but a nudge of alcohol would have helped my nerves. The butterflies in my stomach wouldn't stop tossing.

"This is gold . . . just go with it." Killian walked me right out onto the stage and took the mic from Cal. "Ladies and gentlemen, Ellen Davies." He handed me the mic, and someone rushed out from behind the curtain to give Cal a new one. I smiled nervously and glanced at the crowd before making eye contact with Callum again.

Together, we sang *Baby, It's Cold Outside* to the cheers and applause of the crowd who seemed to be eating it up. I definitely had nothing on him. His voice was perfect, and I sounded like an old lady trying to stay relevant, but when he looked in my eyes, none of that mattered. It was like magic, the chemistry and heat between us. We made perfect harmony together, and Callum never pulled his gaze from mine.

When the song was over, applause went up and he smiled at me, breathless. Then a slow chant went up, "Kiss her, kiss her, kiss her." Callum blushed and shook his head, but I looked at Killian. He was pointing directly over our heads where mistletoe had been hung earlier in the day. It dangled there, tempting me, calling to my heart.

Callum looked up too, but the look on his face wasn't the same. He probably felt pressured and a little embarrassed, but

a Christmas tradition was a tradition. I snickered and shrugged, and he swallowed hard, his eyes scanning the crowd once before I pulled his gaze back to me.

“I love you, Cal,” I whispered and pulled him down for an explosive kiss. His hands rested on my hips. My arms draped around his neck. The heat in that kiss could start a thousand forest fires. My foot rose behind me. My heart stopped beating in my chest, and for a moment, it was just me and him. Tongues twirling together, lips parted to allow for maximum penetration, Callum claimed me as his own right there in front of all those people, and my heart had never felt more at home.

“Now, now,” Killian joked with a mic in hand, “remember, Dr. Andrews, this is a high school.”

The crowd both laughed and cheered, and I pulled away, blushing. I smiled at him, but instead of seeing love and hope in his eyes, I saw pain. His fingers held tightly to mine as I backed away, and I kept my smile there as the next song started and our fingers lost contact. His hand fell to his side. The mic rose to his lips, and he started singing *Silver Bells* as I walked down the stairs. Killian was there, taking the mic from me, but I didn’t stick around to talk.

I walked to the back of the auditorium and watched the rest of his show. He did such a fantastic job, and by the time he was done, I could tell he was tired. Part of me wanted to just give him space because clearly, there was something going on, but I needed to know what. I walked out into the hallway, passing the lockers and classroom doors on my way to the wings. The door was open, propped that way with a trash can, so I just walked right in.

Several folks wearing costumes of different Christmas characters bustled around hastily. I searched the dressing rooms and locker rooms, but I couldn’t find Callum. So when I ran into Killian backstage, I stopped him.

“Hey . . .”

“Oh wow, woman. You were fire! Did you see the way the crowd ate that up? That was hot.” His praise meant nothing to me. I wasn’t here to perform or wow his crowd. I was here to

schmooze, which I'd done very little of thanks to Callum's strange reaction.

"Thanks . . . Hey, have you seen Cal?" I bit my lip and folded my hands in front of myself.

"Uh, yeah, he ducked out. He left his shift to come here and had to get back fast." Killian narrowed his eyes at me. "He didn't tell you?"

"I didn't even know he was going to be here tonight. I thought he had to work." I sighed. In fact, I didn't know anything about him most of the time. He hadn't told me a lot, just his work hours. And since we were working such conflicting schedules, I didn't even know a good time to call him. It was obvious that any time I tried thus far was bad. "Thanks, Killian."

"Call me Kill." He winked at me and rushed off with a bundle of holly in his hand, and I leaned against the wall.

I wondered if Callum was avoiding me. But why would he be? I hadn't done anything to upset him. I had even laid off pressuring him to speak to Dad. So why this? Why now?

I sulked to my car and climbed in. My heart felt bruised but not broken. I was certain he had a good reason. Maybe he really did just have to get back to work. Or maybe I had already done it—ruined the relationship by being too pushy.

Callum

After five days of doubles in a row, I was exhausted—too tired to even turn on the lights when I got home this evening. It was after midnight, and I sat in the front room sipping a glass of bourbon and thinking about Ellen. The way my body sparked last night at that event when we kissed—urged on by the crowd and the mistletoe overhead—you’d have thought we were a match made in heaven. We were, but God, or the fates, or whoever tied that red string to our hearts, had gotten it wrong.

I tried not to be bitter. After all, I agreed with Allen wholeheartedly. Ellen needed someone who could travel with her and support her company entirely, at least until they planted a home office somewhere. Even then, she’d be traveling quite a bit, and I had a career to continue pursuing. When I started out, I thought of myself as a surgeon, someone who would save lives. But the more I escalated in responsibility and prominence, the more I’d put my eyes on directorship.

Now, as the head of internal medicine, I was only a few steps away from becoming a hospital director, and if Allen was correct and the board was looking at me as the new director when he retired, my dream and everything I’d been working for during the past five years was coming true. Not that a promotion in and of itself would ever make me turn Ellen away. No, I’d give it all up in a breath if I thought it would work.

But I knew the strain it would put on Ellen's relationship with her father. I knew how she would see me as remorseful about my career—I would be unable to hide it. She would make choices that jeopardized her future, and I couldn't let her do that. She deserved someone to love her the way she needed, and right now, she needed me to be strong and let her go. If it was meant to be, it would happen again. Right now was not the right time.

I sipped the bourbon harder, not even trying to nurse the drink. I was never a man to drown his sorrows in alcohol, but there was something different about this sorrow. Walking away from a fling was one thing. Walking away from someone I loved deeply was another. I knew it was what she needed and that in the end, she would see it for what it was—true love. But it didn't make it any easier knowing I would be tearing her heart out.

Sitting in that chair, I realized I was doing it again. Procrastinating the conflict that was inevitable had become my signature trademark. I had procrastinated telling her how I felt for years, even after her divorce. I had procrastinated making a move or pursuing her. I procrastinated telling her father that I was in love with her, and now I was procrastinating letting her go. I didn't want to let her go. I wanted a jealous grip on her heart so strong that even death couldn't stop us.

Love that was stronger than the grave, stronger than the doubts, stronger than the separation or fears. Love that burned so brightly no water could douse it, no flood could stop it, no winds could snuff it, and I wanted it with her for the rest of my life.

“Oh, Ellen,” I grumbled into my cup, realizing it was empty. More than anything, I wanted her to be happy, and I knew that she was happiest on the road, in her element.

The urge to drink the entire bottle snuck in and tempted me, but I remained seated, staring at the glow behind the curtain from the streetlights outside the house. She was probably sleeping soundly, dreaming of a future with me that wasn't going to happen. Meanwhile, I was sulking and brooding over that very fact and feeling gutted. When Allen

laid it all out for me, there was no way I could argue. He was so right. If I loved her that much and my love was true, I'd treat her exactly as her father did. I'd give her freedom to do as she pleased, but not only that, I'd protect her from her own poor choice because she would make it. She would leave the company and lose everything she'd worked so hard to build.

Headlights flashed on the window and lit the room for a moment. Then everything went dark. Someone had pulled into my driveway or the neighbors', so I sat and waited. The house was so dark it would appear like I was either out or sleeping. I didn't know who would come to my house this late at night except potentially, Ellen. Would she rendezvous here secretly against her father's wishes? Then again, I hadn't told her his wishes yet.

A shadowy figure walked past the front window on the walk leading to my door, and I saw the telltale waves of Ellen's dark hair. I knew it was her. Who else would it be? Everyone else would be sleeping by now, but she probably knew I'd be getting off work and missed me. I had basically ghosted her for the past few days, not purposefully. I was just so worn out from work and the charity event and practice that I had done nothing but eat, sleep, and work.

She knocked, and I sat perfectly still. I wanted to go to that door and open it up, beg her to run away with me, make love to her all night. Tell her I wanted to marry her and that she's the only woman in the world I'd ever thought of marrying. But I let my body sink farther into the seat and closed my eyes and ears against the intrusion of her knocking. And boy, did she knock. She stood there a full ten minutes, banging. But it wasn't until she called my name that I felt guilt wash over me.

I heard the emotion in her voice. For all I knew, she was standing there stark naked beneath a trench coat, wanting to make me the happiest man alive, and I was a fool. A fool for letting her seduce me at that hotel to begin with. Not because I didn't want or enjoy it but because of the inevitable pain. I knew what Allen would say, and I went along with her anyway. It was almost like I was leading her on the whole time.

She walked away. I saw her move past the window. Thankfully, she didn't peek in or I'd have been caught red-handed. I waited, but no headlights shone on my window, so I waited longer. She returned, this time only briefly, and then she was gone. I heard her car pull out, and I sat there longer, unable to rid myself of the weight of guilt that pinned me down.

When I finally got up the courage to go to the door and see what she did, I felt lightheaded. The alcohol was kicking in. Drowsiness pulled at my eyelids, and I opened the door to see a note stuck to it. I glanced up and down the street—no sign of her anywhere—so I took the note and retreated into my house, locking up behind myself. I didn't stop at the living room. I walked to my bedroom and then farther into my bathroom, and turned the light on.

Sitting on the edge of the bathtub, I opened the letter and read what she had written.

Cal,

I stopped by tonight to see you. I thought you said you were off work at midnight, but you must be working late. I miss you. Our schedules haven't been very conducive to meeting up, have they?

Call me when you wake up. I have something to ask you. I wanted your opinion. Chandra does too. She said she trusted your gut after the way you pulled off that event for us. Thank you again.

I love you,

~Ellen

My heart wrenched in my chest. There wasn't the slightest bit of sadness or ambivalence in the words she wrote. I didn't even sense any doubt, as if she thought nothing was wrong and that we were still moving toward the same idea, that we would be together. That broke my heart even more because it meant the onus was one hundred percent on me to break it to her. Allen wouldn't even soften the blow by talking to her himself.

I folded the letter and stared at it for a moment. It was clear to me that I had to have that conversation with her soon. I couldn't continue to lead her on, not when I knew what Allen wanted.

Exhaustion forced me from my seat. I shut the light off and left the letter on the bathroom counter, then undressed as I walked toward the bed. Morning would come early enough, and she would expect a call. When I didn't call her, she'd start to get the point that something was wrong. I couldn't tell her this news via a phone call, though. She deserved better than that. I had to do it face to face. That meant I'd have to find that schedule of her events she gave me a few weeks back and find out where she would be and when.

But now, I needed to let the bourbon lull me to sleep and pray I didn't have any dreams that would keep me lying awake for hours. God, why did this have to be so hard?

Ellen

I drove home feeling a bit disheartened. I knew Callum was off work. I had stopped by the hospital first, hoping to catch him, to no avail. So when I went to his house and he wasn't there, I felt hurt. It was a cold night, and the roads were slick. I took my time driving home because what else was I going to do now? I was wide awake, drank a Frappuccino a little too late in the evening, which was why I got the idea to visit him in the first place.

I parked and let myself in. The house was dark, but I heard Mom and Dad's television on in their room. I dropped my keys on the table by the front door and shed my coat, hanging it in the closet. Then I kicked my heels off and went to my room. I didn't have emotional energy to change, but I forced myself to. There was no sense wearing cute jeans and a frilly top just to lounge until the caffeine wore off. I left the clothes lie over the end of my dresser and pulled out a T-shirt and shorts and climbed into bed, turning my own television on.

The only thing worth watching were late-night reruns of shows that had aired in the fifties. I zoned out for at least three episodes of *I Love Lucy* before feeling my stomach churn. I hadn't eaten dinner, so the coffee wasn't sitting right. I felt a little nauseous. The longer I tried to ignore it, the worse it got, and I decided a snack would help. I was surprised to find Dad seated at the kitchen table enjoying a hoagie when I walked into the kitchen.

“Can’t sleep?” he asked before taking a huge bite. He did love his sandwich meats, which Mom and the doctor had both warned him were full of nitrates and bad for his heart. I had half a mind to remind him, but I knew what his response would be, so I walked past and opened the pantry door.

“Yeah . . . my stomach is a little upset. Too much coffee and no dinner.” I pulled out a box of crackers, my favorite chicken-flavored kind. “You?” I shut the pantry and walked over to the table and sat across from him as I opened the package. He shrugged as he chewed and looked at the bedroom door.

“Mom is having a difficult time tonight. She finally fell asleep, so I came out to drown my sorrows in a delicious assortment of deli meats.” He grinned at me and held the sandwich up before taking another bite.

I’d been so busy worrying about events and rosters and Callum that it sometimes slipped my mind that my mother had cancer and was undergoing vigorous treatment to shrink the tumors and keep them from getting worse. She always wore a smile, even when she was in pain.

“How is she actually doing?” I asked, nervous to hear the news. The doctors had given a good prognosis, but it was still nerve-wracking.

“She’s doing okay. The tumors are shrinking like they’re supposed to, and she is going to continue the treatments until they’re gone. She just gets sick from the chemicals and has a hard time breathing at night.” He looked sad. I wanted to take his pain away. I couldn’t imagine losing someone you’d loved for your whole life as your partner. Just losing a baby I’d been carrying a few months was traumatic.

“We got a huge donation,” I told him, changing the subject.

“Really?” he said, acting surprised, though something told me he’d already heard the news. Maybe Callum had told him or he knew the donor. His eyebrows rose, and he laid his hoagie down.

“Yeah, so it’s a huge thing. Uh, they want us to expand the company with it, not give it to a charity. Chandra and I have some great ideas.” I munched on a few crackers while he shared about how generous the doctors at Hudson were. I knew that. He didn’t have to tell me, but I loved listening to him speak. Even as a young girl, I’d ask him how things worked just to listen to him explain the mechanics behind how a garbage truck dumped or how a subway functioned.

“So, does this change your goals for the future of the company?” he asked, then took a bite. It was my turn to talk for a while. I put my crackers on the table and dusted my fingers as I started.

“Actually, yes. Chandra and I had planned to be settled and in one place within ten years, but this plan may accelerate that to two years. We only need to nail down a few things before we bring our goals to the Board. We want to have enough funds to hire folks to take our places on the road so we can branch out further and make more places a lot of money. Our focus would be in and around NYC, but we’d continue our global push, only with new heads doing the traveling.”

The thought of our new plan made me feel both excited and sad. I wanted to talk to Callum about it before anyone else, but he wasn’t home. I must have looked downtrodden because Dad asked, “Is everything okay?”

I looked up at him and sighed at his question. No, it wasn’t okay because there was a giant elephant in our home that no one wanted to talk about. Least of all, Dad. Something told me Callum hadn’t even spoken to him yet. I knew my father, or at least I thought I did, and if Cal had approached him about our relationship, Dad would have already given me the lecture and told me off.

“Have you spoken to Callum Andrews?” I blurted it out faster than I could take it back. I needed to know. Cal promised me, but I felt like maybe he wasn’t as reliable as he should be. Honestly, I wondered if he was secretly at some other woman’s house right now, having sex with her. If maybe he had other flings going on like he used to. But he swore to me that he was different, that being with me had changed him.

I wanted to cling to that new assumption, but fear needled at my conscience.

“Yes, actually. We had a talk the other day.” Dad rubbed his fingertips together, dropping breadcrumbs on his plate. He suddenly looked serious, even stern. He stood and picked up the plate and carried it to the sink and set it there, then turned and faced me.

“Well, what did you talk about?” I asked him as I turned in my seat to face him. My stomach tightened down and I felt the nausea growing. For whatever reason, my nerves had been so on-edge after the lodge event, I’d felt worn out and emotional about everything. I felt entirely incapable of having a healthy relationship after Roger, and I was allowing my fear and anxiety to affect my physical health.

“I told him I want him to stay away from you.” Dad was not mincing words.

“What? Why?” Everything was beginning to make sense now. Callum wasn’t just busy. He was literally ghosting me.

“Because, Ellen, you have built something not many women your age get to build. Look at everything your company has done, everything you stand for. You want to give that up to stay here?” Dad approached me, a look of compassion on his face. He crouched in front of me and took my hands in his giant ones and kissed them.

“I have no intention of giving up my company, Dad.”

“And Callum Andrews has no intention of giving up the directorship to go on the road with you. Who will be there to support you when you’re overseas and he’s in the middle of an important meeting?” He furrowed his brow. “Don’t you think you deserve a man who will go with you, build your company with you? Ellen, think about how things went with Roger. Your career got in the way.”

A knife slashed through my heart, plunging directly to the seat of where my deepest relational fear lived. So he really thought Roger left because of my job . . . I knew it. I felt the same way, and now Dad was trying to subvert this relationship

because he thought it would happen again. And I thought the same thing, had feared it for weeks now. Maybe even before I seduced Callum at that event.

“Excuse me,” I said, standing. I couldn’t sit there and pretend that his lack of faith in me didn’t hurt.

“Wait, Ellen. Listen . . .”

I paused, looking down on him a few steps away.

“I just meant that Roger wasn’t willing to be the husband he should have been.” Dad stood and walked over to me and took my hand again. His words had already done the damage. I didn’t need more heartache. “I never meant you failed, honey. I meant, when both people don’t have the same goals in mind, it’s hard to fight for a future together. Callum will never be the man you need. His goals and vision for his future don’t match yours.”

I nodded and pulled my hand from his grip, then walked down the hallway and into my room. I leaned against the shut door for a while, thinking of all the things I should have said to him, but the moment passed. Besides, he knew Callum far better than I did. They’d been friends for years now, and while Cal and I had history, it wasn’t ever deeply intimate. We had sex, and I fell for him, but I’d never asked him what his future plans were.

I crawled into bed and turned the TV off, then pulled the blankets over my head. I’d have been better able to handle this heartbreak if it really had been another woman, not Callum pushing me away. Did he honestly think I wouldn’t find out or that when I did, I wouldn’t be hurt? Was he avoiding me because of this, or did he intend to tell me at some point? Because I deserved an answer. And I deserved to know why he would never love me the way I deserved.

Crying, I reached for my phone on the nightstand and turned it off. The sun would wake me up, and the last thing I wanted was for Callum to call. Sure, I’d left the note for him, but now, I didn’t know what I’d say to him. If my father asked him to keep his distance, for sure, he would. I believe I’d

already been experiencing that sickening loyalty he had to my dad.

But I had to believe that Dad was wrong, that Callum would still choose me somehow, and that was the only thing that kept me going for the moment. Especially when the nausea returned and I found myself praying to the porcelain goddess that my heart wouldn't be crushed again. It couldn't happen. Not with Cal. I loved him.

Oh, God . . . help me . . .

Callum

I sat at the head of the conference room table midafternoon on Monday. All of the team was here, with the exception of Dr. Scriber, who took a personal day. I cleared my throat and began the meeting. “Good afternoon, everyone. We have a few cases to go over today, so let’s get started.”

I shuffled through the papers in front of me and pulled out the first case. “Patient 237, a 56-year-old male with a history of hypertension and hyperlipidemia, came in complaining of chest pain and shortness of breath. Initial tests show a blockage in his coronary artery. Dr. Michaels, you were the attending physician in this case. What was your approach?”

Dr. Michaels leaned forward and began to speak, but my attention was focused inwardly on Ellen. I never called her Sunday morning, and she hadn’t reached out either. Here it was Monday midday, and my gut churned with unspoken words.

I forced myself to focus on the discussion at hand, but my mind kept drifting back to Ellen. Was she avoiding me? Did she regret what happened between us? My thoughts were interrupted by Dr. Michaels’s response. “We started him on aspirin and heparin to prevent further clotting and scheduled him for a cardiac catheterization to assess the extent of the blockage.”

I nodded, making a mental note to follow up on the patient’s progress later. As we moved onto the second case,

my phone vibrated in my pocket. I glanced down and saw a text from Ellen. My heart skipped a beat as I quickly unlocked my phone to read the message.

Ellen 12:19 PM: Thought I'd stop by. I made cookies.

I felt a smile tug at the corners of my lips as I read Ellen's message. Maybe things weren't as awkward as I thought they would be. I quickly typed a response.

Callum 12:21 PM: Sounds good. Come on up to my office.

I tried to focus on the next case, but my mind kept drifting back to Ellen. The thought of her being just down the hall made it difficult to concentrate. After what felt like an eternity, the meeting finally came to an end. I quickly gathered my things and made my way to my office.

As I walked through the door, I was greeted by the delicious smell of freshly baked cookies. Ellen was sitting in one of the chairs, a plate of cookies in her lap. She was beautiful in her dress slacks and cream-colored shirt, but then, when didn't she look beautiful? She looked up as I entered and smiled. "Hey there," she said, her voice soft and inviting.

"Hey," I replied, trying to keep my voice steady. "Thanks for the cookies."

Ellen shrugged. "You never called." Her voice was cool and calm, but I saw apprehension in her eyes as I sat across from her and took a cookie from the plate. I took a bite and savored the sweet, melty chocolate. It's hard to top a cookie fresh from the oven, but the tension hanging in the air soiled the experience for me.

I could tell from the look on Ellen's face that she was here to discuss the thing I'd been avoiding. My heart skipped a beat as I tried to prepare myself for whatever she might say. "I know I haven't been the easiest person to deal with lately," she began, her eyes never leaving mine. "But I wanted to talk to you about what's been on my mind."

I nodded, taking another bite of the cookie as I waited for her to continue. "It's about my father," she said, her voice

barely above a whisper. “I know you spoke with him the other day, and I just wanted to know what he said.”

I could feel my stomach tighten as I tried to come up with a response. I knew Ellen had likely spoken to him about things now, and she probably knew what he’d said. She didn’t need me to tell her. The look on her face told me as much, so my response to this was crucial. I ate the cookie as slowly as I could without seeming to procrastinate and finally set it down on the plate. “He made it clear that he doesn’t think we should be together,” I said, my voice low. Recalling Allen’s exact words was impossible. Once he’d made himself clear, I didn’t remember anything else he said.

Ellen’s eyes dropped to the plate of cookies on my desk, and I could see her hands shaking slightly. “I don’t know what to do,” she said softly. “I love you, but I don’t want to disappoint my family. They mean everything to me.”

I reached across the small table and took her hand in mine. “I love you too, Ellen,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper, “but your father is right. You have worked so hard to build your company, and it would be wrong of me to come into your life at this point and have you give all that up.” My heart was breaking, but I knew it was the right thing. I would never allow Ellen to give up her dreams just to be with me.

Her eyes filled with tears as she pulled her hand away from mine. “I can’t believe you’re just going to give up on us like this,” she whispered, her voice breaking.

“I’m not giving up on us,” I said firmly. “I just think that we need to take a step back and reevaluate things. You’ve come so far, Ellen. I’m trying to make the right choice for your future.” That’s all I was thinking about anymore. Even the carrot dangled in front of me of receiving the directorship wasn’t a thought in my mind, not with Ellen sitting right in front of me. She was what mattered.

Ellen’s eyes flashed with anger I’d never seen her express before. She looked into the plate of cookies and said nothing for a few long seconds. Her expression contorted. I could tell

she was thinking about what I said. I had meant it with the best intentions.

“You know what, Callum? Maybe you’re right.” She stood and squared her shoulders. “It’s always best that other people, specifically men, make choices for my future.” I rubbed the back of my neck as I realized what she was saying. “Because I’m just a helpless woman who knows nothing. I can’t make decisions for myself or possibly know what my heart feels.”

“Ellen, please . . .” I sat forward, hoping to calm her. We needed to talk this over. Had she never heard of right person, wrong time? We just hadn’t found the right time, even though I knew there was no one else for me.

“I’ll talk to you later, Callum.” Ellen picked up the plate of cookies and walked out, and I was devastated. That had come out all wrong. She deserved so much better, and I knew it would hurt her, but I didn’t have a choice.

I raked a hand over my face and laid my head against the headrest on my chair. I knew I was dealing with this much better than her in this moment only because I’d had more time to adjust to the idea that Allen and Karen weren’t fond of my being with Ellen. She was hurting more deeply because she only just found out. I just didn’t see a way forward in the relationship anymore.

Ellen

“**S**o when we learned of the David Drees Center for Cancer Treatment, we knew we had to act. My partner Chandra Summers and I have spent years tirelessly raising funds for medical facilities exactly like this one for the past several years. We are honored now to provide this check for seven figures to a cause more worthy than any we could find.” I smiled as I gave my speech, but inside, my heart was churning. The fact that I stood behind this podium with the large sum for donation should have brought hope, but looking out across this crowd and seeing my mother’s pale face and sunken eyes, I felt drained.

Without our donations, patients exactly like my mother would be suffering. The event we put on last weekend had raised so much money for the facility, and it hit home. This was where Mom received her chemo and radiation along with consultations for further treatment. My hands shook as I gripped the podium and continued my speech, but in my heart, I was hurting so badly. It had been a week since I spoke to Callum. I hadn’t even seen him. And now, with the severity of Mom’s weakness staring me in the face, I really needed him.

I finished the speech and sniffled. I’d been crying, but the sniffles weren’t from that. I had felt ill for days now, and maybe I shouldn’t have come here with all these cancer patients waiting to hear how their treatment facility would handle the donated funds. I just didn’t feel like it was right for me to skip it when I was the organizer, so instead of sitting

with the group of onlookers, I excused myself to the office where the manager of the facility had prepared a place for Chandra and me to rest.

Being in this place was heavy. When Mom was first diagnosed, I was overseas. Dad had assured me that she was going to be okay, that they caught it early. But I'd been living in their house for weeks now, watching her health deteriorate. They still assured me that it was normal and that it was the chemo working, but I was faced with so many confronting fears, I didn't know how to respond. I thought I had Callum at my side, that he'd help me through it, but now he was gone, and I was alone again.

What if Mom died before I could give her grandchildren? What if I was alone on my wedding day, when I married—eventually—the man of my dreams? What if I never met that man and I was always alone? What if I got cancer and died? My mind was an overwhelming storm of negative thoughts and fears. I believed Mom would recover because the doctors said she would, but when faced with my own mortality, my list of regrets grew longer and my ache to stop time and have my heart's desire increased.

I sat in a red leather chair and rested my elbows on my knees, covering my face. What was I even doing with my life? I didn't want to travel the globe anymore, being alone, feeling like the deepest desires of my heart would never be met. I wanted a steady life with a man I loved and a baby. I wanted a baby. I wanted it with Callum.

Tears stung my eyes, and I blinked them away hard. That was never going to happen. I would never be a mother, not in the traditional sense. And thinking of adoption right now only made me feel more alone. Who would go through that with me? Mom was too sick to help. Dad and I didn't see eye to eye, and Chandra would mean well, but she had a tendency to mother me.

“You okay?” I looked up to see Dad standing in the doorway. He held a glass of champagne and leaned on the door jamb.

“I’m okay.” I tried to sound reassuring, but it came out sounding flat. I wasn’t okay. I didn’t know when was the last time I was, or if I ever would be again. Right at that moment, I was just existing.

“You don’t look so good. You’re pale. Are you feeling alright?” He sipped from the champagne flute and walked toward me. His hand pressed against my forehead and then he stepped back.

“I’ve had the sniffles and been a little nauseous. That’s why I came back here. With all those immunocompromised people out there, I didn’t want to risk giving them the flu. I’m sure it will pass.” I waved off his concern and tried to force a smile. Standing, I smoothed my hands down the front of my skirt and took a deep breath, which only started a round of coughing.

“I think you should go to the urgent care and get checked out. You know, pneumonia is going around right now. If you have that, you might spread it to Mom.” His face showed concern for me and fear at the same time, and I completely understood. Mom couldn’t risk being exposed to germs like that, not while she was on chemo. I knew it was the right choice, but I hated that he was the one to point it out. It made me feel like he was making decisions for me again and only reminded me of the conversation with Callum.

“You’re right. I’ll go over there now.” I grabbed my purse and coat off the coat rack near the door. Never had I wanted to escape a conversation more than this moment. There were so many feelings I’d kept bottled up. I knew if Dad pushed the wrong button, I would burst.

“I care about you, kiddo.”

I turned to look over my shoulder. “You know I’m not a child, right, Dad?” I wanted to scream at him, blame him for Callum’s not wanting me. But it wasn’t my father’s fault. Callum had a choice to make, and he chose my father and their friendship over the love we had. Dad stared at me blankly, so I walked out. If he only knew how he sometimes made me feel, maybe he wouldn’t be so controlling.

The line at the urgent care was long. I had to wait almost an hour to be seen. The entire time, my stomach roiled and churned. I didn't feel like I had pneumonia. I knew it was only the flu or a cold, but I wasn't doing this for myself. I was doing this for Mom. I could have just checked into a hotel for the next week until Christmas. But I wanted to be close to her since on the day after Christmas, I'd be leaving for ten months again. By then, hopefully, she'd be fully recovered and in remission, but for now, my heart wanted to be near her.

"Ms. Davies?" a nurse called from the door. I stood and took my things and followed her to an exam room. She took my blood pressure, pulse, and temperature, and I sat there for another thirty minutes before an older, stocky doctor with a balding head walked in.

"Well, it seems we have a lot of the same symptoms floating around here. The nurse says you're not feverish . . ." He carried an old-school clipboard with a chart on it. Some places hadn't switched to digital yet, and that made me feel better, honestly. I knew nothing would be missed if it had to be handwritten instead of typed or dictated.

"Yeah, well, I think it's just a cold, but my mother is undergoing chemo, and with the holidays, I just want to be sure." I sat a little straighter in the chair, and he nodded.

"Right, right . . . I'm sorry to hear about your mother. That's hard to take this time of year." If he only knew . . . "I'll tell you what. We need to do a bit of blood work. We can test for pneumonia and influenza A. Those are the two nasty ones going around. While we're at it, we will do a pregnancy test too, because the medicine for the strain of pneumonia is a little tricky for pregnant moms."

"Uh, no chance that I'm pregnant. I am basically infertile." I hated having to say that. It made me feel inept, like I was defective, less of a woman because my parts didn't function properly. It brought up so many bad memories and heartbreak.

"Ah, I see. Well, is there any chance at all that you could be? Any unprotected sex in the past six to eight weeks? Any

chance you missed a period?” He cocked his head sideways. I knew he was just doing his job, but it wasn’t necessary.

“Yes, I had unprotected sex, but I’m telling you. With my ex-husband, we had unprotected sex for years and I never got pregnant . . .” Except that once, and it turned out badly, but I didn’t tell him that. I knew my body, and I wasn’t about to get any hopes up that it would happen for me.

“Well, do you mind if we just run the test? We use the same blood sample. It’s sort of routine lately because this strain of pneumonia is deadly, and the medication can cause birth defects.”

I had no emotional energy to fight with him over it. Doctors could be so pushy, and rather than wasting time, I just waved my consent and he was off to collect a nurse for my blood draw. It took another twenty minutes to get my blood drawn, and if it weren’t for my mother, I’d have just gotten up and left. This place was so busy it made it painfully slow.

I sat in the waiting room waiting on the results of the test so they could use the exam room to see other patients and pulled my phone out. I went over every text message Callum had sent me for weeks. The heart emojis, smiles, the *I love yous*. I stopped short of stalking his social media, but my heart was aching. I missed him.

“Ellen?” The nurse who drew my blood stood behind the payment counter holding a few sheets of paper.

I stood and carried my coat and purse, expecting them to have a prescription for me. I just wanted to go home and soak in a hot bath. My feet hurt, my heart hurt, and it didn’t feel like Christmas at all. Or maybe it did—at least, the way the last two Christmases had been. Maybe this was the way all Christmases would go from now on.

“Yes?” I rested my elbow on the counter as I dug in my purse for my wallet.

“Ellen,” she said again, grinning, “You don’t have pneumonia.”

I looked up at her, confused. I didn't think it was, but why was that a smiling matter? "Okay? So it's the flu? Just a cold?" There were so many bugs flying around this time of year, who knew what I had?

"It's a baby," she said in hushed tones.

I stared at her for a second, letting the words sink in. She looked like she was about to cry and laugh at the same time, and I felt shock sinking in. "It's a what?"

"I heard you telling the doctor your struggles with infertility. I struggled with it too. It was such a miracle when I conceived my little Gracie May. Oh, gosh, I'm so happy for you. I hope you and the lucky father are going to do something incredible to celebrate." She handed me the papers as my brain remained paralyzed with shock. "Here are some good resources for you. You need to abstain from drinking alcohol this Christmas . . ." Her voice became white noise as tears welled up in a sudden explosion of happiness. My jaw dropped, and I covered my gaping mouth.

"Oh, God," I said, and I felt the need to sit down. Me? A mother? Finally? My knees went weak as the nurse pushed a wheelchair up behind me. "Oh, God . . ." I mumbled again, laughing and crying and laughing more.

I didn't even know what to think except—how do I tell Callum? Or maybe I just needed to leave and sort this out on my own. Yeah . . . I needed space and time to reflect and not stress. Later, when I knew what I needed, I'd tell him. Right now, I needed time.

Callum

Lights twinkled from just about every imaginable surface in my home. I had three trees erected and decorated thanks to a great fluffing company I used every year for this event. My Christmas Eve dinner was a hit every year, with dozens of people in attendance. I opened my home to nurses, doctors, and even a few homeless veterans I'd met over the years. It was a tradition. I loved it. But the past two years, Ellen hadn't come.

Before that, when she was married to Roger, she made an appearance but didn't stay. This year, knowing she was headed overseas again after such a rough patch for us, I planned things out in a way so that we'd be thrust into conversation. There was mistletoe hanging in every doorway. The seating arrangement put her parents and her directly next to me. I hoped to broach a conversation with Allen about Ellen and me having a second chance, doing a long-distance thing. After seeing how heartbroken she was a few weeks ago and the conversation over cookies, it was my last-ditch attempt to make it work. She wanted me to fight for her, and I decided to fight.

"Dr. Andrews, what a lovely party," Dr. Scriber said, arm hooked through her partner's. I shook both of their hands, but my eyes continued to scan the crowd for Ellen's face. She was, as always, fashionably late. Allen and Karen had been here fifteen minutes already.

“I’m glad you’re enjoying it.” I made small talk. No sense in being rude to the guests who were here simply because I was eager to see one who had yet to arrive.

“The decorations are fantastic this year. You really outdid yourself.” Mindy always came, at least the past four years while she worked under me, and I was thankful she had brought Jace this year.

“Wait until you get dinner. This year, we’re having some amazing roast beef. I decided on nontraditional because everyone will be eating ham and turkey tomorrow.”

We chatted for a few minutes about the menu and then the weather. I was going stir crazy when I excused myself with the explanation that I had to talk to all my guests, but I snuck away to call Ellen. Her phone went to voicemail, and I left one for her. She was probably still driving, but it was time to sit and eat.

I made the announcement that dinner was served as the catering staff carried the trays of food out. I watched all the guests take their seats as Allen made a toast, also a tradition. As hospital director, I always invited him to do it just before eating, and he never let me down. So when I sat at my seat and listened to what he had to say, I stared at Ellen’s empty chair with the sinking feeling that she wasn’t coming. She never missed this, only because of her miscarriage and divorce the past few years. Why would she skip it this year?

She had no clue what I had planned, to confront her father in front of all of our friends and coworkers. To pressure him to allow love to exist. I even looked up my vacation schedule and had it planned out. I could fly to be with her one week out of every quarter, and if she could do the same, that would be six weeks out of every year we’d be together along with her Christmas events here in Evansville. It would work. I knew it would. I just needed time to tell her.

Allen finished his speech and sat, and the feasting began. Bowls and platters of food were passed around the tables and people filled their plates, but mine—and Ellen’s—stayed empty. Karen stared at me as she took birdlike bites, and Allen

seemed to avoid eye contact. It didn't make sense. She was so adamant about us, that I should fight for her. Why wouldn't she come?

Not knowing what was going on made me so uncomfortable. I got my phone out at the table to call her again. This time, her phone was off, and it didn't even ring. I laid it on the table next to my plate and looked up at Allen. "Where's Ellen this evening?" I asked nonchalantly.

"Oh, she is off to Zurich already. She didn't tell you?" Karen asked me. She wore a fancy red and green wrap around her head. Everyone knew she was dealing with her cancer treatments, and she probably felt a little self-conscious about having no hair. She was still a beautiful woman, which is where Ellen got her good looks.

"She did not." I folded my hands in my lap and scowled. "I thought she didn't leave until the day after tomorrow." I thought she'd be here.

"She caught pneumonia." Karen clicked her tongue. "With my immunosuppressants, I can't be exposed to germs. Poor girl. She'll have to have Christmas alone, but we sent her gifts with her."

It felt like my chest was on fire, sucking the oxygen right out of my lungs, perforating my gut, paralyzing me. The thought of Ellen traveling alone at Christmas while she was sick made me feel so guilty. I should have called her and told her my plan. I thought I'd surprise her, that it would be a grand gesture. I never expected her to just run away. I wondered why she wasn't answering my phone calls. She was probably sleeping it off.

"I want to thank you again, Callum, for respecting my wishes." Allen cleared his throat and swallowed a gulp of his red wine, then dabbed his lips with a napkin. "Whatever you said to her got through to her. She was so excited about building this new branch of her business. I don't remember ever seeing her so happy. Thank you."

Ellen had mentioned expanding, though she hadn't gone into detail. I knew she wanted to talk about it one night, but we

avoided the topic because she was emotional. I felt like a jerk now. She left sad? Or if what Allen was saying was true, she left happy. But how did she leave so happy when she was so upset with me?

“I see . . .” I said, feeling sick in the stomach. I couldn’t tell him he was welcome. He wasn’t welcome. In my confusion and lack of awareness, I had followed my professional, ethical obligations instead of fighting for the woman I loved. She was supposed to be here tonight, not off somewhere else, alone and sick. It didn’t make sense how she left happy, either.

Or maybe it was all a ruse and she left really upset and didn’t want to tell me, so she just vanished. I was so upset I couldn’t sit there any longer. “Pardon me while I check on the dessert,” I told them, then I stood and walked away. I had all this angry, nervous energy buzzing through my body. My vision grew dark, pinpoints of light the only means to guide me. I was so upset my blood pressure was rising and I could barely see.

I took my phone and hid in the bathroom and called Ellen again, but this time I left a voicemail.

“Ellen, it’s Cal. Your dad said you were sick, that you left town. Baby, I’m sorry. I had this whole thing planned for tonight. Please call me. We can work this out. I have hours of this party left and I can’t think of anything but you. I love you . . .”

Never had I felt grief punch me in the gut so hard. I hid in the bathroom until someone knocked, at least ten minutes later. So when I was forced to leave my cave of sulking, I did the next best thing. I grabbed a bottle of hard eggnog and poured a large drink. I downed the first one completely, then refilled it and resolved to hide from Allen and Karen the rest of the night. When I got caught beneath the mistletoe with Mindy, she pecked me on the cheek and asked if I was okay. The damn nearly burst. I felt anger surge, but I bit it down. I lied and told her dinner wasn’t sitting right in my stomach, but I hadn’t even eaten a bite.

Finally, after hours of brooding and a final farewell to all my guests—including Allen—I locked up and shut the lights off. The cleaning crew would be by early to get started, and all I wanted was to go to sleep and not wake up until Ellen came back—if she came back.

I drank myself to sleep then had horrible dreams of Allen firing me because I jettied off to marry her. If she only knew what I had planned tonight . . .

Ellen

The waitress at the tiny café set our sandwiches in front of us. I was shocked at how small the portions were here. I had gotten spoiled by American cuisine over the holidays, and some places here in Switzerland were even more modest than most. Chandra sat across from me, all smiles. Since being here, we'd raised more than twenty million dollars for different charities and hospitals. It had been exhausting and emotional, and my morning sickness really took it out of me.

Lately, though, I'd begun to feel better. I wasn't as sick, though I did get tired a bit easier than before getting pregnant. But as the tiny life grew inside me, I made a pact with myself not to complain. Being a mother was a gift, and not every woman got to do it. After losing my first baby, I refused to think a single negative thought about this one even when I was suffering.

"What are you thinking?" Chandra used her straw to stir a packet of sugar into her lemonade. Nothing was as sweet here as back home, either. I tried not to think of home much because when I did, it always made me think of Callum. It was difficult, though, being in a different culture. I compared everything to home. So I thought of Cal a lot.

"What do you think?" I asked. I rested my hand on my growing stomach. I was showing a little, but not enough to merit maternity clothing yet. I stuck to elastic waistbands and

loose-fitting shirts. Eventually, though, it would be impossible to hide it.

“You should just call and tell him, Ellen. Not only does he deserve to know, but you’ll feel better about it. Hell, he might just have that talk with your father then.” Chandra picked up her sandwich and took a huge bite.

She made it sound so easy. Like telling a man that I’m having his baby two months after I found out wasn’t going to be challenging at all. Callum might not hate me, but he would be upset. And I didn’t know how to feel about him having that talk. “You think I really want him to finally get the balls to talk to Dad because I’m pregnant? That places all the value on the life growing inside me.” I shook my head. “No, if he’s going to do that, he needs to do it because he wants me. I’m not an afterthought.”

My heart sank as I stared at my plate of food. What had looked so appetizing on the menu only a few minutes ago now looked repulsive. This time, at least, it wasn’t morning sickness, just emotion. Callum did have a right to know I was having his baby, but I wanted that flame to be well and truly dead. Never again would I let a man control my heart because I cared for him so deeply I’d do whatever he wanted. That bit me in the backside for years with Roger. I wanted a baby, and when I finally got what I wanted, he hated it.

Callum hadn’t stuck around long enough to see me get what I wanted. And the saddest part of it all was that I wanted him. Not a job, not a kid, not an amount of money or some romantic getaway. I wanted him in my life, my partner. To love him, fight with him, make love with him, and do life with him. He had missed out.

“Well, I was just saying, you have a tendency to push people away when they get close. Are you sure you didn’t just run off because you were afraid that you’d fail?” She set her sandwich down and offered an expression of kindness. “When you’re afraid of failure, you do crazy things, Ellen. You think you’ll screw it up if you tell him you’re having his baby and he comes running. You feel like hiding it is the only way to

protect yourself from feeling weak or like a failure. But you're wrong."

Her words stung. Mostly because they hit home. I didn't think I ran for those reasons, but it was possible. Staying in Evansville and announcing a baby would have done exactly what I wanted. Callum and my father would have been forced to come to terms with the idea that we were now a family regardless of whether Dad approved. That would have strained their friendship for sure. I knew Dad would never fire Callum, but he could rescind the invitation to the directorship.

"Oh, God," I whimpered and folded. "Chandra, this is really messed up. I cannot deal with it." I placed both of my hands on the table, palms down. Callum ignored me, refused to face things like a man, and then, when I needed him the most, he treated me like a commodity. Like it meant nothing that we had connected so deeply. He tried to make my decisions for me and pushed me away.

"Okay, hun," she said, touching my hand. "We don't have to talk about it." She continued eating as I sat brooding and stewing over Callum. It was Valentine's Day. I should have moved on, found a cute Swiss man to take me to dinner. Meanwhile, I was still pining for a man who didn't deserve my heart. He threw me away like yesterday's leftovers.

When Chandra was done eating, she headed off. She had a day planned at the spa to prepare for her evening. While I'd been hiding in the hotel and obsessing over whether I made the right choices with my life, she was out on the town doing meet and greets, and at some point, she met someone. I hadn't met him yet, but with the way she talked him up, it seemed like she was happy.

I went back to my nest of misery and sulked some more, bringing the uneaten food home in a takeaway box. It went in the fridge and I went in a hot bath. I took my phone out and listened to all of Callum's voicemails again, starting with the most recent. He called me at least twice a week, though I only got the messages when I was here in the hotel. My phone was useless anywhere else. Europe didn't have the same cellular plans as the US.

I held the phone to my ear as I soaked. *“Ellen, I miss you. I know you’re getting these messages. I wanted to say again how sorry I am. I do love you. I’m still waiting for your call.”*

I pressed play on the next one . . . *“Ellen, I was thinking of you. It’s almost Valentine’s Day. If you were here, I’d take you out. We could go to that hotel in Yellow Springs where we rendezvoused after your event. Anyway, I was thinking of you. I love you.”*

“Ellen,” the next one played, *“we should really talk about things. Adults talk through issues. I’m ready to do that with you. I miss you.”*

“Look, Ellen, we both said things that hurt each other. I didn’t mean to upset you. I have to respect your father. I think maybe it’s something you need to talk to him about. I’m here if you want to talk.”

The more I listened to them, the more I began to doubt everything I knew about Callum. The newest messages were so sweet, so loving. But the later ones were sort of hurtful. They made me bristle and feel personally attacked at times. Until the one he left me on Christmas Eve.

“I can’t believe you didn’t come.” His voice was slurred, like he’d been drinking heavily. I tried to take the message with a grain of salt the first time, but the past fifty times I’d listened to it I just couldn’t. *“I had this whole thing planned out. You were supposed to be here. You just ran off. You pressured me to do the thing for so long, and I did it, and then you never showed up.”*

No, “I love you,” no “I miss you.” Just raw anger. I almost dropped my phone in the bathwater just so I never had to listen to those messages again. I knew I would, too—that in a moment of desperation, when I started to believe I had made the wrong choice in keeping the baby a secret, I’d get them out. I’d listen to him and torture myself and then remember how angry he was. I had to tell myself time and again that if he loved me the way he said, he’d have stood up for me. I would have had no problem supporting him in that, but he didn’t try.

He wilted at the first sign of frustration on my father's face. It was never my place to destroy their friendship.

I laid the phone on the edge of the bath and let a few tears escape. I did do the right thing, but eventually, I'd have to face up to it. My due date was in the fall, near the time I'd return home. I planned a trip in the far east. They had the best practices for new mothers and birthing policies. We would couple that with several big events and then return with a one-month-old baby to stay with Mom and Dad just before the Evansville event.

If Callum was lucky, he'd get to see me, but I still wasn't certain I'd tell him about the baby. It was too early in my pregnancy. I was too emotional, too unsteady. I had to grieve the relationship and then I'd decide. I had no intention of leaving my child at home for months at a time while I traveled for work, and I knew the company wouldn't be at the point where I could stay centralized yet. Not in only a year.

I closed my eyes and tried to let the warm water soak away my emotions, but my back hurt. It was only the beginning of aches and pains for my body. I squirmed and readjusted my position until I was just too uncomfortable, then climbed out and drained the water. I couldn't even down a bottle of tequila to drown my emotion. The only escape I had was sleep and a prayer that tomorrow, I would forget Cal existed and focus on the joy of my biggest dream being fulfilled.

All my hopes were pinned on this tiny human inside me. If that couldn't pull me out of this depression, nothing would.

Callum

Four months . . . that's how long I'd had to mull over every conversation, every interaction, every choice I made. Winter's death grip loosened, and the rains of spring rode in and washed away the dreary, dark sky. But they couldn't wash away my depression. I had dated plenty of women and moved on when they left for whatever reason, but this time, my brain and heart were wrecked.

I sat and stared out my office window, the nice corner office that used to be Allen's. It was mine now, just as he'd promised, and his new office as my advisor was so tiny and cramped, he only worked one hour per day in it. I was thankful that he stayed on to ease the transition when I took the role, but it made every day just a teensy bit painful for me, considering his relation to Ellen.

I hadn't brought her up once, though it wasn't like I didn't want to ask questions. I just knew what Allen would say if I got onto that topic and started prying. So I kept to myself for the most part and delved into the world of directorship. When Allen retired, his personal assistant left the hospital, so I was tasked with hiring one of my own. After weeks of searching, I hired Kendra, every bit as intelligent, charming, and beautiful as Ellen. Except, no matter how hard I tried to think of Kendra as more than a co-worker—and believe me, I tried—the only thing I could ever think of was how badly that would hurt Ellen.

“Dr. Andrews,” Kendra said, interrupting my thoughts. I looked up at her, but the weight in my heart today made it impossible for me to smile or even utter a response. Some days were like that.

“You have that three o’clock with Dr. Peters. He would like to meet you in the conference room today.” She had a way of saying normal everyday things in such a manner as to make them sultry or laced with sensual tones. I wasn’t sure if it was because she found me attractive—which she already told me she did—or if it was just the way she talked. And shame on me for having hired the woman when I knew how vulnerable my heart was after Ellen left.

“Thank you, Kendra.” I gathered myself and stood, but she didn’t leave the doorway. She stood watching me collect a few things and prepare to meet Allen. When I got to the door, she still didn’t move. I had the choice to move past her, which would inadvertently force my body to brush against hers, or I had to set personal boundaries again. This was the third time in a month.

“Kendra . . .” I said, then waited, and she winked at me.

“Doc, you’re lonely. You keep shooting me down when I flirt with you, but you’re not seeing anyone. Who is this mystery woman who has you so hung up you won’t live a little?” She took my tie and straightened it then splayed her hand on my chest and smoothed my shirt until I backed away.

“While I am certain there are plenty of directors who would be pleased to have such a beautiful woman as their assistant who was as attracted to them as you are to me, I can’t take you up on the offer.” I took a deep breath and blew it out. “Kendra, the woman I’m ‘hung up on’ is probably the most incredible human specimen you will ever meet. It took me thirty years to figure out what it meant to love someone, and at fifty-one, I think I know more than ever exactly what my heart wants.”

I nodded at the door, and she stepped out into the hallway. I followed, locking up. “But if she’s not around, how do you know you love her?” She twirled a lock of her strawberry

blonde hair around her finger and followed me down the hall toward the conference room.

“Because I know I would wait a thousand lifetimes to be with her, and that’s the only thing that matters. Now, if you’ll excuse me.” I left her standing near the entrance to her office and continued down the hall.

Not pursuing Ellen to respect the direct wishes of her father didn’t mean I had to start pursuing someone else. Not until my heart was ready, and it just wasn’t. I hadn’t even thought of sex or a fling with another woman in years, anyway, so throwing myself into something with a new person seemed pointless. Who wants to start over with someone new when you’ve already exposed your heart fully to the one you love?

Allen was waiting as I strolled into the conference room. He had a cup of coffee in one hand, his glasses riding low on his nose, and I saw a second paper cup with a plastic lid next to him near an empty chair. He looked better now, fresher than he had in months. The stress of this job had worn him out, and struggling with Karen’s treatments had taken a toll too. As a friend, it was good to see him doing better. As the estranged lover of his daughter, not so much.

“Afternoon . . .” he said, looking back at his paperwork. I knew we had to discuss the way our operations department was doing their annual procedure audits, but I had other things burning in my heart to talk to him about.

“Afternoon,” I said, sitting. I laid my things out in front of me and waited as he used a pencil to jot a few things down on his notes. When he looked up, he took the glasses from his face and hung them from the neck of his polo.

“You’re really getting the hang of things around here, Cal.” With his position of authority over me no longer a thing, he spoke to me in a much more relaxed demeanor. At times, I felt our friendship had been irreparably damaged. Other moments, I felt like we were back in our early days when he confided in me about everything.

I figured I'd start with small talk. These meetings were always staunch and cold. We used to have dinner as friends at least once a month, but when Karen got sick, that changed. I liked to think it was because of her cancer, not because of what happened with Ellen, but I knew better.

"I'm trying. How's Karen?" My intent was to keep it light but make it personal on purpose. I didn't want him to think I was prying about Ellen, so asking about his wife was the first step in making him comfortable with me. He loved Karen so much and always spoke about her.

"She's actually doing very well. Doctors say as long as her monthly scans go as planned, they will pronounce her in remission in July." He beamed with pride. They'd been married more than thirty years, and it was great to see them happy. Especially when I knew how hard-fought happiness was for couples. What I wouldn't give to have that happiness with Ellen back. I missed her so desperately. I just acted too late, and she left.

"That's amazing. I'm so very happy for her." I hoped he would elaborate, maybe indicate that Ellen was going to come for a celebration this summer, but he remained quiet, hands folded across his stomach. So I said, "And how's Ellen?"

My hands felt jittery, my heart racy. It was the first time I'd said her name out loud to her father since that dinner on Christmas Eve when she never came. I didn't know what to expect. Here it was mid-May, and we hadn't even brought her up again.

"You know . . . same old . . ." His response was so vague it demanded that I ask more questions, but the way his brow furrowed slightly as he said it told me to back off. So she was being secretive, or he was. Either way, Allen was a dead end. And I didn't know Karen well enough to call her asking for information. She'd know I was just snooping the instant I called.

"That's good to hear," I said, turning my attention to the paperwork in front of me. I wanted to ask how she was, if

she'd called, if she would visit. I wanted to know why she left, why she never said goodbye, if she still loved me.

But I swallowed it all and concentrated on the words on the page. I gave him my word and I couldn't go back now. She made her choice to leave, and I knew it was the wrong one, but she didn't know what I had planned to do at dinner that night. Now, she never would because the distance between us only made it obvious that I had hurt her too badly. I lost her, and it was because I procrastinated and chose my career.

God, Ellen, would you ever forgive me?

Ellen

The pain was so intense I could barely breathe. The nurse, a cute Asian woman with a choppy bob, held the iPad up so I could see Mom's face. "Breathe, Ellen. Take a deep breath. It's going to be okay, honey." Mom's voice was barely audible over the flurry of conversation and movement in the room. I knew I was close. I'd been having the urge to push for a few minutes.

"Mom, it hurts," I whined, rolling onto my side and rocking back and forth. Searing heat and stabbing pain shot through my hips and stomach, making me tense and yelp. I could do this, though. Motherhood was something I wanted more than anything my whole life.

"It just takes a little bit, baby, and then you'll do it. You are so strong, Ellen." Mom's voice was reassuring, and I knew she was trying, but no matter what she said, it didn't erase the pain. My little one was coming so fast they hadn't had time to give me the epidural I requested, and now they were preparing for delivery.

"Okay, Ellen," the doctor said. He patted my knee. "It's time to push, okay? We go push and count to ten, then deep breath and you push again." His broken English was tinged with an Asian accent. I chose Tokyo for their advanced medical facilities, and I was thankful. The doctors here were the best in the world, and right now, I felt helpless. I nodded at him and screamed in pain, and they helped me roll to my back.

“Hey, baby, you’re doing great,” Mom coached from the video call, and I grabbed my knees and breathed. The doctor counted me off, and I sucked in a deep breath, tucked my chin to my chest, and pushed as hard as I could.

I thought my brain would explode. Pressure built in my ears. My head felt like a balloon blowing up inside it, and there wasn’t a single cell in my body that wasn’t on fire. I pushed to the count of ten, then sucked in another breath and did it again, and again. The doctor spoke to me the whole time, Mom too, but I heard nothing except the counting.

Until I heard a tiny cry, and I collapsed back onto the pillow, sobbing with relief. It was over, and it was just beginning all at the same time in the tiny screams of the new life I’d just birthed. I shut my eyes and sobbed, not even caring what was going on in the room. My body was exhausted. I’d stayed up the entire night with a backache before coming in, and labor progressed in under three hours. It couldn’t have been normal at all.

“You did so well, honey. You call me when you have a moment, okay?” Mom’s voice faded, and I let my eyes stay shut as the nurse muttered something about ending the call. I breathed heavily, catching my breath, until they laid a tiny bundle of writhing screeches on my chest.

I looked down at my baby, a boy who looked exactly like Callum. It had been hard enough getting the courage to tell my parents about the baby. I thought Dad would be angry with me or disown me, but he was thrilled for my opportunity to become a mother. He understood the child was Callum’s and promised to keep my confidence. In the meantime, I had to face the fact that I’d have to tell Callum eventually. He lived in the same hometown as my parents, where I’d visit every year for the holidays. It was inevitable that he would see me with a child. I just never thought it would be this obvious that it was his.

“You not look so happy,” a nurse said, using a wash rag to wipe the vernix coating from his skin.

“I’m so tired . . .” I mumbled. I was, too, though I was deeply emotional. Having this tiny little boy in my arms was a dream come true, but I was depressed. I thought the more time that passed, the more I’d forget Callum and just be able to move on emotionally. But I was wrong. The more time that passed, the more I missed him. The more I realized he was the only thing I wanted, that I’d made a mistake in leaving and not fighting harder.

“Well, we get you to nurse the baby and then you can have a rest.” She smiled and used the controls on the bed to adjust it to a more upright position. The plan was to nurse long enough for the hormones released to encourage more contractions for delivering the afterbirth. I didn’t realize how difficult this process would be.

It seemed that seconds took hours, but I nursed my little boy and finished the birthing process before my eyelids began to droop. They put him in his bassinet, swaddled tightly, and let me nod off after they cleaned us both up. I dreamed of Callum walking in, infuriated and ready to take my son away.

The dream startled me awake after only about an hour of rest, and I opened my eyes to see Chandra leaning over the baby’s bassinet. She cooed softly and hummed a little, touching him lightly, and I cleared my throat.

“Oh, gosh, I didn’t mean to wake you.” Instantly, she moved away from the bassinet and sat on the edge of my bed. I noticed a bouquet of flowers on my bedside table and she took my hand. “You should rest.”

“Bad dream . . .” I mumbled and rubbed my head. I probably looked like a complete wreck. Not only had I gained at least thirty pounds, but I hadn’t taken time to make myself presentable. I just crashed. I knew my hair was messed up, and my eyes probably had bags under them.

“Need to talk about it?” she asked, strumming the back of my hand with her thumb.

“Just the same . . . Callum being angry and taking the baby.” I pushed myself up to a more upright position and rubbed my eyes. Chandra had been here for me every step of

the way. She opted not to be in the delivery room with me as a means of protecting herself from being terrified of birth. I didn't blame her. It was awful.

“Well, it was just a dream. I'm here, and I'm not letting anyone get within a ten-foot radius of this baby.” She grinned. “Have you picked a name yet? He's adorable. Looks just like his father.”

I knew she would say that as soon as she saw him. It's what everyone would say as soon as they saw him. “No, I've been too busy with work and depressed over Callum to even think of names. I think there is a seven-day period to think about it before I actually have to file his birth certificate.” I had tossed around a few ideas, but nothing felt right. I felt like I was missing a part of my soul, and until I had that missing piece, I didn't know how to function. How was I supposed to name a child when I felt like this?

“You have to tell him, Ellen.” Her gentle urging hadn't gone unnoticed for the past nine months.

It was September first. I was in Japan. I had exactly ten weeks until I would touch down in New York state and spend two months with my parents. There was little chance of avoiding Callum the whole time. Even if I allowed Chandra to take over the fundraising event which was largely planned by me this year, I would still bump into him at the hospital, at the very least. Or he'd come looking. As long as Dad held my confidence thus far, I knew he would be completely shocked at the discovery of our having a baby, and I just wondered whether I should even go home.

“I'm not ready,” I mumbled, my voice just above a whisper.

“You've been 'not ready' for months. You have to say something. It's only right. Callum loved you so much, Ellen. Everyone could see it. He's going to understand. He will be thrilled.”

I pulled my hand away from her. “You know, I thought that too. That he really loved me, but he never fought for me. Who does that?” My hurt started to seep out in my tone and I

couldn't stop it. "Because if he wanted me, if he truly loved me, he would have stood up to my father. Instead, he chose that friendship over me."

Chandra stood and sighed softly. "I don't see it that way." Her eyes met mine in a piercing stare, and I knew I was going to get it now. She'd been holding back, biting her tongue. I watched her month after month try to console me, all to no avail. "I think he loved you enough to let you go, and instead of choosing him, you ran. You were scared that you'd mess it up and you got hurt that he didn't do things the way you thought they should be done. Instead of telling your father to buzz off, you decided if Callum didn't hold all the pieces together, neither would you. And you did what you did because Roger hurt you."

Her words were a hot iron to my conscience. I cringed and closed my eyes. The baby whimpered then cooed, and I felt my heart pang with pain. She was right on every count, and I knew it for months but I pushed those thoughts and fears away and pressed on with the job. I curled my hands into fists and took a deep breath to keep myself from crying. I'd done enough of that over the past few months.

"I love you, Ellen." Chandra sounded closer. When I opened my eyes, she was leaning over me. She pressed her cheek to mine in a hug and squeezed my shoulder. "You get your rest. As soon as the doctors clear you and the baby for travel, we'll move on to our next city and host more events. Please don't think I was trying to scold you. You just need to see that there are two parts to every disagreement."

I nodded, but I knew if I spoke, tears would come too. I watched her walk away and leaned forward, pulling the bassinet closer to my side of the bed. I watched the baby sleeping peacefully. Everything about him screamed Callum Andrews. Even his long, spindly fingers. Oh, God, what his fingers did to me so many times, and the way they tangled my heartstrings too.

She was right. I needed to face the music, but this wasn't something I could do on the phone or even a video conference call. I needed to plan a visit with him while I was home over

the holidays. And I needed my parents' support. It was likely far too late for a relationship, but he deserved to know about his son.

The iPad lay on the table next to me, and I decided to call Mom. It was better to get the news out of the way now and give Dad time to cool off before I came home. It was a few months out, and that should be plenty of time to adjust to the idea that Callum would know about their grandchild, even if we never dated. I gave up that hope a long time ago when he stopped calling.

Callum

Normally hosted in mid-November, this year's event was not only late, but entirely different from last year. I spent weeks anticipating the announcement of it. I hoped it would be a weekend event similar to the lodge, but the flyers were sent out and indicated it would be only a one-night event like previous years. That took a bit of wind out of my sails, but I still refocused them and managed to keep hoping for a grand reunion with Ellen.

It was a black-tie event at the city convention center, the largest event numbers-wise that I'd ever seen. They had to do something to top last year. With almost half the town in attendance and multiple ballrooms with silent auctions and art exhibits donated by local artists, I found myself overwhelmed as I meandered through one room after the next.

Folks really decked themselves out in their finest apparel. There were so many tuxedos, it looked like a royal wedding, and some of the gowns were so elegant, I'd have thought I walked into a fashion show. But there was one gown I had yet to see, not that I knew what she'd be wearing, but I expected it to be just as jaw-dropping as last year's event in Yellow Springs where she rented a quarter of a million dollars in jewelry.

I searched, sifting through every room, every lobby, down every corridor, but there was no sight of Ellen. I hadn't even seen Chandra, but I knew they had to be here. This event was

put on by their company, and I didn't assume they'd hired anyone new yet. Doubt began to spring up as I started through the rooms for the second time, checking each face for a trace of familiarity.

I saw Killian and Ben, but I avoided them. I didn't want my attention to be taken for even a split second because in that minute moment, I'd miss her. So I averted eye contact and pushed through the crowd. For thirty minutes, I searched. It felt like Christmas Eve last year all over again, waiting for her to show up, only for that bubble to burst at the dinner table when I learned she left the country without saying goodbye.

I had almost given up when I saw Chandra in the hall. She wore a simple black suit, not at all the extravagant outfit I expected. She looked stressed, wrinkles across her forehead deepening as she spoke to a dark-haired man whose back was to me. When she spotted me, I saw something wash through her features, and then she smiled.

"Cal," she said, approaching with outstretched arms. "It's so good to see you."

She embraced me briefly, and I felt her stiff posture. I took it as an indication that I might have been correct. Ellen was likely not here.

"I'll catch up with you in a second," the man said, kissing her on the cheek before hurrying away.

"Sorry, that's my fiancé. He's helping tonight." She folded her hands like a proper lady and cocked her head. "What can I do for you?"

It should have gone without saying what she could do for me. My heart hammered in my chest with unspoken questions. Where was Ellen? How was Ellen? Did she miss me? Was she staying for Christmas this year? Instead of asking what I wanted to ask—why did she leave so suddenly? I asked, "How are things?"

My tone was cold and tight. I didn't mean it to be. It was the result of holding back my real questions. Chandra looked

tense for a moment, then her shoulders drooped and she shook her head and stared at her feet.

“She’s not here, Cal. She didn’t come.” Her chin rose slowly until her gaze met mine. “I tried to tell her to come, but she is confused and . . . well, frankly that’s all I can say because the two of you just need to speak to each other. I can’t get involved.”

So my suspicions were correct. Ellen really did skip this year’s event again. Months of anticipating and waiting and looking forward to this exact moment felt like a vacuum sucking the air out of the room as it flew away with Chandra’s words. I didn’t even need to ask the question that came to mind because I knew the only place Ellen would ever stay when she came home for the holidays was with her parents. And that’s where I needed to be right now. Because the questions stirring in my heart demanded answers, and I had waited long enough.

Rather than just rushing off and being rude, I asked Chandra, “How are you doing?”

“Oh, you know, life goes on, business is good. I met and fell in love with a wonderful man whom I will marry in the spring.” Her eyes lit up when she talked about her fiancé, and I wished to God that I could talk about a fiancée I had. That I could talk about Ellen the way she talked about the man she was in love with.

“That’s so good to hear. I’m so happy for you. I wish you all the best of luck. Now if you don’t mind excusing me, there’s someone I have to speak with.”

I started to walk away when Chandra called my name. “Uh, Cal . . .”

I turned to see her arm extended, a business card pinched between her fingers. “This is her number. I assume she is the person you need to speak with?” I reached out and took the card from her hand and smiled.

“The only reason I came tonight.” I looked down at the rectangle of cardstock in my hand embellished with dark blue

ink and Ellen's name in large, swirling cursive.

"And a huge donation, right?" she asked and grinned.

"Of course, only the largest for my two favorite women." I winked at her, suddenly filled with hope again.

"Hey, Cal?" she called as I turned again.

"Yeah?" I asked over my shoulder.

"Good luck."

I walked out the door into the brisk December air, though it wasn't as cold or snowy this year yet. I had no intention of calling Ellen—yet. A surprise visit was a better idea, even if it was to her parents' house ten days before Christmas. I didn't care about what Allen thought anymore. He wasn't my boss, wasn't even my advisor anymore, and given how we'd drifted apart—likely because of the way things happened between me and his daughter—I felt like we weren't even friends anymore.

I climbed into my car and drove straight to Allen and Karen's. The lights strewn in trees and wrapped around streetlights and trees were festive, but in all the glitz and glamor of the holiday decorations, the only thing I wanted to see was the smile on Ellen's face when I walked up to the door and knocked. It might not be a "God, I missed you" sort of smile, but she was always polite. If I was going to dig myself out of this mess and fix what broke last year, I had only two weeks to do it.

I turned down their street and had to stop for a neighborhood cat taking its grand old time crossing the road. I tried not to let my anxious anticipation make me too eager to be patient. The urge to see her—need, maybe—had me pushing the gas pedal to the floor to speed up. I probably looked like a lunatic or something, and I didn't even care. Ellen was only a few blocks away and I missed her so badly.

I pulled up in front of their neighbor's house. There were too many cars from a party across the street to park in front of theirs, and her rental car was in the drive. I didn't bother locking up, either. I climbed out and shut the door and moved up the walk with long strides. I was so excited. I couldn't

contain the smile. I would finally get the chance to tell her all the things I should have said a year ago, all the things I should have told Allen. I prepared what I would say as I hurried up the steep driveway and around the corner of the house, but as I passed the front window where their Christmas tree glowed with flashing lights and silver and red decorations, I looked into the window.

Ellen stood next to the couch, her form a little thinner than I remember. She held something in her arms, though her back was to me, so I didn't see clearly what it was until she turned. She handed a baby—a tiny baby only a few months old, at the most—to her mother. Karen accepted the bundle with a huge smile, and Allen's phone flashed as he took a picture.

I stood frozen in place, not because of the cold—because of the shock. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Ellen had a baby? I glanced around. There were no other people in the room and no other cars in the driveway. Was it her baby? Was it my baby? I stood there like an idiot, counting the months on my fingers. If she got pregnant in November, that would make her due date mid-August . . . Unless she got pregnant mid-December . . .

My gut sank like a lead balloon. Had she hidden a pregnancy from me? Is that why she left town so quickly? Was she with someone else at the same time? Was she pregnant before she met me? Did she sleep with someone only weeks after leaving?

Question after question bombarded my thoughts, only these ones were more painful than the ones that had occupied my mind all year. I backed away slowly, returning to my car with a dagger in my heart and cement for shoes. Even the wind didn't feel the same, more like it was trying to steal my breath. I sat in the car for a few minutes, staring at the lights on their tree flashing on and off.

Little by little, my self-awareness returned and I realized I was shivering. My breath crystalized in the air and formed a layer of frost on the inside of my windshield. This couldn't be happening. It didn't make sense. Ellen wanted a child so badly. She would have told me. Wouldn't she?

I could sit here and torture myself or I could just ask her. I pulled out the card Chandra gave me and entered Ellen's new contact info into my phone then sent her a message.

Callum 8:27 PM: Hi, Ellen. It's Cal. Chandra gave me your card. I didn't see you at the event. I'd love it if we could catch up. I think we have a lot to talk about.

I thought about sending more, telling her I knew about the baby, but I didn't want to scare her off again. If it was my child, she had a perfectly good explanation for why she hid it. And if not, it was none of my business, except that I would raise that baby like my own if she gave me the chance.

I just prayed two things—she would give me the chance and she wasn't seeing someone else.

Ellen

When I got the text last week that Chandra had given my number to Callum without my permission, I was upset at first. Then I realized if he went to the company site, he could have gotten it that way too, so I had to let her off the hook. She was being a good friend, and honestly, a good godmother to my son. I didn't end up responding to that text, or the slew of them that followed over the next few days, and I hunkered down at Mom and Dad's, not even leaving for errands. Chandra handled everything for me as I requested.

So much had changed since I left last year, and most of those changes happened since September when I gave birth. I had new confidence in my career and in being a mother, and I realized that in spite of still loving Callum deeply, I would be okay without him. Which is why when he asked me to come to dinner with him at the lodge to catch up, I said yes. I needed closure now.

Chandra almost had me convinced to tell Callum about the baby, but once that little boy stole my heart, I realized I couldn't do it. I couldn't leave him here for visitation while I was abroad, then come back and be forced to interact with a man I still loved, watch him move on and fall in love with someone else, all while another woman helps raise my son and I am thousands of miles away. No. It wasn't happening. The best choice for me was to leave him out of the picture as long as I could get closure.

So I made the long drive up the mountain to the lodge and braved the snowy roads. It wasn't a horrible storm, but when northeasters hit New York, they always dropped snow. This one wasn't bad, though, and I made it up with only a slight delay. When I walked into the lodge, I was greeted by familiar staff and saw a few new faces. The office manager who knew me growing up made it a point to come say hello as I walked toward the bar-slash-restaurant in the back.

My nerves were on edge too. I hadn't even spoken to Callum in a year other than to reply to his text that I'd be here tonight at seven. I had played and replayed this moment in my mind at least a dozen times a month. What would he say? How would he react to seeing me? How would I feel? That question was answered as the butterflies stirred in my belly.

The host led me through the dining room and right to the same table where Cal and I had shared dinner during that event. He stood as I approached, and he took my breath away. He wore a tailored black suit, a dark blue dress shirt, and a black tie. I forgot how strikingly handsome he was. And I felt entirely underdressed in my cream slacks and snow boots. At least my sweater was cashmere.

"Cal . . ." I acknowledged him with a nod as the waiter pulled my seat out. His eyes searched me, as if he were trying to remember every detail of my face.

"Ellen." Callum waved the waiter off as soon as he sat. I felt like they must have had a previous conversation about our needing privacy the way the man darted away. I settled into the seat more comfortably and slid my coat off my shoulders, letting it drape across the back of the chair. "How are you?"

I wanted to tell him I was extremely nervous but I didn't. "I'm okay. Glad to be home for the holidays." I picked up the napkin wrapped around my silverware and unrolled it, then left the silverware on the table and draped the black cloth over my knee.

"Hmm, yes . . . Happy holidays." He mimicked me, draping his napkin over his lap. If this wasn't the most

awkward conversation I'd ever had with him, I didn't know what was.

There wasn't even a menu on the table for me to look at, and I knew Gus—the kitchen manager—updated the menu quarterly. I started to wonder if we were really here for dinner or if Callum had only wanted to get me here to talk. I knew some amount of talking would be done, but I came hungry.

“So, where's the menu?” I asked him, glancing at the host station.

“Oh, I took the liberty. I ordered the same thing we ate last year at the event.” He smiled and folded his hands together.

“How did you manage that? Gus changes the menus—”

“Called in a favor.”

My heart warmed at the romantic gesture. He was trying to relieve that night for some reason. Was it that night he'd fallen in love with me, or known he was falling for me? I sat in a velvety feeling of nostalgia that made my cheeks warm and I had to look away. My feelings for him were too strong. I shouldn't have come here.

“So, what's new? I mean . . . the company? Your personal life?”

I thought instantly of my son, at home, probably sleeping in my mother's arms. His rosy cheeks and button nose were too much like his father's to deny it. That was new . . . I had a baby, but I bit the words back.

“Uh, well, we had that major donation. We have a new philanthropic branch opening to the company. We are looking for a medical director now to lead the charge. We will be providing advanced medical care to third world countries.” Keeping the topic focused on my professional growth was what needed to happen. Anything to avoid personal questions.

“That's incredible. And you're doing that with the major donation you got last year?”

That's what I said . . . was he not listening to me? I nodded and picked up the small glass filled with ice water and sipped

it. My mouth was dry, my stomach tied in knots. A tiny voice inside my head told me I should never have come here yet again, and I forced it away. Callum and I had chemistry and connection, so why was I wishing I could leave?

“That and a few other things.” I set the water glass down and met his gaze. “Why did you ask me here? I mean, it was clear to me last year that you have no intention of pursuing me the way I need. I’m curious.”

His expression darkened, clouds shadowing his forehead and swirling in his eyes. He flicked his tongue over his bottom lip and then set his jaw. I watched his shoulders tense, then his hands clench, and my fight or flight mode kicked in. Had Chandra said something to him? Was he upset with me? I had only just gotten here and I knew this was a huge mistake.

“Ellen, I need to ask you a question and I need you to be honest with me.” I didn’t like that tone. Why did he use that tone?

“Of course.” My brain went into a panic trying to keep my body in check, pulse racing, fingers shaking so badly I had to fold them in my lap. It was all I could do to sit still.

“Did you have a baby?”

My heart stopped beating in my chest and felt like a lump of Santa’s coal deposited there specifically for me because I was a liar and a sneak. The only way he’d have known that is if Chandra told him. Part of me wanted to deny it, but I could never make her out to be a liar. After having the baby, I had worked so hard to lose the pregnancy weight so when I came back, there would be no way for him to know unless he saw me with my son.

I thought carefully about how to respond. He might know about the baby, but there was no way for him to know it was his unless Chandra said so, and I knew she’d never stoop that low.

“I did,” I said abruptly, but even as I did, I felt my stomach churn worse than the morning sickness that plagued me for weeks this time last year. There was no getting out of this

conversation now. I was stuck. He knew and he wasn't going to back down now.

“Uh . . .” He raised his eyebrows and tilted his head, then sighed. When he looked back up at me, it was with a hint of anger or pain in his eyes. I couldn't tell which, but either one felt like it threatened to drown me. “I mean . . .”

He hem-hawed with his words until bile rose in my mouth and I had to drink water to rinse it away. If I sat here a single second longer, I was going to vomit on him. Without thinking, I stood so fast my chair tipped over and the whole table shook as I bumped into it. I snatched my coat and ran. I didn't slow or even look over my shoulder until I got to my car. The parking lot was slippery, and I almost took a spill, but I made it and climbed in as Callum appeared in the front doorway to the lodge. His eyes scanned the parking lot as I started my car and peeled out.

It was all happening wrong. I was supposed to be the powerful one, the strong one. I was supposed to have the higher ground and the secret. He hurt me. He refused to fight for us. I kept the secret because my heart couldn't handle what that meant, that I had a child with a man who didn't actually want me, and now the tables had turned.

I zoomed out of the parking lot and onto the mountain road. Snow fell in large flakes across my windows, and the wipers did little to keep it clean. I turned the defrost on full blast, but my car was so cold all it did was freeze some of the snowflakes to the window, which only made ice start to form there. Curve after curve, I wound my way downward until my car slipped on a patch of ice. The back end came around, my headlights washing across the mountainside, until the back tire got caught in a drift and pulled me off the pavement. Once one tire went, the whole car dipped off.

My body jostled around in the seat and my head smacked against the window hard. I had forgotten my seatbelt in my panicked state, and the inertia tossed me to and fro. When the car came to a rest, I found myself breathless and in a good amount of pain. My head throbbed, and I blinked my eyes several times, but in the dark night, with the lights of my car

shining upward toward the sky, I saw stars—or maybe snowflakes falling—until my world went dark.

Callum

I went after her—thought I could catch her. But by the time I got to the door, she was peeling out of the parking lot. I stood there staring at her both in anger and shock. She ran because it was my baby. That was the only logical reason. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry, or scream. Ellen had my baby and hid it from me? But she had my baby . . . I was a father.

I pressed my hand to my forehead and stared into the darkness at the vanishing tail lights. I had a baby. In all my years, I never thought of having children or even wanted them, but some stirring deep in my gut made me yearn to see him or her. To see their little smile and watch them grow. Comfort them and hold them and play ball with them. Tears welled up in my eyes just thinking about it.

Walking back to my table, I flagged down the waiter and requested a drink. After an interaction like that, it was the only thing that would calm my shaking hands enough to drive home. I just found out in a very dramatic way that my entire life had changed. It wasn't just Ellen that I wanted now. It was our family.

This year had made me grow up quite a bit. I realized that one hundred years from now, not only would no one remember my name or my occupation, but I would be gone forever. That every day, all day long, even though I was making a difference in people's lives, it meant nothing because I wasn't happy. I'd

have wasted all my time working and making money. Meanwhile, the one person in the world I wanted to share every second of every day with didn't even know it.

The waiter brought the glass and a bottle of wine, and I took both. I didn't even know how to put together coherent thoughts right now. Why had Ellen felt the need to hide it? Was she afraid I would take the baby? Did she really think I wouldn't find out? Was she nervous to tell me, thinking I wouldn't accept her then? That I would feel forced to ruin my friendship with her father? I'd have done that in a heartbeat—

And that thought made me realize exactly why she had done it. She hid my child from me because she wanted me to want her and fight for her—only her. Not a baby. Not a career. If she had told me to my face that she was carrying my child, no force in heaven or on Earth would have stopped me from standing up to Allen. And she felt like she wasn't good enough for me to do that, because I hadn't. At least, not when she was around to see it.

I rubbed my forehead and decided a few sips of the glass of wine were enough. With the snowy road and my emotions, I shouldn't drive like that. I dropped a few twenties on the table and collected my coat, then headed for my car. Ellen was terrified, and as angry as I was that she had kept that secret, I knew I couldn't blame her for everything. More than half of that was my fault. I had to give her space, but I knew this time of year only lasted so long. If it was like previous years, she'd be gone in three days.

I climbed into my car and turned it on, then waited a few minutes for it to warm up a bit. It still wasn't putting out heat when I started for town. The roads had become very snow-covered and slick, so I took my time, and when I wasn't even a mile down the road, I noticed red and blue flashing lights reflecting off the snow and ice. As I came around a bend in the road, I saw the reason. Someone had slid off the road. Their headlights shone nearly straight up into the sky. The back of the car was hung up on a few trees and the guardrail. They were lucky they hadn't slipped a half-mile farther down where it was a two-hundred-foot drop off.

I waited in line as the cars took turns using the single lane to pass by the wreckage. The tow truck had the car secured and EMTs were climbing across the hood to extract the driver and any passengers through the windshield. The closer I got, the more impatient I grew. I wanted to get down the mountain and go straight to Allen's house and speak with him. Only, when it was my turn to pull around the tow truck, I saw something that made my blood run cold.

"Ellen . . ." It was Allen's car. I'd recognize his black Buick anywhere. The scratch on the front end that irritated me every time I saw it was there staring at me. I told him to fix it, have it painted. Someone in a parking lot ran their grocery cart into it and he never cared. He was all about family and relationships, and I never understood that. But I stopped in the open lane and gawked at the front end of that car in the air and knew it was Ellen all because of that scratch.

"Oh, God," I mumbled. I pulled around the tow truck and ambulance, then stopped and put my car in park. I set the E-brake, and before I even climbed out I had Allen's number ringing. I walked up the steep road past the flashing lights and around the end of the tow truck, and a police officer tried to push me back. "It's my . . . I . . . I know her . . ." I protested just as the line clicked.

"Cal . . . Merry Christmas. Is everything okay?"

I stood with a gaping jaw as I watched them sliding a stretcher across the front of the car with Ellen strapped to it. They had to have known she was with me . . . unless she said nothing to them. But they were probably keeping the baby with them and—

"Callum?"

The officer pushed me back a step as Allen said my name. So much was happening all at once, I couldn't make sense of it. The wind bit down on my skin, and snow dusted my shoulders, but all I could do was stare and mumble, "Ellen was in an accident, Allen."

"Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to step back." The officer was polite, but insistent. He pushed me a few more

steps back, and I managed to squeak out a protest.

“I have her father on the line. Are you taking her to Hudson?” My mind reeled as I tried to listen to the policeman and Allen at once.

“What? Callum? Is Ellen okay? Dear . . . Ellen’s had an accident. Cal . . . talk to me.”

“Sir, please step back. You can follow the ambulance to the hospital.”

They loaded her onto a gurney and wheeled her toward the back of the ambulance right past me. She was out, her face doused in blood. Oh, God, I waited so long to have her again, and I scared her so badly, she lost control of her car. Oh, God, this was all my fault.

“Allen, go to Hudson, now.” I hung up and shoved my phone in my pocket and turned my collar up as I followed the EMTs. “Can you tell me what’s wrong? What is her pulse? Her vitals . . . are they good? I’m a doctor.”

“Sir, you have to step back.” The officer pushed me again, and I grabbed his wrist.

“Listen! I am the hospital director and that woman is the mother of my child. Get out of my way.” I glared at him with rage seething beneath the surface and decided I would never again let Ellen believe I didn’t want to fight for her. “Now, get a plow up here and escort the ambulance down this mountain right now, or I’ll speak to my friend in the mayor’s office and have your job!”

Never in my life had I felt so confrontational than in that moment when I believed my life to be slipping between my fingers. Ellen couldn’t be hurt. The baby needed her. I needed her.

The police officer scowled at me and reached for his radio to dispatch a plow, and I turned and stomped away. I couldn’t leave my car sitting on the side of the road, so I couldn’t ride with her, but I could be right behind her, and once I was in the hospital, no one would keep me from her side.

Ellen

I tried to open my eyes, but someone shone a bright flashlight into them and I blinked hard. “Ma’am, do you know your name?” I saw blood . . . lots of blood. The blue gloves this person—nurse or paramedic—wore were covered in it. Was it my blood?

“Ellen Peters-Davies. What happened?” My own voice sounded hollow, distant. I heard a whir of sirens and felt my whole body jostle. “Where am I?”

“Ma’am, you were involved in a car accident. You are in an ambulance being taken to Hudson Medical. Would you like us to call anyone?” The woman wiped at my face and smiled at me as my eyes met hers.

“Uh . . . My father,” I mumbled, but I knew they’d never be able to call him. My phone was in the pocket of my coat and I wasn’t wearing my coat. Where was my coat?

“Dr. Allen Peters? Wasn’t he the director?” I heard another voice but didn’t see anyone else. My head hurt. It was difficult to keep my eyes open. It felt like someone had beaten me with a baseball bat. I remembered nothing except running away from Callum at the lodge. He knew . . . I started sobbing.

“He knows!” I wailed and tried to sit up, but the dizziness and the inertia of the moving ambulance tossed me, and the woman pressed her hands on my shoulders and forced me to lie back down.

“Ma’am, I’m going to need you to lay still, okay? We’ll get you to the hospital and get a scan done. It looks like you have a concussion.”

Again with the flashlights, they shone in my face until I thought I’d vomit. And then I did—all over my chest. I heaved until my body wouldn’t heave anymore, and then I blacked out again.

Later, when I woke up, the nurses were wheeling my bed through the entryway at the emergency room. Lights flashed overhead again, but these were ceiling lights. I felt warmer, and I felt someone holding my hand. I blinked hard and looked around, trying not to feel too dizzy or nauseous again, and I saw Callum. His back was to me, coat on, hair damp from snow. He was barking orders about a CT scan and an MRI. I tried to squeeze his fingers, but I felt weak.

When they turned the corner, he whipped around and leaned over the bed to help push me into an exam room, and our eyes met. I had tears in mine, both from emotion and pain. I was scared. I felt pain in several parts of my body, but mainly, my head. The fear, however, was paralyzing—not only about what was wrong with me but what Callum was going to say.

Nurses scurried about, checking vitals and starting an IV for fluids. Callum continued to play doctor even though we both knew legally, he should let the ER docs handle this, and when he ditched his trench coat and asked all the nurses to leave, I thought I was going to throw up again. He waited until they were all out of the room and did something that shocked me. He leaned over me and cupped my cheeks and kissed my forehead, and I winced.

“Oh, God, sorry . . . Ellen, you had me so scared.” He put the arm of the bed down and sat right next to me, facing me. His hands never left my face. He stared into my eyes, but he wasn’t checking my pupils. He was staring into my heart.

“Cal,” I moaned, tears now spilling over in rapids and breakers. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t . . . and I thought . . . and you . . .” I couldn’t form words.

“Baby, it’s okay. I’m here.” He pulled me against his chest and kissed the top of my head, and I winced again and cried out, and he let me go.

“It hurts . . .” I held my head and sighed. His shirt had blood all over it now, and so did his chin. “Am I dying?” I closed my eyes against a wave of nausea and felt the room sway.

“Absolutely not.” His tone was resolute. “We’re getting you set up for a CT scan. You probably have a concussion, and you have a pretty nice bump and gash on your head, but your vitals are strong. You’re not in pain anywhere else?”

My eyelids fluttered open again and I shook my head. “I mean, everything sort of hurts, but nothing as bad as my head.”

“Okay, then, well, you’re getting a full body scan. This hospital owes you big time.” He took my hand and kissed it. “Look, I’m sorry for confronting you like that. I saw you with the baby. The night of the fundraiser, I came to your parents’ house. I wanted to see you and apologize. And then . . .”

“Cal, I’m so sorry for keeping him a secret from you. I just . . . My head hurts so bad right now.” My eyes kept shutting all on their own, and I couldn’t keep them open. I was so tired. It was like I had been drugged or something.

“So he’s mine? I have a son?” I heard the joy in his tone, and I wanted to join him in that joy, but so much grief and guilt pinned me in my misery. “Oh, God, Ellen . . . We have a son.”

“Mmmhmm . . .” My body felt like a lead weight. I squeezed his hand as hard as I could, which felt weak compared to normal. “Cal, I’m so sorry.” I couldn’t apologize enough. Chandra had been right all along. I should have told him months ago.

“Hey . . . It’s okay, shh. We’ll talk about that later. Right now, you need to save your strength.” He touched my face lightly. “I made such a huge mistake, Ellen. I should have stood up for you right when you asked me, because you’re the

best thing that has ever happened to me and I never want to lose you again. I'd planned a special toast for Christmas Eve dinner and intended to tell your father about us in front of everyone, but you never showed, and then I got hurt. I'm sorry for not fighting for you like I should have." He kissed my fingers lavishly, and I blinked out more tears at his apology. *God, why did I run off?*

"Yes, and you fought pretty hard out there on the street, too. I'd like a word with you, Dr. Andrews." I opened my eyes to see a police officer standing in the doorway. Callum leaned down and kissed my forehead again.

"I'll be back," he said, and as he walked out, Mom and Dad walked in.

"Oh, my God, Ellen!" Mom called and rushed to my side. "They told us you slid off the road just shy of the mountain pass. You could have been killed." Mom sat where Callum just was and fussed over my face with a tissue, probably wiping blood. Dad stood in the corner with tears in his eyes and anger on his forehead. No doubt, he blamed Callum for it, and I had no strength left in me to resist him or convince him. It was all Cal now or nothing.

"Mom . . . I don't feel so well. Where's the baby?" More vomit was already rising in my throat. I hated this feeling. I just wanted to sleep.

"He's with Aunt Becky. She's got him safe and sound, baby. You rest." Dad's voice was comforting, but when I looked up at where he was standing, all I saw was the whoosh of the curtain and he was gone. I hoped to God he wasn't going to confront Cal and scare him off now.

"Mom?"

"I'm here, Ellen." She wiped and dabbed at my skin.

"I need Cal."

"It's okay, baby. Daddy knows now."

Her words drew more tears from my eyes that helped wash away the blood. And before I knew it, I was out again. My sleep was fraught with nightmares and flashes of light. I

vaguely remembered the whirring sound of a machine—
maybe the MRI or CT scan—and then I slept, praying Callum
would be there when I woke up.

Callum

I pulled up outside Allen and Karen's home and parked. Ellen had extended the invite to join her family for Christmas dinner after the hospital cleared her of any significant injuries. She had a mild concussion, which Allen blamed me for. I couldn't be upset with him. I blamed myself too. I wasn't sure, however, whether Allen and Karen had been totally on board with Ellen's decision to invite me, so nerves tied my stomach in knots as I approached the door carrying a gift I'd purchased for Ellen.

Allen answered the door when I rang the bell. He had a staunch expression of displeasure on his face, but he said, "Cal . . . come on in."

I nodded politely as I stomped the snow off my shoes and stepped into the entryway. It felt different entering their home this time. Last time I was here, I had felt paralyzed with anxiety and shock. The time previous to that, I felt exhilarated, like a kid again—and then panicked like that same guilty child. This time, I strolled in with eager expectation and confidence. I stood up to that police officer on the street and got a stern talking to once in the hospital, and if I was capable of that, I was definitely capable of speaking my mind clearly with one of my oldest friends even if it meant he was upset with me.

Ellen sat on the sofa with her back to me. I couldn't see what she was doing, but as I shrugged out of my jacket and

handed it to Allen, I heard the baby fussing. The sound of the tiny infant's cry gutted me, making me want to rush to his side and comfort him. It was a true sign that I was meant to love him his whole life, and I didn't even know his name yet or what he looked like.

"Thank you," I told Allen as he hung my coat. Karen walked past carrying a plate of Christmas cookies and smiled at me.

"Welcome, Callum. Come on in here and have some cookies and eggnog." She smelled like gingerbread and sugary icing, and the festive green sweater she wore lit up with flashing lights that danced across the entire front of the sweater. In fact, the entire room felt like one strand of illuminated garland after another. Two trees decked with red and silver mirrored each other at opposite ends of the large open space, and stockings were hung in the fireplace where a large fire crackled and warmed the room.

I walked cautiously into the living room carrying my gift for Ellen and rounded the end of the couch and looked down. She had a soft blanket draped over her chest. It was covered in reindeer and sleighs and it covered more than just her chest. A tiny hand peeked out across her chest and melted my heart. She was radiant with her disheveled hair and sleepy eyes, no makeup, but I never thought she needed it. She looked tired, and I couldn't wait to hold my son and give her a chance to rest. She deserved it.

"Ellen . . ." I didn't know what to say. It was the only thing that felt right. I sat next to her carefully and laid the gift on the mahogany coffee table. She grinned at me warmly and lifted her hand to her chest where she folded the blanket back. Attached to her breast was my son.

Dark brown hair sprouted from his head, sticking up with static, and a dimple in his cheek reminded me of Ellen. But every other feature on my tiny son's face mirrored my own. I felt like I could cry with joy at the sight of him. I looked into Ellen's eyes and there were tears there. This moment wasn't exactly the way it would have been if we'd have shared it when this little guy was born, but it was pretty special to me.

“Meet Thomas Callum Andrews.” Her voice was soft and gentle, and it was everything I could do to not lean forward and kiss her right there, but with Allen and Karen standing over us, I felt awkward.

“He’s perfect, Ellen. You did so well.” I touched the hem of the dark green blanket he was wrapped in. She named him after me, which meant she had no intention of keeping it from me forever.

“Would you like to hold him?” she asked, and I nodded. I waited patiently as she fixed her shirt and removed the blanket, swaddling him in it before handing him to me.

I couldn’t believe my eyes as I looked down at the little bundle in my arms. Thomas Callum Andrews, my son, was the most beautiful baby boy I had ever seen. His little fingers were curled into tiny fists, and his chest rose and fell with each breath. I couldn’t help but feel a rush of emotion as I looked at him. Ellen had done an incredible job with him. He was perfectly healthy and happy, and it was clear that she had put her heart and soul into taking care of him. I felt a sense of pride and admiration for her that I had never felt before.

As I held Thomas, I couldn’t help but think about how much my life was about to change. I was no longer just a carefree bachelor, but a father responsible for the well-being of another human being. The weight of this responsibility was both exhilarating and terrifying at the same time. I looked up at Ellen, who was watching us with a soft smile on her face. In that moment, I was grateful for everything she had done for me. She had given me the greatest gift of all, a son.

“I brought you a gift.” I cradled Thomas to my chest as I reached for the gift and handed it to her. Allen and Karen watched as Ellen tore the silver and blue paper off carefully. Inside the wrapping was a beautifully illustrated baby book with a soft, plush cover. Ellen gasped in delight as she pulled it out and ran her fingers over the pages.

“It’s perfect,” she breathed, flipping through the pages. “Thank you so much.”

I smiled, feeling a sense of satisfaction wash over me. It was a small gesture but one that I hoped would show her how much I appreciated everything she had done for me. Besides, once she left Evansville, I wouldn't see Thomas for a while, maybe for a long time, and I wanted all of those memories cataloged and complete so I could remember them.

“Oh, Callum, that's so sweet.” Karen leaned over Ellen's shoulder and looked down at the book as she slowly turned the pages to take in the illustrations. Allen stood in the corner and scowled in a defeated fashion.

“I thought you would appreciate the sentiment most of all. After all, when you leave, there will be very few ways for me to be a part of Thomas's life.” I couldn't help the defeat that entered my tone. It gutted me to know that she would be leaving tomorrow and there was very little I could do except state how I felt and hope it meant something. Short of throwing my life away and following her, which I had thought of several times, and sitting next to her with my son in my arms, I fully believed it may be the only choice now.

Ellen looked up over her shoulder at her mother and said, “Um, Mom, Dad, could you give us a moment?”

As Allen and Karen left the room, I turned my attention back to Ellen and Thomas. The air was heavy with tension, and I could sense that Ellen was feeling the weight of our impending separation. I knew that I had to say something, anything to try and make her stay, but the words caught in my throat as I looked down at my son.

Ellen must have sensed my hesitation because she turned to face me, her eyes filled with emotion. “Callum,” she said softly, “I know that this isn't what either of us had planned, but we can make this work. We can co-parent Thomas and make sure he has everything he needs.”

I nodded, feeling a sense of relief wash over me. She was right. We could make this work. “I just don't want to miss out on anything,” I said, my voice cracking with emotion. “I want to be there for every milestone, every moment.”

Ellen smiled, her eyes tearing up. Fighting for her and standing up for her meant more than just telling her father we were going to be together because everything had changed. She deserved better than to be a single mother with an absent father who only saw his son twice a year. She deserved someone who would stand by her side, partner with her, help her live her dream, and raise our son.

“Ellen, I want to be with you. I want to travel the world with you, work alongside you, and be a part of Thomas’s life every step of the way.” I spoke with conviction, knowing that this was the right decision for me. There was a certain niggling fear in my gut that my choice may backfire, that I may throw everything away for a relationship that failed, but even that fear was subject to my new sense of protectiveness for these two in front of me.

Ellen’s eyes widened in surprise, but then she smiled softly. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying?” She shook her head as if she didn’t believe what I was saying.

I nodded, my heart racing with anticipation. “I’m saying that I volunteer to quit my job as hospital director and go with you. I want to make this work, Ellen. I want to be there for you and Thomas.” Nothing was more important to me now.

Ellen’s smile grew wider, and then she threw her arms around me, hugging me tightly. “Oh, Callum, I can’t believe it. You’re really willing to do this?” Her voice was so filled with emotion, I knew when she pulled away that she’d have tears streaking down her pale cheeks. I almost burst with emotion. She liked my hastily thought up plan.

I hugged her back, feeling a sense of joy and excitement that I hadn’t felt in years. “Yes, Ellen. I am. I love you, and I want to be with you and our son.”

As we pulled away from each other, I could see the tears in her eyes. But this time, they weren’t tears of sadness or fear, they were tears of joy and relief. “Thank you, Callum,” she whispered, her voice barely audible.

“If for some reason you can’t put me to work, I will volunteer. I have enough savings, and my pension too. With

you at the helm, we can do this. I really believe it.”

“But you would give up the directorship?” she asked, swiping at her eyes. She sniffled and studied my face, but I kept my expression calm. I didn’t want to give up my dream. I had worked so hard for it. The thought of giving it up made my stomach churn, but I knew it was worth it for Ellen and Thomas.

“Yes, I would. You and Thomas mean more to me than anything else in this world. I want to be there for you, every step of the way,” I said, looking into her eyes.

Ellen nodded and her head dropped. “I’m really sorry I didn’t tell you sooner. You deserved to know, but I was scared.”

I shook my head and cupped her cheek in my hand, tilting it up to meet my eyes. “You don’t have to apologize, Ellen. I understand why you kept it from me. But we’re in this together now. We’ll make it work.”

Ellen’s eyes shimmered with unshed tears as she leaned into my touch. I could feel the warmth of her cheek against my palm, and I felt a sense of peace settle over me. For the first time in a long time, I felt like I was exactly where I was meant to be.

“I don’t know how to thank you,” she said, her voice trembling with emotion. “You’re giving up so much for us.”

I smiled softly and brushed my thumb over her cheek. “I’m not giving up anything, Ellen. I’m gaining everything.”

She leaned in, pressing her lips to my palm in a soft, tender kiss. It was filled with all the emotion we had been holding back for so long. It was a kiss of gratitude, of relief, and of love, and one I couldn’t wait to return later in private.

Thomas cooed and squirmed, and we both looked down at him. “He really looks like me, doesn’t he?” I couldn’t get over how much he resembled my baby pictures.

She nodded, smiling down at the little bundle in my arms. “He’s got your eyes, too,” she said, reaching out to gently

stroke his cheek. Thomas gurgled and arched his back, yawning.

“He’s amazing,” I said, looking up at Ellen. “I can’t believe we created something so perfect.”

Ellen’s smile was soft and tender as she looked down at our son. “I know,” she said, her voice filled with wonder. “I can’t believe he’s here and that he’s ours.”

For so long, I had been chasing after my dreams and my career, but now, holding Thomas in my arms, I realized that this was what I had been searching for all along. I needed a family, people to share life with and to love deeply.

Ellen must have sensed my thoughts because she leaned in and whispered, “What are you thinking about?”

I turned to her, a smile playing on my lips. “I’m just thinking about how perfect this moment is.”

Ellen smiled back, and I could see the love in her eyes. “It is perfect, isn’t it?”

“How’s the baby?” Karen said, tiptoeing back into the room with Allen on her heels. She carried two mugs of coffee and set them on the table. Ellen laid the book on the table and picked up the coffee.

“The baby is good,” she said as Allen walked in. He still looked a bit grumpy, but Karen must have said something to him. His scowl was a mere glower now. “Mom, Dad, there is something we want you to know.” She nodded at me, and I prepared myself with a deep breath.

I looked directly into Allen’s eyes and said, “I’m leaving Hudson Medical. I will travel with Ellen and Thomas. We are a family and we need to be together.”

For a tense moment, I waited for what he might say. I knew him well, and I knew he only wanted what was best for Ellen, and there was no question in my mind that this was the best thing. Karen, meanwhile, cooed over the baby and took him from my arms, swaying with him across the room. When Allen spoke, he didn’t surprise me one bit.

“Your job is an important one. You’ve waited fifteen years for this position. I hand selected you.” His pressing, the doubt in his voice, it was all a show. Allen knew I’d made up my mind a year ago. He was testing me, and it wouldn’t work.

“If it were Karen, you’d do the same.” I broke eye contact to look at Ellen. “She’s worth it.”

“Hmm . . .” His *hum* of approval meant more to me than he would ever know. “Well, Karen, it looks like you need to set another place at the table. And I suppose we will have to have new family portraits taken too. We have new family members to add.” Allen walked across the room as he spoke and vanished out the door to lick his wound, and Ellen grinned at me and pulled me in for a kiss.

“Oh, you kids . . .” Karen chided, but when I pulled away from Ellen and opened my eyes, Karen was gone.

“I love you,” I whispered to Ellen, and she responded by kissing me again.

I should have done this a long time ago.

EPILOGUE

Ellen

Callum rushed past me with another armful of supplies, and as he did, he pecked me on the cheek. “You’re doing fantastic, Mama.”

I felt the rush of air across my sweat-slicked skin and breathed a sigh of relief. In the face of one of the worst floods in the history of the country, we were elbows-deep into medical aid and relief efforts. My company had grown to the point that the United Nations called upon us for help in serving those suffering from exposure or injured in the tragedy. We worked alongside Core International and the Red Cross to handle the thousands of folks needing help.

It was hot. The temperatures hadn’t been below ninety-five degrees in days. We used makeshift tents and misting fans to keep patients out of the sun and cool. Thomas, now nine months old, was strapped to my chest in a baby wrap, sucking his thumb as he slept, and I couldn’t be happier. The past several months working side by side with Callum had been a dream come true. Chandra took full control of our fundraising efforts while Callum took the position of medical director, and as a team, we had been in more than a dozen third-world countries since January.

I tended to yet another dehydrated child who needed IV fluids and as many hydrating ice pops as I could find. I didn’t speak the language of Myanmar, but the one thing that translated perfectly in every language was a smile, and my

face hurt from smiling so much, but I couldn't stop. I loved this job and these people and my life so much. Callum and I had even discussed trying to have more children, even if that meant adoption from one of the adoption agencies we raised funds for in March.

"Tank you," the little child said as I handed him an ice pop and then decided it was time for a break. I had been working all day, and it was nearing supper time. Callum would clock out soon and come to our tent for a refresher and some food, and I would do my sponge bath and feed the baby.

I made my way across the refugee camp toward where the physicians' and volunteers' tents were situated. My back hurt, and I would kill for a bottle of cold water. Still, I wouldn't trade it for the world. This work was even more fulfilling than planning large events that would help raise money for medical facilities and services. This help felt tangible because I was giving it with my bare hands. While I couldn't do anything more than offer water and snacks, do simple first aid, and help with initial intake vitals, I was making a difference.

Our tent was just as steamy as every other place in this camp, but it was home. I carefully untied the wrap and laid Thomas in his makeshift crib—an old crate lined with pillows and blankets—and then I walked over to the camp stove and set a pot of water on to boil. Once I'd boiled the water for five minutes, I could have something to drink and then cook supper.

I sat on the edge of the air mattress and kicked my shoes off and rubbed my feet. They were caked with dirt and tender. The pot of water used for washing was mostly clean, drawn this morning to give Thomas his bath. I took the sponge and washed my legs and feet, then rinsed the sponge and set it on the counter. I stripped off and used the sponge to wash myself as best as I could. In this condition, I was never fully clean, but it still felt fresher than I'd been in days.

I took my soiled clothes and dropped them in a basket set to go to the edge of the water tomorrow to be hand washed and then went to my suitcase and pulled out a clean outfit. I had my panties in hand when Callum strutted into the tent, filthy

and whistling happily. It was growing dark out, the lamps hadn't been lit yet, but he growled in approval.

“Hmmm, I see what's for dinner tonight.” He waggled his eyebrows at me, and I couldn't help but laugh.

“You're going to have to wait for dinner, Callum,” I said, throwing my panties at him. “I need to clean up first.”

He caught them with a grin and then walked over to me. “Let me help you with that.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Are you offering to give me a sponge bath?”

He chuckled. “Maybe. Or maybe I just want to wash off this grime.”

I nodded and handed him a sponge. “Well, you're welcome to it. And then we can eat.”

He took the sponge and began to wash my back, his touch gentle but firm. I closed my eyes and let out a sigh of relief. It felt so good to have someone take care of me for a change.

As he worked, I couldn't help but think about how much I had grown to rely on Callum in the short time we had known each other. He was a constant source of support and comfort. We were partners in every sense of the word and I loved it.

I turned as he rinsed the sponge out and took it from his hand, gesturing for him to take his clothes off. With Thomas sleeping and our breaks falling at the same time today, I needed to take advantage of it. We had so few times to be intimate, every single one was precious.

“Hmmm, you're going to wash me up too?” he asked in a sultry tone as he pulled his filthy T-shirt over his head with one hand. I grabbed the drawstring of his shorts and pulled it, untying it.

“Yes, and then I'm going to make sure you're properly fed,” I replied, smiling as I pulled his shorts down, revealing his already hardening member.

Without a word, I took the sponge and began to wash him, starting with his broad shoulders and working my way down

his chest and stomach. His skin was warm under my touch, and I could feel his muscles tense and relax with each stroke.

He groaned as I reached his groin, the sponge gliding over his length. I could feel myself getting wet as I watched him react to my touch.

“God, you’re beautiful,” he muttered as I finished cleaning him up.

I grinned and dropped the sponge, stepping closer to him. “And you’re irresistible.”

We kissed deeply, our hands roaming over each other’s bodies. I could feel his hardness pressing against me, urging me to take him. I reached between our hot bodies and gripped him, slowly squeezing and stroking until he was fully erect and rock hard in my palm. I’d never gotten used to the feeling of his length inside me. It was a pleasure I had been denied for too many years of my life. I wanted him to stay there forever each time he visited, but first, I wanted our hearts to feel as one.

“I love you more than anything, Cal, and I’m so happy we are together. It doesn’t even matter that we live like impoverished refugees. You are my home.” I stroked him and kissed him again, and his hands slid over my butt and down to my inner thighs. He began to rub my clit with the tip of his finger, and I moaned into his mouth.

“You’re my home, too,” he whispered, “and I’ll never leave you. I love you.”

I began to kiss down his neck as he continued to tease me, his fingers just barely touching me, teasing me to the brink of an orgasm but not giving me enough to make me come. I wanted him inside me so badly.

“Please, Cal, I need you,” I begged, my body aching for him.

“Ah, but you said you’d feed me,” he responded in a cheeky tone. Callum turned me so my back was to the bed, then gently laid me across the mattress. I let him spread me open to his gaze, looking down at my pink folds and swollen

clit. He leaned down and began to kiss me. He started with my mound, then one thigh, then the other. As he kissed, he slid his fingers inside me, pumping slowly. I could feel myself getting wetter with each passing second.

I groaned as he plunged his tongue into me, and I clenched my hands into fists. I ran my fingers through his graying hair, pulling him closer to my center. I could feel my body heat up, the tingling growing stronger and stronger as he worked. I was so turned on, my clit felt like it was on fire. He began to kiss my lips, and then my clit. He sucked gently on first one lip and then the other, and then licked across my sensitive nub, teasing me. I moaned a little, and he began to hum, sending vibrations through my core. It was the most intense sensation I had ever felt.

“Cal,” I groaned, trying to push him away as he teased me.

He didn’t listen, though. Instead, he continued to lick and suck on my clit, finally giving me the release I wanted. I felt myself contract around his fingers. I moaned loudly and tried to ride his mouth as my body shook. I felt my clit pulse with my heartbeat, the orgasm throbbing like a thick artery throwing hot blood through my thighs. The sensations began as tiny fissures lapping at my muscles and then opened up into a red mouth, hungry and devouring.

My legs clamped around his ears, my head moving back and forth as he held me in place. His hands moved to my hips, and I could feel him thrusting his tongue inside me, pressing it against my walls and flicking his tongue across my clit. As he licked, he sucked, and I could feel my core throb. “Oh, God, mmm . . .” I moaned and hissed. My hips threatened to lift off the mattress, but he pinned me down.

The scent of sex was thick in the air, our juices gathering on my thighs. He pulled away and used the back of his hand to wipe his face. “Wow, you’re delicious,” he said, climbing up to kiss me. I could taste myself on his lips, and it turned me on even more.

“I need you inside me,” I said. “Please, put it in me.”

“I’m going to. You’re going to get it good,” he said, his eyes burning with lust. He looked at his fingers still glistening with my juices. “I just want to lick you clean.” As he sucked each one, I touched myself. The ache deep inside me was still growing. It had been so long.

“Cal, please,” I whimpered softly. I didn’t want to wake the baby. “I need you inside me now.”

He climbed on top of me, spreading my legs with his knees. I could feel his dick pressing against my pussy. He kissed me hard, his tongue dipping between my lips. His hand moved down to my clit and rubbed it in quick circles. His hard cock teased the outside of my entrance and then sank between my folds. He thrust all the way inside me, his dick hitting me deeper than anyone had ever gone. And then he started thrusting.

I could feel every inch of him sliding in and out of me. The head of his cock brushed against my G-spot with each thrust, sending shockwaves through my body. He grabbed my legs and pushed them up, spreading me wide. He began to thrust even deeper into me, each time hitting that sweet spot. I moaned and moaned, my words turning to gasps.

“There you go, baby,” he moaned. He moved his hips rhythmically, grinding his pelvis against mine. I felt my pussy tightening around him. “You feel so good, so tight.”

I could feel my orgasm building. “Mmm, Cal, harder,” I moaned.

“You’re going to come again?” he asked, his voice deep and hoarse.

“Yes, yes, yes.” I reached down and rubbed my clit in quick circles. My hips moved in time with his thrusts. “Right now, and I want you to do it with me.”

“I’ll give you everything I have,” he groaned. He began to thrust even faster, his body slamming against mine. My fingers worked faster against my clit. I could feel the orgasm growing inside me.

His body tensed as he thrust deep inside me. “Yeah,” he moaned, his dick twitching. I could feel his cum shooting inside me.

“Oh, God,” I moaned, his seed filling me up. My orgasm went off like a bomb, my pussy clamping down on his cock. My body was seized with convulsions as I exploded. I couldn’t even make a noise, just a muffled moan.

“That’s my girl,” Cal growled. He glided in and out of me a few more times before pulling out, then collapsed onto the bed next to me. We were both soaked in sweat again and would need another bath. I heard the hiss of water as it splashed out of the pan and hit the burner.

“Oh, wow . . .” I breathed in deep and smiled up at him as he propped himself on an elbow. “I can’t believe all of this is mine.”

Callum opened his mouth to speak, but Thomas let out a wail. I grinned and sighed. It was the way life would be for a while. Our intimate moments were short but sweet. I pulled a sheet over my damp body, and Callum grabbed some boxers and put them on before bringing me our son. I brought him to my breast to nurse, immediately calming his cries.

“You rest. I’ll cook,” he said, and I couldn’t have been happier.

As I watched Callum walk across the room with a smile on his face, I couldn’t help but feel content. Even with the constant demands of motherhood, knowing that I had him by my side made everything worth it. Despite the sleepless nights and the endless diaper changes, we managed to keep the spark between us alive. Our love-making sessions may have been short-lived, but they were always passionate and intense.

I had never been happier, and I didn’t think he could ever top any of this.

EXTENDED EPILOGUE

Callum

I thought it was very strange when we pulled up to Allen and Karen's house on Christmas Eve for dinner that both of their cars were parked in the drive. We were forced to park on the street, though the weather was mild this year—temps in the fifties and calm. Ellen carried Thomas, now more than a year old, into the house, and I followed. We hadn't seen them since the baby was only a few months old, and this year's visit came late after a hurricane destroyed parts of the Caribbean and we spent months providing medical relief.

"You ready for this?" she asked, bouncing Thomas on her hip. He smiled broadly and clapped. We would spend the next three months here recuperating before heading out to the next disaster scene.

"As I'll ever be," I told her, nodding.

As we stepped into the house, the aroma of freshly-baked bread welcomed us. The house was decorated with colorful lights, garlands, and a beautifully decorated Christmas tree in the corner. The furniture was rearranged to make sure that there was enough space for the little one to crawl around without hurting himself. Karen and Allen had gone above and beyond to baby-proof the entire house.

Karen appeared from the kitchen wearing an apron and a smile. She hugged us both and took Thomas from Ellen's arms. "Merry Christmas," she said, kissing his cheeks. "I've

made your favorite, roast beef and some mashed potatoes for dinner tonight. And for dessert, we have a delicious apple pie.”

“Oh, thank you, Mom.” Ellen threw her arms around Karen and kissed her cheek. “We missed you.” She started to shed her coat as Allen walked into the room with a long pipe spewing smoke.

“What did I tell you, Allen? Not around the baby.” It was comical to see him cough and sputter as he walked away. Karen was really standing her ground. “So sorry about that. Come on in. Have a seat. Dad can help you bring your bags in later.” Karen was doing well. After a full year of being cancer-free, she looked better than ever.

I followed behind Ellen, taking my own coat off. We hung them on a new coat tree near the back door. A lot had changed in this tiny space. There were now plastic outlet covers and cabinet locks, and the coffee table was replaced with a soft, foam-covered ottoman. It was clear that Karen and Allen had gone all out to make sure their home was safe for Thomas.

I kissed Ellen on the cheek and headed for the kitchen where Allen was sipping a drink. He nodded at me as I entered. We’d had a few video calls over the past few months, but nothing had been the same since I told him I was leaving with Ellen. He had helped me wrap up things at work, and he had even arranged to have my house packed up and my things put in storage. It sold within a few months, and Allen and Karen sent us the paperwork and the check. But our friendship hadn’t been the same.

“Allen,” I said, moving toward the bowl of punch on the counter. I took a glass and the ladle and helped myself to some of the delicious red drink. “How are things?”

“Good. We remodeled Ellen’s room for the baby. He’ll have his own space now.” He was stiff, probably still nursing his wounds from my standing up to him.

“That’s great . . . Did you buy a pullout?” If Ellen’s room was now a nursery, where would she and I sleep? Certainly, he didn’t expect me to get a room elsewhere after having lived together for a year.

“We turned the garage into a third bedroom. It’s all set up for you both.” Allen sipped his drink and pursed his lips. He still wasn’t pleased with me, though I’d proven myself to him, and I knew why. He and Karen were very old-fashioned, and I was about to put an end to the final reason they disapproved of me.

“Allen, I know we haven’t seen eye to eye about Ellen, but I want you to know she really is the love of my life. I want nothing more than to take care of her.”

Allen’s face went blank for a few moments as he processed what I had just said. I could see the gears turning in his head as he looked down at his drink and then back up at me. “I see,” he finally said, his voice stern. “I appreciate your honesty, but you know how I feel about this. I don’t believe in unmarried couples living together, let alone having children out of wedlock.”

I knew this conversation wasn’t going to be easy, but I was determined to make Allen see my point of view. “I understand your beliefs, Allen, but times are changing. Ellen and I love each other, and we want to make a life together. We’re committed to each other and to raising Thomas in a loving home.”

Allen’s expression softened as he listened to my words. I could tell that he was contemplating what I had said, and I hoped that he would understand where I was coming from. “I know that you love Ellen, and I can see that you are dedicated to being a good father to Thomas,” he said, his voice gentler now. “But I still believe that marriage is important. It’s a commitment to each other and to your family. It’s a public declaration of your love and your intentions.”

I nodded, understanding his perspective. “I agree that marriage is important, Allen. And I do want to marry Ellen. Which is why I plan to ask her tonight—with your blessing, of course.”

Allen looked at me for a moment, considering my request. Finally, he let out a long sigh. “I can see that you’re serious about this, and I can’t deny that you’ve been a good influence

on Ellen and a loving father to Thomas. If you're willing to make a commitment to each other and to your family, then I'll give you my blessing."

I felt a wave of relief wash over me as Allen's words sank in. I had been nervous about asking for his blessing, but now that he had given it, I knew that Ellen would be overjoyed. "Thank you, Allen. I promise you won't regret this."

He nodded and took another sip of his drink. "Just make sure you baby-proof the house before Thomas starts crawling. You know how kids can be."

I grinned, feeling grateful for Allen's support. "Don't worry, we've already started baby-proofing." In truth, we had a lot of planning to do with our travels, and our hopes were to have more time here with family than on the road as Thomas grew.

Allen smiled, looking pleased. "Good. That's what I like to hear. You're taking responsibility and being proactive. I have no doubt that you'll make a great husband and father."

I felt a surge of pride at his words. Allen was a hard man to please, and his approval meant a lot to me. "Thank you, Allen. I won't let you down."

With that, we finished our drinks and joined the women in the living room. I had thought to wait until we exchanged gifts later this evening, but with my mood in a great place, I decided to catch Ellen beneath the mistletoe and propose immediately. Karen had hung it in a few different places, so when she took Thomas and bounced him, I followed Ellen, who headed for the kitchen. When we were beneath the archway into the kitchen, I grabbed her elbow.

"Hey . . ." I gestured upward with my eyebrows.

"Oh, I see what you did there." Ellen pecked me on the cheek, but when she tried to turn to go, I knelt and reached into my pocket. "Oh . . ." She sighed softly. Her eyes flicked toward her mother then locked back on my face.

"Ellen Peters . . . I have loved you since the day we met. You have brought so much joy and love into my life, and I

can't imagine living a single day without you by my side. Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

Ellen's eyes widened with surprise, and a tear escaped from the corner of one of them. She looked down at me, her hand covering her mouth. "Yes, yes, of course I will, Callum," she whispered, her voice shaking with emotion.

I slipped the diamond ring onto her finger, feeling a sense of overwhelming happiness as I stood up to embrace her. We kissed beneath the mistletoe, our love for each other growing stronger with each passing moment.

As we drew back from our embrace, we saw that we had an audience. Karen, Allen, and even Thomas had gathered in the doorway, their faces beaming with joy and approval.

Karen clapped her hands together, tears in her eyes. "Oh, my goodness, congratulations." Allen clamped a hand on my shoulder and chuckled. "Always the fast one, aren't you, Callum?"

"When you see something you want, you get it. And I got what I wanted for Christmas already."

Ellen kissed Thomas on the top of his head and then threw her arms around me again. I stood beneath that mistletoe thinking of the first Christmas we spent together, now eleven years ago. If only I had been bold enough to take the chance at love back then, we wouldn't have needed a second chance—or a third. But Ellen was worth the wait and the pain too.

The rest of the evening was filled with laughter, cheers, and toasts as we celebrated our engagement. I couldn't believe how lucky I was to have found Ellen, and I couldn't wait to spend the rest of my life with her. We wouldn't always travel, and we wouldn't always see eye to eye, but we would always have each other, and that was something I'd fight for every day for as long as I had breath.

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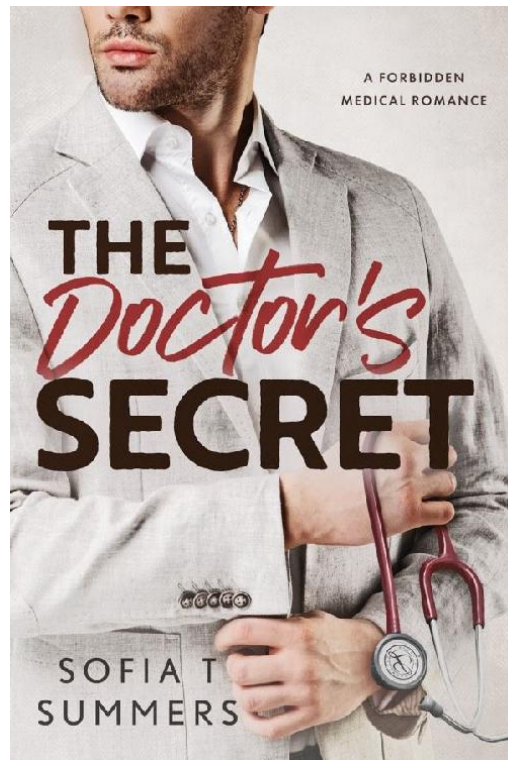
AN AGE GAP CHRISTMAS
AMNESIA ROMANCE

BABY *Bump*

SOFIA T
SUMMERS



THE DOCTOR'S SECRET (PREVIEW)



DESCRIPTION

**Keeping a secret for over a decade killed me inside... until
a silver fox billionaire forced me to confront it.**

I was made to give up my son for adoption when I was only
16.

Seeing him again in my office with his *dad* made me shiver to
my core.

I loved my boy.

It was clear that Jace did too.

It broke my heart to see Christopher in pain and struggling
with a medical condition that only I could help him with.

As his doctor, I had to maintain my boundaries.

And I certainly had to keep my distance from Jace.

But holding hands during those late nights at the hospital led
to decisions that could ruin my medical career.

The excitement of being in Jace's arms would have to compete
with the life I'd built for myself.

This new and shaky beginning rested on one secret I could tell
no one.

Especially not Jace.

Christopher was my son.

He was *our* son.

But did that matter if we could *never*, in fact, be a real family?

PROLOGUE

Jace

Mindy was incredible. Her tits bounced and swayed between our bodies as I thrust into her. She convulsed and clawed at my sides as my body released all the pent-up lust from the entire night of talking and holding her. My balls drew up and I filled that condom until I thought it would burst open. And when we were both calm, I kissed her shoulder, then her jaw, then stole a breath right out of her mouth.

“You’re amazing, Mindy,” I whispered before I pulled out. She lay on the bed in ecstasy, sprawled out with her pussy gaping slightly from being played with so many times. Her skin dripped with sweat, her pussy with moisture made during our sex. She was gorgeous. I’d never been more in love, not even with Connie when she was here.

I pulled the condom off carefully and tied it shut, then dropped it into the trash bin with the others from earlier in the night. My dick went limp almost immediately this time, spent from all the action she’d been giving me. I hadn’t done much more than self-pleasure a few times a week for the past two years, but Mindy and I’d had sex enough times to use up a box of condoms in three weeks.

Climbing back into bed, I tried to catch my breath. I didn’t mind the workout at all. It made me feel like a teenager again, or maybe it was because Mindy was sixteen years younger than me. The age difference didn’t bother me a bit either,

because she was perfect for me in every way. Smart, funny, sexy as hell. Her thick curves and bright smile were beautiful in every way.

“So good,” she sighed, smiling at me. Her hair clung to her face, dampened with sweat from the exertion. I’d never done anything like that before, experimenting with her. I enjoyed it a lot. In fact, I wanted to do it every day for the rest of my life. If Christopher, my twelve-year-old, wasn’t still hurting so badly over missing his late mother, I’d ask this woman to marry me right now. But his reaction to Mindy being here earlier at the dinner table was enough to make me hold back a little.

“Yes, so frickin’ good,” I told her, peeling a sticky hair off her forehead. I smoothed her chestnut hair back so I could see her emerald eyes better. With flecks of gold and chocolate in them, they were quite possibly the most incredible eyes I’d ever seen. Just another thing to add to her beauty.

“Jace, can I tell you something?” She looked serious suddenly, as if she needed to tell me some dire secret. I asked her earlier if she’d done any experimenting with other guys, and I wondered what she could need to tell me. It didn’t matter what it was. I loved her so much, and nothing in her past could hurt our future.

“Yeah, of course.” I held her, ready to listen to whatever it was she had to say.

“The day we met in the coffee house wasn’t the first time I’d seen you.” She watched my face carefully.

“It wasn’t? You mean you really did see me around the hospital before?” I remembered the conversation we had when I thought I’d seen her before. It was like *déjà vu* at times. She was so familiar. I felt it was fate drawing us together. I felt so safe and so comfortable around her, and she was so good with my son as his doctor, I genuinely felt like she cared about him more than just this diagnosis.

“Not exactly. I was given a picture of you twelve years ago. The day I gave birth to a tiny, premature baby boy.”

I watched the way her forehead crinkled and her eyes narrowed, but I shook my head. I was confused. She had a picture of me twelve years ago? But how? We had never met. We didn't know each other. When I met her in that coffee shop about a month ago was the first time I'd even heard the name Dr. Scriber. And twelve years ago? She had to be a child then? Like sixteen or something.

“What are you talking about?”

“Jace, I ran a DNA test on Christopher when we drew his blood for the Crohn's test.” She sat up and curled in on herself. “I recognized you from the image the adoption agency gave me. You were older, but my gut said it was you. The man and woman who adopted my son were Jason and Constance. I never knew their last name, just had a photo. So when I saw you and I noticed Christopher looked a lot like my father, I ran DNA.” She turned and looked into my eyes, and my heart went cold.

My body felt like it had seized up, my breathing shallow. My field of vision started to narrow and I thought I'd pass out. “What?” I sat up and stared at her, hurt and confused. I shook my head, unable to comprehend what was going on. I studied her face, searching for something that made sense, something to ground me in the present because my thoughts were reeling. I climbed out of bed, feeling all the sudden like I might get sick. I stared at her; I couldn't put words together.

“Say something?” she whispered, slipping off the bed on her side.

“I'm... You're...” My chest rose and fell in an accelerated breathing pattern and tears welled up in her eyes. I watched them pool above her lower eyelashes and linger there. I was afraid my reaction would scare her or hurt her. I loved her more than life itself but this was shocking. I expected her to say she'd tried a threesome, or that she once had an STD. Maybe that she liked women too. Not this. Not ever this. My mouth hung open in shock and I turned so she wouldn't be frightened by my facial expression.

“I'm Christopher's biological mother.”

I dropped to the bed, completely speechless. My chest ached. My heartbeat hammered in my ears. All I could do was breathe—deep breaths in and slow breaths out.

“Jace...”

When the door clicked shut, I remained frozen. She was the biological mother of my adopted son? How the hell does that even work? Was this some trick? Or did fate really tie the red string to our pinkies?

Jace

It was a normal exam room, just like the five previous ones we'd been to in the past several months. Christopher sat on the table swinging his legs like any normal, healthy eleven-year-old, but after the fresh round of severe symptoms over the past week, I knew he was anything but. I wrung my hands in my lap, trying to keep a straight face. A father's greatest fear is losing one of his children prematurely. And since I had only one, it seemed even worse than what other parents might go through, especially after losing Connie two years ago.

"When is the doctor coming? I want to go home." Christopher—"Topper" to his friends—was impatient. As many tests as he'd had and I would be just as impatient. No one seemed to be able to tell us what was wrong with him, and each time he got sick he had differing symptoms. I just wanted answers.

"Not long, bud. Dr. Scriber was really kind to squeeze us into her schedule. Just be patient, okay?" I sucked in a deep breath and tried to relax my shoulders. I couldn't lose my boy. My heart was still a wreck after losing my wife of thirteen years. She was my everything, but when cancer strikes sometimes there is nothing you can do.

"I wish Mom was here." Christopher didn't seem upset about the appointment, not in terms of fearing what was wrong with him. His childlike innocence protected him from the fear

of things like cancer. He knew his mother was gone and that's it. One day he'd understand, but for now I wanted to protect his little mind from all the anxieties we as adults had to bear.

"I wish she was too, Top." I glanced at the clock. We'd been waiting twenty minutes already, a normal delay for a doctor I supposed, but to a worried patient it was eternity. I distracted myself by studying the images plastered on the walls—pictures of the human body complete with internal organs labeled and diagrams of the cellular construction of tissues. Three pediatricians and two general practitioners we'd been to, but not one of them recommended a specialist or doctor of internal medicine. Only by chance had I run into Dr. Scriber at a coffee shop, and I believed fate had intervened.

"Can we get ice cream when we leave?" he asked and I chuckled. There wasn't any situation where this child could be patient without a bribe, so I nodded.

"Sure, kiddo. We'll get whatever you want. You're doing a great job being patient." I made a mental note to have a talk with him about not using food as a reward for behavior. It sets a bad habit up for his life later on.

The door pushed open and I looked up to see Dr. Scriber walk in, staring down at a tablet in her hands. Things sure had changed since I was a kid, when doctors wrote everything on paper with a pen and carried the patient's chart with them in the room. Dr. Scriber was clearly up to date with the latest technology, which hopefully meant she was up to date with any new illnesses or diseases. I sat a bit straighter as her chin rose and she looked up at Topper.

"Well, who do we have here?" she asked warmly. Her smile stretched to her eyes which sparkled. I immediately felt at ease in her presence.

"Dr. Scriber, we met at the coffee shop." I stood and shook her hand. She looked at me briefly but turned back to my son with intrigue. Why would she look at me? I wasn't her patient. I sank back onto the chair as she laid her tablet on the countertop next to the sink and snagged two latex gloves out of the box.

“I’m Christopher. My friends call me Top... sometimes Topper.” He didn’t look enthused as he spoke.

“Any latex allergies, Dad?” she asked, still not looking at me.

“None.” I shook my head, watching her don the gloves.

“So, Top, I guess we’re friends now.” Her smile brightened and Topper nodded. “What is going wrong?” Dr. Scriber took the stethoscope from around her neck and put it to her ears, holding the bell in hand and pressing it to his chest. She looked down at the ground as she listened and Chris spoke.

“My belly hurts a lot. Sometimes I throw up; sometimes I get diarrhea.” He cringes as he speaks, probably embarrassed. I nod at him, encouraging him to keep going. It’s best if she hears the symptoms straight from him. I couldn’t begin to remember everything he’d been through for the past few months.

“I see... Any food allergies, Dad?” She placed the tool in another location on his chest and listened again.

“None that we know of, but Christopher is adopted, like I told you, so I’m not sure if they ever ran tests on him before he was brought to us at the age of a few weeks old.” Her hand moved across his chest as I spoke, finding another place to listen. Then she straightened.

“Well, they don’t usually run food intolerance or allergy tests on infants. They do run what’s called a PKU test. It tests for high protein levels in the blood which would indicate a genetic condition that may damage the brain, but you’d have seen that years ago.” Dr. Scriber stepped back and put her stethoscope back around her neck. “Are you pretty active, Topper? Do you like to play sports?”

“Yeah, they’re okay I guess. I really like video games too.”

She chuckled. “So you exercise a lot? Do you eat a lot too?” She sat on the stool and made some notes on the tablet then focused back on him as he answered.

“Uh, yeah, I guess. I like pizza and chicken nuggets.”

“Anything that you notice makes his symptoms worse?” She turned to me for the first time, tablet in hand.

“I can’t really make sense of it. One day he’s fine, the next day he has a fever or headache. Sometimes he gets sores in his mouth.” I felt at a loss for so long, I just wanted her to fix this.

“Well, we’re going to figure out what is going on. Do you mind if I listen to your belly?” she asked him, and he shrugged.

“Fine, but can I still eat ice cream?” Topper lifted his shirt up and she laughed at him.

“You like ice cream?” she asked standing. She gestured for him to scoot back, patting the table behind where he sat.

“I love ice cream.”

“Go ahead and lay down here,” she instructed, and he followed her direction. She took her stethoscope and listened again to several places on his stomach. While she did so, she didn’t talk. Not one single doctor we’d been to had taken so much time to speak with Chris and make him feel at home. Most of them wanted to talk over his head at me. I was smitten by her bedside manner, not to mention that Dr. Scriber was a gorgeous woman, and I didn’t see a ring on her finger.

At that thought, I felt guilt creeping into my conscience. Connie was my heartbeat, not any other woman. I’d been told by friends I could move on now, but despite being desperately in need of sexual release, and highly attracted to other women at times, I couldn’t allow myself to feel something like that again. Not yet anyway. I scolded myself for noticing how pretty she was and watched her work.

“Does ice cream hurt your belly?” she asked him, finding another spot to listen.

“Nah, I don’t think so.”

She eyed me and I shook my head. “He hasn’t had ice cream before an episode. I don’t think it’s lactose.” I heard that one before too, that it was just lactose intolerance and he should avoid dairy. He was miserable for those six months

while we tried that. “Look, other doctors told us it was just in his head because of his mother’s death.

She held a hand out to him and he took it, and she helped him sit up. “You miss your momma?” Her expression turned to one of compassion as she stood by him. I truly hoped that she wouldn’t just give up at the thought that grief made his belly ache.

Christopher’s shoulders fell the way they did every time someone asked him about his mom. They were close, and his grieving was hard. No matter how much time passed, he still hurt, and I’d hear him crying in his room some nights.

“Yeah...” he mumbled.

Dr. Scriber placed a caring hand on his knee. “I know just how it feels to lose someone, buddy.” His chin turned up and they looked into each other’s eyes. “It’s really difficult, and I totally understand. It’s okay to be sad and miss them.”

“Yeah...” he mumbled again and she patted his knee.

“Why don’t you go out to the waiting room and get one of those suckers from the nurse. I will talk to Dad a bit and we’ll sort this out.” Her smile returned and he looked at me seeking permission.

“Go ahead,” I told him, anxious to hear what she thought.

She walked over to her stool as Chris slid off the table and walked past me out the door. It slammed shut and she chuckled. “He’s a sweet boy.”

“You’re really good with him.” I felt my heart swelling. There was so much hanging on this appointment, and all my hope was in her now. I felt like we would end up giving up and I didn’t know what would happen.

“Kindness is essential for medical practice,” she recited, but I got the feeling there was something more there.

“Thank you for being so kind with him. He’s had it rough.” I felt comfortable with her, like I could open up a bit and maybe it would help her understand Top better. “When his mom died he stopped eating for a while. I thought maybe his

issues were because he got malnourished. I fed him supplements and vitamins, but he never improved. He kept having these episodes of diarrhea and vomiting, headaches, achy body, fever. This last one, I'm pretty sure there was blood in his stool." I would never forget that night when I was terrified. I had no clue what to do, so I called and set up this appointment.

"Grief can definitely hit us in different ways, but this doesn't sound like grief, and I don't think his lack of eating for a while did this." She looked down at his chart. "It appears to me that you've had several tests done. Have you tested for celiac or Crohn's?" Her eyes met mine and she searched me, but she looked more concerned than curious. For a moment we gazed into each other's eyes and I swore I'd met her somewhere. Like, I'd seen her face in another life or maybe a vision, as if fate really did ordain us to meet.

"Uh... I... Uh, no, those two tests were never done." I swallowed hard, my chest pounding. The unexplainable connection between us seemed to be felt by her too. Her cheeks flushed and she looked down.

"I think we need to see each other again." Her hand shook as she typed into her tablet. "I mean, I need to see Christopher again," she clarified, and looked up at me. I wasn't sure if she had misspoken or if she felt the same way I did, attracted and interested to get to know her more.

"Of course."

"We'll run some blood work. I have a hunch and I think just a simple blood test can determine if the disease is what I think. You can schedule an appointment with my receptionist. In the meantime—" she reached into her pocket and pulled out a card and handed it to me "—our emergency line is listed there. You can call and leave a message or talk to a nurse on call. Then if it's something we can address, one of the doctors on call will call you back." She stood. "It was really nice meeting you, Mr. Turner." She held out her hand and I stood and took it.

"Please, call me Jace."

“So nice to meet you, Jace. Let’s get that appointment set up and get Chris back in to see me.”

When I pulled my hand away from hers I realized my palm was sweating. I hadn’t done that in years—gotten nervous over speaking to a woman. There was so much going on inside my head I felt like my brain was scrambled as I made the appointment for next week. A really sexy, curvaceous woman just entered my life and I was totally smitten, but I had to take this seriously. My son was everything to me, and Dr. Scriber was a pathway to understanding how to better care for him. I couldn’t let my feelings get in the way, which only paved a way for guilt to climb on my back and weigh on me the entire drive home.

I couldn’t do this to Connie. She deserved better. What was wrong with me?

[End of preview. Get the entire story here.](#)

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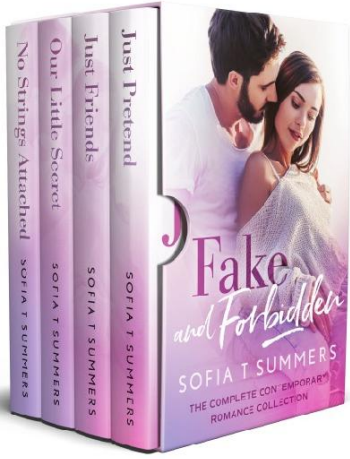
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