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LOVE

AND OTHER



REVENGE
PLOTS

LILIANA WOODLAND

LOVE AND OTHER REVENGE PLOTS

LOVE IN LOUISVILLE
BOOK 2

LILIANA WOODLAND

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To my fellow women from Appalachia, especially Eastern Kentucky: you are strong, you are smart, you are bold. You deserve love.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

If someone had told me years ago I'd write a book about a reformed bully, I would have laughed. I normally like heroes who are flawed but mostly green flags. Someone like Grant is not the norm for me.

It felt like the right story for Kendall, though. She's bold, and doesn't take anything lying down, so I needed something with some higher conflict for her. The bullying only happens in the prologue, and everything after is redemption.

She also grew up in poverty in Eastern Kentucky. I didn't experience the kind of poverty she does in the book, but I did grow up in Eastern Kentucky to working class parents, so I have been very aware of class differences my whole life. That gave me a good jumping off point to have her butt heads with Grant, the hero in this book, who did grow up with money.

There's some critique here, too, about fatphobia in medicine and in society in general. There is discussion of Kendall's unintentional weight loss, but I hope I succeeded in making it clear that body size shouldn't dictate how someone is treated. Kendall felt like a good character to map this journey onto, since she's so unabashed and vocal about her opinions. I do have plans to write some books with neutral plus-size characters, where weight change isn't discussed at all.

I took a few liberties with medical settings in this book. This was for the sake of story. I know residency rotations are not usually three months long for orthopedic surgeons, and I've never met a nurse who has split

settings like Kendall does within the same hospital system. Hopefully it's not distracting for anyone in healthcare.

Full content warnings: bullying (in prologue, otherwise off page and in the past), fatphobia (also mostly off page), discussion of unintentional weight loss, discussions of queerphobia in rural communities, discussion of specific and rare complications during pregnancy and childbirth, parental abandonment, classism, frank details of growing up in poverty and experiencing food insecurity, and some explicit detail involving surgical procedures. There's also a little bit of dark humor here and there—sometimes healthcare workers cope with the gravity of what they do by making light of it.

As far as the mention of pregnancy complications—the heroine does have a conversation with her sister-in-law about some of the things she's witnessed working as a nurse in labor and delivery. It's possible I'm working through some of my own anger at how often women are given substandard maternal care in the US. Proceed with caution if that's a trigger for you. The conversation happens in chapter 7, so you could also skip right over the paragraph of dialogue once Kendall starts talking about her experiences on the L&D unit.

I hope you enjoy!

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PROLOGUE

KENDALL, TEN YEARS AGO, BACK IN HIGH SCHOOL

I refuse to let Grant Wyndham get to me.

He glares at me from his spot with the rest of the seniors. His sandy blond hair stands at artfully styled angles off his forehead. Sure, he's hot, but it's absolutely wasted on him. I stare back at him, challenging. I'm Teflon. I'm not some vulnerable flower he can crush under his expensive shoe.

I adjust my lyrics at the podium. I catch my older brother's eye, and he gives me a thumbs up. He sits near our mother in the front row, wheelchair brakes locked so he won't roll forward. I'd suggested sitting in the accessible seating near the back, but he declined, and now I'm glad I can see his face.

I lift my chin. A bead of sweat rolls down my neck in the stuffy auditorium. One of our teachers sits behind me on stage, and the cloying scent of her perfume reaches me. A stray cough sounds from somewhere. I block out all the distractions.

The first notes of "The Climb" play through the speakers. The song itself is a little overdone, I guess, but I like it anyway. I bring the microphone to my lips.

I close my eyes and sing the first few bars. My voice is clear and resonant, not shaky at all, and I relax as the song builds. My hips sway and the music envelops me. I love performing. The audience fades away, including Grant and his stupid, gremlin-like friends.

As the final notes fade, I open my eyes again. Grant still fixes me with his malignant little stare. His eyes rake over my clothing—a dress

purchased from a consignment store and repaired several times—and up to my face. His lip curls.

He's tried to break me during our years in school together, and it never works. When he stuffed a picture of a hippo with the caption "glad you could make it to the swim party" in my locker, I yawned. When he taunted me in class, I rolled my eyes. He makes fun of my looks, my homespun clothing, my crooked teeth. My body, my size when he's feeling particularly cruel, even if that's not his main focus. I never cry, though—at least not where he can see me. I won't.

It does hurt, sure. I'm only human. But he doesn't need to know that.

I scan the rest of the audience. My group of friends, along with my mom and brother, almost embarrass me with their thunderous applause. I catch Clay cupping his hands around his mouth and whooping, and my cheeks warm. Most of my other classmates clap politely.

Grant's surly figure keeps drawing my eye. He sits with his arms crossed in front of him, looking bored. He's not clapping. When he sees me surveying the crowd, though, a small smile curves his lips. He looks a little sinister, like he might have more teeth than he's supposed to. I grin back at him. He's not going to win. He's salutatorian, but I'm valedictorian. My accolades outshine his. We're both from Blacksburg, a tiny town in the Appalachian Mountains of Eastern Kentucky, and his condescension is laughable, anyway. Who does he think he is? Royalty?

The rest of the awards program sees me sweating through my best dress, but a sense of anticipation curls in my belly all the same. I'm getting out of this hellhole of a town, and I can't wait.

After saying my goodbyes to my family in the parking lot, I climb into my old, rusted car, paid for with my job at McDonald's as well as an unexpected influx of cash from my itinerant father, and I head to the ice cream place. It's a charming little hut surrounded by picnic tables and beds of sparse gravel with blades of grass poking through. My stomach swoops when I spot most of my class here, including Clay.

The evening breeze brushes along my skin. I've never thought of high school as magical, but now that it's almost over, a charge stirs the air as though the ambient excitement casts a spell on our little space. We're in this bubble together, my classmates and I, filled with hopes, dreams, and hormones.

My friends and I order our desserts and park ourselves at a wooden table. I sneak glances at Clay, who, though it may be my imagination, throws his own looks my way. He's skinny and pale, and a hint of a blush stains the tops of his fair cheekbones when his eyes land on me.

"You think he likes you too?"

I jump at the low voice. I swivel to face Grant, of course, whose cheeks dimple with his display of straight, white teeth. He really is cute, and it's cosmically unfair that he gets to be smart as well.

"Yes," I snap. Am I telling the truth? I have no idea. My friends go still behind me, sensing an apex predator, perhaps, but I don't have the same sense of self-preservation. "Why? You want to talk to him for me?" I bat my eyelashes.

Grant chuckles before snatching my phone from the table. I bolt upright, panic flooding my veins, and reach for it, my hands grasping around his forearm. I'm tall, but he's a little taller, and he holds my cell with an iron grip as he scrolls through some of my texts.

"Give it back!"

"Let's see what Kenzie's been texting about." He grins. "Clay talked to me in English today." His loud voice carries to the surrounding tables, and I want to crawl into a hole in the ground. "I think he's going to ask me out." His eyes shoot to mine, his lips pursing, as he scans me and finds me wanting. "Oh, damn. Did he, actually?"

My gaze finds Clay, whose jaw hangs open. Oh God. I might just leave town and never come back. Who needs these people? I'll probably never see them again once I go to college in the fall.

Grant's not done, of course. I glare at him, stoic, as he waves over a few of his friends. His girlfriend, Maggie, hovers behind him, biting her lip. She's actually kind of a sweet girl. What the hell does she see in Grant?

"I think we should send a picture to him." He moves the phone around, pretending to find the right angle. "Damn. Can't get a good one. Can you pose? Under the table, maybe? Or better yet, let's switch you out with someone else." His stupid friend, this chinless dude named Tom, chuckles next to him.

Ah, yes. His most inventive insult—the burden of the sight of me. Charming, how he thinks anyone wants to look at his own evil face.

My eyes find Clay's again for a lightning-quick second. He still stares at me, and my skin burns.

“That’s enough,” I say to Grant, grabbing hold of his forearm and digging my nails into the skin. I don’t care if I break it—his arm, that is. I don’t have money for another phone.

He wrenches away from me.

“And there’s several unanswered texts for your dad here. What’s wrong? He doesn’t like you, either?”

I freeze. I dip my chin, horrified to feel tears stinging my eyes, and then return my gaze to his. He blanches, like maybe he realizes he’s gone too far, has hit a tender nerve.

“Give me my phone back,” I say.

He hands it to me wordlessly. His eyes flick down to his shoes, and he gulps. Tears start to fall down my face, and I hurry back to my car before I even have my ice cream in hand.

He’s done it, finally. He’s made me cry in front of him, and my only consolation is that I’ll never, ever have to see him again.

1

KENDALL: PRESENT DAY

My laugh rings out in the treatment room, so loud I almost startle myself. “You should put that on a T-shirt,” I tell Mrs. Lykins, my current patient. “‘Too young for sensible shoes’ is a slogan I can get behind.”

Mrs. Lykins grins back at me. “I’m so glad I’m doing this.” She relaxes in her chair. “I’ve been having pain for years now.” She gestures to her knee.

“I think you’ll be really happy with the results,” I say. “You’ll be back to wearing dancing shoes in no time.”

I review the rest of the joint replacement information packet with her. It’s a large part of my nursing job at the orthopedics clinic of Wellington Hospital in Louisville.

I’ve got a sweet setup, too. Dr. Planck moved hospitals a few months ago, and he helped get a specific job created for me here, one that includes time in the OR as well as clinic days. I’ve worked my ass off, so it’s nice to be recognized like this, to be given such an opportunity.

Mrs. Lykins thanks me, and we move out into the hallway. I walk along the gleaming floors to the clinician offices, hoping to have a quick snack. This morning’s coffee, my best tool for outwitting my lousy thyroid, isn’t really sticking.

Dr. Fields, one of our other surgeons, stops me in the hallway. His beige shirt matches his pale skin today. “Have you heard anything yet?”

This has been our song and dance all week. He asks me if I've heard anything, and I tell him no, that it will probably be a couple weeks. The "it" in question being a med school interview. I've applied to one in Louisville, where I'm hoping to stay.

"Still nothing." I shrug.

He bounces on his toes like an excited toddler. "It's going to be soon. I can feel it."

"Did you consult your star chart?"

He waves that off. "No woo type of stuff. Just faith in you."

My face heats. I'm awful at receiving praise. You wouldn't think so, given my general affinity for attention, but I draw the line at people complimenting me. "Thanks," I say as I duck my head.

I scarf some almonds in the break room. My mind drifts to the rest of my day: taking vitals, fielding patient phone calls, assisting with injections for joint pain. Clinic days provide a slower pace than the OR, and I like the variety.

I'm back in the hall when Dr. Fields's voice drifts from his office, where he's speaking to someone in an animated tone. The newest ortho bro, I bet. It's late July, and therefore time for a batch of residents to start their new rotations at the hospital's clinics and inpatient centers.

The sound of a low chuckle reaches me, followed by a muttered exchange about a current case. I pause by the door, straining to hear without rounding the doorway. There's something about that voice . . .

The laugh rings out again, and then the owner's voice rumbles with another observation. The blood drains from my face. The air grows heavy, and I'm reminded of something I studied in physics about time dilation, like I'm in a gravity well while the seconds crawl by outside my little sphere.

There's no way. It *cannot* be him. I refuse to entertain the thought.

I know that laugh, though, that speech pattern, that deep timbre with the barest hint of Eastern Kentucky twang, though it's faded just like mine has, maybe even with intentional effort. It belongs to someone I never want to see again. I heard his laughter throughout high school, usually directed at me in the cruelest manner possible. Maybe I'm hearing things. Besides, how could that man be a doctor now? How could that snake have dedicated his life to helping others?

If he is here, he must be one of those suit types selling orthopedic implants. Or more likely, he's some finance guy the hospital hired to try and

cut costs by compromising patient care. That sounds more like him.

I round the corner. Oh, God. It *is* him. He wears a white coat, an x-ray clutched in his hand like he might actually know how to read them.

Grant Wyndham.

One of my worst high school tormentors, in the flesh. He's changed a little, of course. His defined muscles bulge under his scrub top, and the planes of his face stand out a little more sharply. He's brushing his stupid blond hair away from his forehead and flashing his stupid straight teeth.

Well, I have straight teeth now, too, so fuck him.

I march over to Dr. Fields, refusing to be cowed. Let him meet me now, to see how well I function despite his previous efforts. I put on my best dazzling smile.

"Ah, Kendall. We've got a live one here. A third year." Dr. Fields gestures to Grant. Or Dr. Wyndham now, I suppose. "Dr. Wyndham, this is Kendall Hodges. She's one of the best nurses I've ever worked with."

I falter a bit, then stick out my hand. Grant's eyes flick over me, lightning fast, so brief I almost don't catch it. His lips part, and his eyes widen a little. He seems gobsmacked. Ha! Let him stew in his regret.

"Nice to meet you." He clasps my hand with his warm, dry palm. "I look forward to working with you over the next few months."

I stare at him so long his brow starts to furrow. No hint of recognition sparks in his eyes. He doesn't flinch.

I've pictured this moment, of course. In my fervent imaginings, I'm wearing my best figure-hugging dress and a pair of four-inch heels so I'm a bit taller than him. I have on expensive jewelry and an air of high-powered importance. He cowers under the force of my greatness. I hardly look at him as I step over his prone form writhing and sobbing on the floor.

That fantasy slides down the drain.

The son of a bitch doesn't know who I am.

To be fair, I've lost a lot of weight since high school, albeit unintentionally—turns out addressing food insecurity and an untreated medical condition had that side effect for me, though I've still got some curves. I wear my contacts a lot. I get my hair professionally done and I've had my teeth fixed, plus I know how to apply makeup now without comic book levels of contour. I have a different last name after dropping my dad's, and I go by Kendall instead of Kenzie.

Fine. I've changed a lot. Still, I can't believe he doesn't know me. I've hated him for years, and he doesn't even have the decency to recognize me.

He's looking at me, his gaze a bit intense.

"Same to you." I nod at him, making a quick decision. I bite my lip to keep from saying more. He doesn't deserve my energy. I'll get through the next three months with as little interaction as possible, then we'll part ways. I try to inject some friendliness into my voice. "Dr. Fields and Dr. Planck are the best in the business."

I step back toward the office door. My body lurches, and I can't seem to relax my shoulders. Dr. Fields speaks up.

"Kendall, you're from Eastern Kentucky too, right?" His voice thunders in the quiet office.

My shoulders inch further toward my ears.

"Oh yeah? Whereabouts?" Grant sounds like he's actually trying to be polite, covering for the evil ogre I know him to be.

My stomach dips. Hell no. I'm not doing this with him.

"Nowhere you would have heard of, I bet." I spin around without saying anything further. I would rather look like a weirdo than have this conversation.

I glance back at Dr. Fields, who eyes me with some concern. I scurry out into the hallway, one word playing on repeat in my head.

Fuck.

2

GRANT

This nurse *loathes* me, and I can't figure out why.

Animosity radiates off Kendall in waves as she preps a patient's skin for surgery, a knee replacement on a fifty-nine-year-old woman. She's scrubbing in today instead of circulating. She hums as she preps the OR and offers pleased smiles to everyone else in the room.

She turns to the physical therapy student who's observing the surgery. "Let me know if you start to feel hot," she says to him, "because it's not hot in here, and if you're warm you might be about to faint."

He salutes her, and she mimics the gesture, chuckling to herself as she continues her work.

When she nears me, though, she clenches her jaw. Her shoulders stiffen if I so much as speak a word to her, like the very idea of my presence sets her on edge. I don't get it. We've barely had any interaction. What have I done to earn such ire?

It's not an exaggeration to say she's nice to everyone but me. I would go so far as to call her gregarious, her laughter given easily and her voice carrying down the hallways of our workplace.

And look, she's also beautiful, not that it matters. Today, her bronze hair lies in a braid down her back, though she has it tucked under her scrub cap for the surgery. She's tall, only a few inches shorter than my own six foot one, with long legs and delicious curves. I've always kept things professional and appropriate with my coworkers, but it's hard not to notice

how pretty she is, and I've snuck a few glances at her over the week we've been working together.

Something about her provokes a familiar itch in my brain, a memory just beyond my reach. Have I met her before? Pissed her off somehow? But no, I would definitely remember her. I'm sure of it.

"It's really cool that you get to work in two different settings here," I tell her, aiming for some semblance of amicability. "I've never met another nurse in your position. You must have really impressed Dr. Planck."

She grunts. Fucking grunts at me, like she can't bear to utter words in my direction. She eyes Dr. Gambill, or George, as we call him, one of the other third-year residents and the most unrepentant asshole I've ever met.

"Does everything look okay here?" Kendall keeps her gaze on him, not offering the same courtesy to me.

George nods but doesn't smile. I really don't like the guy. Why is Kendall being nice to him and not me? Of the two of us, I'm much more polite to nurses. Hell, I've never had a complaint from *any* staff members about how I treat them.

Dr. Planck, the attending, a tall, solid man with a trimmed beard, scrubs in and positions himself across from me. He looks at me and George in turn. "Questions?"

I shake my head. "I'm ready."

George responds in kind, and Kendall dips her chin. Even her mask doesn't hide her frown as she maintains eye contact with everyone but me. She stands near me, but I'm surprised the side of my surgical gown hasn't frozen with the force of her frigid disdain.

I shake off the concern. I've got a job to do, and I plan to be competent at it.

Dr. Planck allows me to have a lot of responsibility, given how routine the procedure is, with his occasional guidance. The scents of the operating room almost soothe me: antiseptic, surgical smoke, a little sweat. The sound of the drill whirring reminds me of the one on my tool bench at home. People joke about orthopedics being carpentry for the human body, and there might be truth to that. Some chatter rises up around me as I drill into the femur, and I get pulled into a conversation or two about weekend plans—being a resident, my response to the "what are you doing this weekend" question is usually "working," but I provide a comment or two, anyway. One of the things that surprised me as a med student was the amount of

talking going on during routine surgical procedures. The suite quiets during the more focused or sensitive parts of surgeries, or when someone's life hangs in the balance, but otherwise the staff might as well be having lunch together. I've learned to tune things out.

Kendall, for her part, assists me with more wordless scorn. If I didn't know better, I'd worry about her stabbing me with a scalpel. She's all good-natured cheer with Dr. Planck, though, and she's a phenomenal scrub nurse, anticipating my needs and talking through a few details of the surgery with Dr. Planck. I can see why the attending's impressed with her.

"Thank you," I tell her when we're washing our hands at the scrub sink after the procedure. "You were amazing back there."

She turns her head toward me. The little twitch of her lips makes me think she might be about to smile at me, but then she rolls her eyes. She *rolls her eyes*.

"You're welcome, Dr. Wyndham." Her husky voice curls around my name like a boa constrictor squeezing the life out of something, like she wants to crush it with the force of her hatred.

What is wrong with this woman?

I corner Dr. Planck at the end of the day.

"I've done something to make Kendall mad," I say, "and I can't figure out what it is."

Dr. Planck lifts his bushy brows. "If she doesn't like you, then it would have to be something you've done. I haven't seen that from her before."

I hold back from huffing out a breath. That's exactly what I said. "Should I try to clear the air?"

"I'll talk to her about it." The doctor thumps me on the shoulder, then walks away.

And what will I do if that doesn't get us anywhere? I can't work well with a nurse who hates me. Frankly, it's pissing me off. What the hell is her problem?



By Friday night, I'm a zombie. Though the joint replacement rotation isn't as grueling as some of my other rotations, I spent the night at the hospital

last night, and I'm running on caffeine, protein bars, and fantasies involving my pillow and a solid five hours of sleep.

It's the life of a resident: eighty hours or more each week, sleepless nights, and work conditions that should be illegal but are designed to harden you in the face of the realities of being a surgeon. Unlike my trauma rotation, which still haunts me, this one mostly involves patients who aren't in mortal peril. I shudder as I think of an eleven-year-old I treated in my second year of residency who nearly lost a leg in a car accident. We managed to save him and his leg, but the kid nearly lost his life, and I picture the faces of his parents at least once a week.

The heat of the late evening air swamps me on my way from my car to my front door. It's the part of summer that drags on, each week closer to the promise of cooler, drier days in the fall, but it still feels endless by the time September rolls around. I open my front door and stroll into the kitchen, where the sight of a woman's nearly bare ass under a threadbare T-shirt greets me.

"Hello?" I stand in my own house, looking anywhere but at the woman in front of me.

She squawks and rushes to stretch her, or more likely my roommate's, shirt over her ass. "Oh, God. I'm so sorry. Adam told me you wouldn't be here yet."

"Ah. Yes. Well, I guess I'm here earlier than he thought."

She hurries back to my roommate's bedroom before slamming the door. I chuckle to myself.

Adam strolls out into the common area and stops by the kitchen, where I'm pulling a beer out of the fridge. One would think I would go straight to bed after an almost sleepless night, and even I don't understand why I don't just go collapse. All I know is that I'll toss and turn if I don't have an hour to sit and relax.

Adam's paramour walks out behind him, and he plants a quick kiss on her cheek before she scurries to the door. He scratches at his bearded chin, aiming a sheepish look in my direction.

"Sorry," he says.

"She didn't have to leave, man," I reply. I walk to our worn couch and he settles in the recliner next to me.

"Nah. She had somewhere to be early in the morning." He pulls his hair out of its low ponytail, letting it fan out around him.

“I don’t know how you have time for that, anyway.”

I met Adam—an internal medicine resident, a third year like me—through a roommate matching service. Even as a resident, he manages to make time for hookups. Between my arduous schedule, precious gym time, and hurried meals, my sexual satisfaction comes mostly in the form of perfunctory sessions in the shower. I had a steady girlfriend back in med school, but now the effort involved in meeting someone seems nearly insurmountable.

“For sex?” He scratches his scruffy jaw. “I find it really sad that you see that as something you’d have to set aside time for. Like it’s a dentist appointment or something.”

“I don’t have time for those, either.”

“Sounds like a healthy setup.” He props one ankle over his opposite knee. “How’s it going in the joint replacement world? You get to use any big saws this week?”

“Yes, yes. I know. Bone broke, me fix.” Besides the carpentry comparisons, the stereotype assigned to orthopedic doctors evokes dude-bro types, former jocks, and gym rats. Neanderthals, basically, before science figured out that Neanderthals were actually smart. “It’s good, though. It’s something I can see myself doing long term.” I take a big gulp of my beer. “There’s something super weird, though. About a nurse I work with.”

“Weird like the one I worked with who ate her lunch with gloves on?”

“No, like she absolutely despises me. Either I’ve fucked up really badly without knowing it, or she’s just nuts. I don’t know which.”

Adam sits forward in his chair. His smile widens, like my misfortune might be the best gossip he’s heard all year. “She one of those nurses who hates residents on principle? You know, wants to put us in our place?”

I shake my head. “She’s super nice to the others.”

“Hmm.” Adam taps his chin. “You must have met her before, then. And you’ve forgotten. College, maybe?”

“Nah. At first I thought she was familiar, but I would have remembered this woman.” I know I’m missing something, though—the thought burrows into my brain and won’t leave. Am I just an idiot? How could I have forgotten something that big?

“In a good way?”

“She’s gorgeous.”

“Aha. So you like her, and it’s bothering you that she doesn’t feel the same way.”

“I’m just being objective about her looks. I can’t like her when she won’t give me the time of day.” I toss my bottle cap into the air and catch it. “And she’s not shy or anything. She’s loud. Boisterous. Jokes around with everyone but me.” She’s completely uninhibited, actually—she would make me laugh if she wasn’t busy staring daggers at me all the time. “She’s also from the same part of the state as me. If one of the docs hadn’t told me, I could have heard it in her accent.”

“She has to know you from somewhere, then. Did you dick around with one of her friends?” He sits up, snapping his fingers. “You played football in high school, right? Could she have heard of you then? You were the star of her rival school’s team.” He scrunches his nose like a rabbit. “That’s dumb though. She wouldn’t care about that ten years later.”

I shudder. “I hope to fuck it’s not from high school.”

I was a holy terror in high school. It horrifies me in ways I’ve yet to come to terms with despite several years of therapy. Memories come flooding back sometimes—how I tormented those I deemed inferior and stepped on anyone in the way of my quest to be the best at everything—and I lie awake at night, shame crawling like ants all over me, fantasizing about the wrath I would bring down on my former self.

I wonder sometimes if medicine is a subconscious way for me to redeem myself. It doesn’t really work that way, but I can try.

“Yikes.” Adam’s voice brings me back to the present. “High school was that bad?”

I squeeze the bottle cap in my fist. The rough edges dig into my palm. “Yeah.” I don’t elaborate. I’m not getting into that with him right now.

“You can’t just ask her?”

I shrug. “I’m working up to that. It’s starting to piss me off, though.” I rub the back of my head. “Maybe I shouldn’t even care.”

Adam doesn’t say much other than a grumbled “I don’t know, man,” so I get up to make myself a sandwich, figuring I should at least nourish myself before I go to sleep. My phone chimes with a text as I slice a tomato.

MOM

I saw Rachel getting coffee with her mama today. She just got out of law school. Did you know that?

I roll my eyes.

ME

No thanks. I'm not dating anyone from home, anyway.

MOM

She's really pretty

ME

I'm sure she is. Still not interested.

MOM

And she's from a nice family. Well mannered

ME

You sound like you're talking about farm animals

MOM

stop that! I told her you'd be happy to hear from her.

I lift my eyes toward the ceiling. Jesus. The cords in my neck tighten.

I do remember Rachel from high school. She was a nice girl, and pretty, like my mom says, but I'm serious about avoiding anyone from home. Anyone who knew me then would know what an ass I'd been at that time. Besides that, I'm never moving back there. Blacksburg is the sort of place you leave behind in a cloud of dust on your way out.

MOM

She got a good job right out of school, her mama said. Making lots of money right out of the gate

That *is* impressive, I guess, but I can't entertain the notion.

I don't respond to my mom's text. Instead, I finish my sandwich and my beer, brush my teeth, and crawl under my covers, where I think about how to handle confusing and hateful nurses until I fall asleep.

3

KENDALL

I stop at the entrance to the break room when I see Dr. Fields and Grant yukking it up at one of the tables. The doctors usually don't have much time for lunch, but today they have a little downtime.

Dr. Fields waves at me. My gut tightens as I retrieve my salad from the fridge.

"Kendall! Come join us. We've got thirty whole minutes for once," he says.

"I don't want to interrupt anything." My eyes dart around the space, searching for an escape route. The other clinic nurse is still with Dr. Planck, so I don't have much of a buffer.

"Of course not." Dr. Fields clears a little space for me at their small table. "Come on over."

I eye the seat with what I'm sure is the same expression as someone watching a scuttling cockroach. "Yeah," I say after a few moments. "That's fine."

Grant aims a small, polite smile at me, his teeth gleaming white as porcelain. The expression looks odd on him. In the past, he sneered.

The chair's metal legs scrape against the silence as I pull it out. Grant's still smiling at me, but his mouth is wide, like a scary clown. The tension in his jaw makes it look more like a grimace. Does he smile involuntarily? I remember him being kind of serious, even as a high schooler, which made

his bullying all the more distressing—it felt like he meant it, like he wasn't joking.

"I like that coconut water." Grant nods to my drink. "Much healthier than soda, anyway."

I grip the bottle in question. He is *such* a snob.

"I drink soda too," I tell him. I lift my chin. "I tend to just have what I want."

"Oh. That's fine." He gulps. "Dr. Fields was telling me you've only been in this setting a few months?" Grant stares at me.

Why is he still looking at me?

"I worked in the OR exclusively before this, yeah." I stuff a bite of salad in my mouth, aggressively chewing.

"Ah. So, where else have you worked? Is this your favorite?"

This asshole's trying to make nice. Ha. Fat chance, motherfucker.

"Labor and delivery at the start of my career. I did some outpatient urology, then the OR, and now this hybrid job." I cram another bite of spinach and feta into my mouth. The hint of sweetness from the dried cranberries and the creamy feta make for a delicious combo, but Grant's ruining my lunch. I don't ask him any follow up questions.

His face falls a little bit when I glance at him. An unwanted pinch of empathy wells up. He has no idea who I am. He's going to think I'm just being a bitch, and though I shouldn't care, I find myself wanting to explain.

Under normal circumstances, I'll talk about anything with anyone. My friends joke that I would read my diary on stage if someone asked me to. But I don't owe him anything. I clamp my lips shut.

Dr. Fields furrows his brow at me. He's a young surgeon, only in his early thirties. No gray hair yet, and he's still got the enthusiasm of a physician early in his career.

"Kendall here has applied to med school," Dr. Fields says. He glances at me, then back at Grant.

Grant's eyes flash with surprise before he adjusts his expression to one of nonchalance. God, I hate him.

"Yeah?" He spears a piece of broccoli. I bet he eats the same bland meal every day. "I know a lot of nurses go for their nurse practitioner degrees, but I think med school's the way to go if you want to further your education. There's a big problem with scope creep with the midlevels."

My hands tremble with my rising ire. Of course his mind would immediately jump to how doctors are superior to physician's assistants or nurse practitioners.

"That's my backup plan," I say. "If I don't get into med school, I mean." I swallow. "I would never step outside my scope. I would work closely with a physician."

To my delight, Grant's face blooms in red, creeping from his neck to his hairline. The pink of his skin stands out against his dark blond hair. Unfortunately, the flush only serves to make him hotter. The warmth moving over his angular jaw and smooth skin is a fascinating sight.

"Sorry," he mutters. "I'm sure you'll be a great clinician no matter what you choose."

I scoff. "It's not always a matter of choice, anyway."

Dr. Fields's eyes dart between us. I know he's trying to figure this out. An awful idea comes to me then—what if Grant knows who I am, and he's pretending not to? I could think of a few reasons for that. He can feign ignorance if I'm the one who brings it up. Or maybe this is all a sick ploy to humiliate me all over again.

But no, this isn't high school. That's not what's happening. There's genuine puzzlement on Grant's face.

"You mentioned urogynecology, right?" Dr. Fields grips his fork. His smile grows strained.

I nod. I'm almost done with my salad; I can get out of this in five minutes. "I like the idea of helping women. Not enough people care about pelvic problems or about women who develop symptoms after giving birth. I want to be a part of helping them improve their quality of lives."

I side-eye Grant, lifting my chin. I'm glaring at him as though he might be personally responsible for all the fourth-degree perineal tears in the world. I'd love to blame all of women's suffering on him. "If I go the nurse practitioner route, I'd help with the non-surgical stuff."

Dr. Fields folds his hands together. "That sounds great, Kendall. Honestly."

Grant rubs the back of his neck. His skin's still splotchy. Ha! He's angry now. He was always easy to rile. He hasn't changed at all; he's just hidden his uglier side from view. I bet he's pursuing becoming a surgeon only for the money, and he doesn't understand caring about something just because you're passionate about it.

“I actually have an idea,” Dr. Fields says. His gaze darts back and forth again, landing on each of us in turn. At some point, I might have to tell him about our history, but I don’t feel right about that, even though Grant was awful to me in the past. “Grant has a quality improvement project he’s working on. We’re trying to further cut down on hospital readmissions. Maybe you could help him, Kendall. It’ll be a good thing to talk about in your interview, and you already have a hand in patient care. What do you think?”

My face tingles. “Oh, I doubt Grant has time to meet with me.”

Grant’s made of marble next to me. His arm brushes mine, and I swear cold seeps into my bones from the touch.

“I could probably make a little extra time,” Grant says, his expression stoic, like he might deserve praise for enduring the hardship of my presence. That weasel.

Why is he volunteering to spend time with me? He can tell I don’t like him, and it’s pissing him off. Plus he’s a surgical resident. Legally, he’s capped at eighty hours of work a week, but everyone knows it’s more than that. I can’t believe he would sacrifice even more of his precious time.

Dr. Fields has a point, though. I need all the project experience I can get if I land a med school interview.

I sigh. “Yeah, okay. That’s, um, a good idea.”

Dr. Fields smiles and spreads his arms wide as if to say, *See? I’m brilliant. My work is done.* Grant exhales. His eyes flick toward me like he might have been worried about what I was going to say. Do I scare him? Good.

I stand up to wash my plastic container, wondering how I’ve gotten myself into more time with Grant.



I rummage in my bag for my water bottle as I stand in the parking garage. I need to work through some of the roiling stress of today, so I’ve got a date with the gym this evening.

“Damn it.” I sigh before making my way back through the halls, which are mostly empty since it’s late, and into the clinic. I enter through the employee entrance and grab my water bottle from the break room.

Low voices drift out from Dr. Planck's office. A thin triangle of light projects out in the hallway. I stop just outside his door. It's cracked a bit, so the conversation inside is easy to pick up on.

I should definitely move. I know what I'm going to do, though, before I go through with it. My breath stalls.

"I have concerns about working with her," Grant says. "Not everyone has to like me, but she hates me so much it's impacting patient care. Just today, she disagreed with me in front of a patient. And frankly, I have qualms about her going to med school if she can't set aside petty grievances, or whatever this is."

My stomach drops. That asshole. I barely even disagreed with him, anyway—I just pointed out that we had the patient's x-rays so he might not need to order more. I strain forward to hear Dr. Planck's reply.

"This is really hard for me, Dr. Wyndham," Dr. Planck says. "You're the only one with these concerns. Everyone else works well with her. You can report her if you have cause for that, but this isn't her typical pattern of behavior."

I back away from the door when his voice swells as though he's moved a little closer. I look around me. Worst case scenario, I can duck into the hall closet. Or could I play it off like I'm just walking by? My fingers drift to my mouth, like I can hold back noise that way.

Grant's sigh punctuates the silence. I take another step back. My heart pounds.

"I'll give it more time," he says. "But I swear I'm not imagining things. That woman hates me for no discernible reason. If it doesn't get better, it might be worth alerting the admissions faculty about this."

My gut plummets further. He wouldn't. But I know he would—he always gets his way. He was always so intense. Wound tighter than a banjo string, my mom would say. I might jeopardize not only my current job but my future prospects if I don't fix this.

I scurry away from the door, careful not to make any shuffling noises, my mind whirling with what I have to process. I sneak back out the employee door and head toward my car again.

Now I have a few choices.

I can tell him who I am, which is probably the best thing to do. It's the action I would have taken if he were anyone else from high school. I'm not

good with secrets, and I can't deny the weightlessness I feel at the thought of spilling to him.

When I imagine the aftermath of that, though, my chest seizes and ice fills my veins. I want to cry, and I haven't done that in months. Years, maybe.

So that option's out for now.

I can hint I have good reason to hate him. Would that work for long? Probably not. I can be a little nicer and just grit my teeth and get through it. I didn't realize I'd been that awful, anyway. I can continue with what I'm doing, and risk not getting accepted to med school because he's badmouthed me to the faculty.

I bite my lip. I can fake pleasantness while still messing with him a bit. Little insults, like wrinkling my nose when he gets near as though he smells bad or sticking his coffee in the freezer when he's not looking. He won't have anything to complain about, at least nothing concrete, and I can have some fun.

I smile to myself. Bingo.



I pick up a gorgeous eyeshadow palette at the beauty store. Shimmery pink, gold, and ivory—yes, please.

Yikes. Eighty dollars? I gently set it back down. I have the money, technically, but one doesn't move past years of frugality and fear without a scar on the psyche. Sometimes I dream of draping my body in designer clothing and dropping hundreds of bucks on beauty products, but I can't bring myself to now, not when I still remember hiding school breakfast in my backpack so I knew I'd have something for dinner.

I turn to Joan, Maria, and Gwen—my best friends from nursing school—to find them hanging out in the skincare section of the store, having a somewhat passionate discussion about whether or not SPF in foundation actually protects one's skin.

Joan, ever the peacemaker, pats Gwen on the arm. "I think you're right. You still need sunscreen on under it."

Gwen nods and runs a hand over her blue-tipped, spiky hair. She points at my basket. "Ooh, blush. That looks fun."

I pluck it out of my basket. “You think? I can’t decide.” I turn it, looking at it from different angles.

Maria, my petite, soft-spoken friend with an affinity for colorful headbands—today it’s Kelly green—wrinkles her nose. “Their blush has this, like, white base that makes me look ashy. And their foundations don’t have a lot of range for darker skin.”

“Ew.” I drop it back onto the shelf. “Fuck that brand, then.”

Maria laughs as we make our way out of the store. No one buys anything.

We walk together down the sidewalk, peeking in some of the other stores. The sun still warms our shoulders despite the evening hour. After grabbing some ice cream from a nearby shop, we settle ourselves at an outdoor picnic table.

“You gonna be okay at work for the next few weeks?” Joan pulls a lock of blonde hair off her face. Joan worries about everyone—that’s kind of her thing, caring more about others than she cares about herself. I wish I could be more like her sometimes, but it also seems exhausting.

I wave her off. “I’ll be fine.”

Maria adjusts her headband, a nervous habit she adopts when she’s about to ask someone an uncomfortable question. Her voice comes out a little breathier than normal. “So, you’re sure Grant hasn’t changed from high school? He could be better.” She smiles. “Is he cute?”

“He’s really hot,” I grumble. “But this isn’t some sexy rivalry. I legitimately fucking hate him. And if he has changed, I’m not sure I care.”

“I hate him too, then,” Maria says. “Is he still being an ass?”

“Actually, yeah. Except now it’s worse, because he’s hiding it under layers of fake courtesy. He doesn’t understand why I hate him, and it’s making him crazy. He thinks I’m a raging bitch.”

Gwen, my prickliest friend, stops eating her ice cream to stare at me. A bit of ice cream drips off her nose ring, but she doesn’t seem to notice. “Wait. You didn’t tell him who you are?”

“Nope. I’m not going to either. I like messing with him.”

The others have stopped to listen. The golden-hour light paints a soft glow over the weathered picnic table. My sandaled feet brush against the soft grass. We’re sandwiched between two businesses in an outdoor corridor with eclectic furniture. It’s lovely, but I suddenly feel uncomfortable.

“I’ve never known you to keep anything to yourself. Ever,” Gwen says. “You couldn’t even get through dinner without telling us about that dream where you bang your spin class teacher.”

“Don’t we all dream about that kind of thing? He’s cute.”

“I’m just saying,” Gwen says. “You’ve gotta work with this guy for almost three more months, right? I just don’t see how you can go that long without revealing anything.”

I grin at her. “You going to live vicariously through my drama?”

“I mean, kind of, yeah. But I also just think it could help clear the air. Maybe he’ll know to stay away from you then.”

I shrug, trying to deflect despite knowing she’s not going to let his go. I have a close bond with my three best friends, but of all of them, Gwen and I butt heads the most. Gwen can be bristly, despite being completely gooey on the inside, and I’m loud, brash, and obstinate, and together we’re like a Brillo pad meeting a brick wall. We love each other anyway.

“I’ll tell him eventually, I think. He hurt me a lot in high school, and you know how I am with vulnerability.” I shudder, then turn toward the others. Gwen’s face softens. “I’m supposed to have a high school reunion in two weeks, and I told a couple of my old friends I would be there. If he’s there, I’ll let him know.” I’m almost certain he won’t be, but I don’t say that out loud. What resident has time for such a thing? “Anybody want to come with?”

To my surprise, Gwen nods. “I’m down,” she says. “I’m not doing anything that weekend, and I’ve been wanting to see where you grew up, anyway.”

“Are you sure?” I stare at Gwen. “You want to drive all the way across the state to my tiny hometown with me? We’ll have to stay the night. I was kinda joking about someone coming with me. Also, you have ice cream on your nose.”

Gwen shrugs before wiping her face. “You look like you need the support. I’ll go, I promise.”

“All right, then. It’s a date.” I drop my spoon into my empty ice cream cup and feel my cheeks lifting. “I have other news too.”

Joan squeals. “Is it what I think it is?”

“Yep.” I’m grinning now. “I got an interview.”

A chorus of congratulatory whoops go up around the table. My face heats.

“So, I guess I’m finally giving up on my dream of being a famous singer. Provided I get in, that is.” I smile again.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been this happy,” Joan says, and I laugh.

“I don’t want to get ahead of myself.” I look around the table. “But at least I have something to look forward to.”

“I still think you shouldn’t have to play nice with your former bully,” Maria says.

I laugh. “I mean, I’m not really playing nice. I’m having fun giving him hell.”

Driving him crazy is only fair, really. I can make sure he regrets all his life choices. Now that I’ve reframed my problem, it’s nearly orgasmic, this feeling of power I hold.

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A few days later, I'm in a conference room with Grant as he talks about his ideas for his—our—project.

I scowl at my coffee as I listen to him. It's five-thirty in the fucking morning—the only time that suits Grant, apparently—and I'm used to getting up early, but this is absurd. The full, bright moon gleamed in the sky on my way in this morning. I couldn't even have my caffeine immediately because my meds need thirty minutes before I can eat or drink anything. Grant, for his part, looks fresh. He's probably already been at the gym for two hours, contemplating his superiority as he lifts weights. As for me, I'm exhausted, though sometimes it's hard to tell if that's lack of sleep or my poor excuse for a thyroid talking.

His concepts for a project are fine. Hospital administration tends to be fond of efforts resulting in things like shorter hospital stays, fewer infections, and fewer falls. I bet Grant would side with the bean counters who sometimes dictate patient decisions. He's talking about ways to reduce complications for patients after joint replacement.

“What do you think?” He glances at me, his eyes tracing over the planes of my face and flicking down my body for the tiniest fraction of a second.

Now *here's* an opportunity. Is he noticing me as a woman? There's a teeny, tiny part of me that enjoys that idea, even if it's a part of myself I hate. There's something validating about it. More than validation, though, is

the idea that I can exploit it, and revel in a bit of grim satisfaction that his former self would be horrified by it.

“I like the idea of improving on patient education before surgery.” I tap a pen against my chin, then let it trail down to my collarbone. His eyes follow the movement before returning to my face. “I give patients a packet of information, but we could do more than that. I have a PT friend we could ask who might be willing to give us some recommendations including an updated exercise list, how to make your home safer, how to navigate stairs. That sort of thing. If it works well we could start having patients do an appointment with PT prior to surgery. That’s not standard here yet.”

Grant pulls his mouth to one side. “So, you want to involve more disciplines?” Somehow, he makes the question sound like an accusation.

“I’m just thinking of things that drive readmission rates. Falls, infections, DVTs, uncontrolled pain.” I tick them off on my fingers. “Heart events, though that would be a different kind of preparation. I could have my friend help us come up with some expanded education.”

“The education idea feels on track to me. And you’re right, there are some facilities that do pre-op PT appointments as a rule, and we aren’t one of them. I think because we have patients who drive from far away, but that might just mean we have to develop some contacts with therapy clinics in smaller towns.” He frowns again. “How would we measure that?”

I sip my coffee, which still scalds my tongue, but I need the caffeine hit. I take the lid off to let it cool. “What outcome are we actually aiming for here? We need to narrow that down.”

“I’m thinking thirty-day readmission rates. That should be easy enough to track.”

I nod and smile. “Perfect.”

His eyes widen. Have I never smiled at him? I guess not. His gaze turns wary. This could be fun, flirting with him, then going hot and cold. Maybe I can convince him he’s losing his mind.

“Dr. Fields was right,” he says carefully. “You would be suited for med school, I think. I’m glad you applied.”

Just like that, my back is up again. He thinks other medical careers are beneath him. Beyond that, he threatened my own aspirations, and now he has the gall to act like he’s supporting me?

I hate this man to my core. I’m not sure I can even pretend to flirt with him.

“What’s wrong with being a nurse?” I set my coffee on the table and scoot away. We’re sitting too close together at this huge table, anyway.

He lifts his hands. “Absolutely nothing. I just think you would make a good physician. You have the initiative and the brains for it. And it’s more money, besides.”

An inferno roils in my abdomen. He of course would think that anyone capable would just pursue med school instead of getting a lowly nursing degree. Never mind that many people have good reasons for pursuing those “lesser” vocations, not all of them based on lack of intellect.

“Well, some of us were too poor for med school. Sue me.”

“Woah.” He rests his hands on the table again and softens his voice like he might be approaching a feral animal. “I know that. Nursing is a great profession, and I respect it. You’re a brilliant nurse and that’s obvious from just the two weeks I’ve been here. I was only agreeing with Dr. Fields, that’s all.”

Silence hangs in the air. I don’t know what to do with this version of Grant, one who reminds me of the dick I went to school with, but who also has these moments where I’m not so sure he’s the same. If I’d just met him, I might think he’s a nice person.

He’s only being kind because of how I look now, I bet. I hate that the world works this way, that anyone would treat me so much differently when I’ve been the same person all along. I harden myself against Grant again. Fuck this guy. I was delightful when I was fatter and poorer, and I’m still delightful now.

“Can I ask you something?” Grant’s eyes search my face.

I offer a perfunctory nod.

“Why do you hate me so much?”

I look down, meeting his eyes again after a protracted moment. A clock ticks loudly on the wall. So much for changing tack. I guess I can’t hide how I feel about him. “I heard you talking to Dr. Planck. About me, I mean. And how I’ve been awful to work with, and you might tell the med school faculty. So, that’s one reason.”

His eyes widen. “I’m sorry you heard that. You have to know how testy you’ve been with me, though.”

“So your first thought is to go tattle on me to my future associates?”

He throws his hands up. “No, my first thought was to try and be nice to you! But that wasn’t working.”

I purse my lips. Damn it. “Sorry.” The word burns leaving my mouth. “I’ll do better.”

“That’s okay. I’m sure it’s not personal—”

“No. It is personal.”

He blanches. “Okay. Wow. So you do hate me then?”

“Hate is a strong word,” I say.

“Ouch.” He clutches some of his notes in his hand like he’s thinking about crumpling them up. “Well, there was clearly something I said or did. I would love to know what it is.”

The whirl of the air conditioner startles me in the silence. “Is it bothering you that much?”

“I don’t know.” He studies me. “I like getting along with the people I have to work with. And forgive me, but this makes no sense at all.”

My eyebrows lift. “You sure you weren’t looking for a hook up or something?”

“Jesus.” He barks a laugh. “You say whatever’s in your head, don’t you?”

“Yeah.” I smile despite the tension. “It’s a big problem for me.”

He leans back in his conference room chair. His scrubs hug his thighs as he spreads his knees apart. “No, I’m not looking for a hook up. I don’t do that with coworkers, anyway.”

The way he scans my body again undermines his point, but I don’t call him on it.

“Okay.” I nod. “We can keep working on our project. For right now, I’ll try to be more pleasant at work. Just, please don’t call any of the med school faculty.” My heart twists. Now I sound like I’m begging. This isn’t going how I planned.

“I won’t.” His lips kick up on one side. “Even though this is patently ridiculous.”

I shrug, but my chest burns. I’m swinging between hate, indifference, and grudging respect like a monkey grabbing vines.

“Fine.” He sighs. “I’m done trying.”

My emotional state continues to lurch violently from one extreme to the other throughout our morning at the clinic. Grant keeps cutting off my attempts at hostility at the knees. Either he’s matured, which is entirely possible, I suppose, or he is very good at faking it, which also seems plausible. My hate keeps slipping through my fingers, though, and I’m

disappointed in myself that it only takes a few pleasant words to dull the edges of my dislike.

The end of this three months can't come soon enough.

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“I’m going out tonight. I think you should come.”

Adam adjusts the collar of his neon-pink polo shirt. He’s pulled his long hair up.

I laugh before catching his expression. “Wait. Are you serious? Uh, no. I’m beat.”

It’s another Friday night, the third week of August, and yet another weekend that has arrived in a haze of exhaustion. My rotation’s going well, though I’m still no closer to figuring out Kendall’s deal. I’m awed by her clear brilliance and set on edge by her dislike of me, all at the same time.

“You never go anywhere, though. I think you’ll enjoy yourself. You can have one drink, unwind a little. Meet some other friends of mine.”

“I have a conference tomorrow. I need to get some sleep.”

“I’m busy tomorrow too, obviously,” Adam says. “I’m only going to stay out for a couple of hours. I think it’s something we need to do sometimes, you know?”

I scratch my chin. I don’t get a lot of leisure time, that’s true, but maybe Adam has a point. I’ve been stressed, and I probably need a little time to disconnect from the realities of becoming a surgeon.

“You could meet someone,” Adam says. “Blow off some steam.”

Now that *is* really tempting. Despite my fatigue, I’m starting to feel the effects of my dry spell. It’s not just that I need sex, either, though that

would be ideal. I think I might need to touch another human being in a setting that doesn't involve surgical gloves and a scalpel.

"Fine," I say. "I'm in."

"Really?" Adam's face transforms, lighting up like a Christmas tree. "Awesome! We're meeting for some apps first, then heading to a place down the street." Adam is from Texas, and his drawl sounds a bit more pronounced when he's excited.

"Yeah, you're right. I need a little more fun in my life, I think. Where's this place we're going? After we eat, I mean?"

"It's a karaoke bar. The best one, I've heard."

I groan. "God, I hate karaoke."

"Nah, it's going to be a great time. You'll see."

And what the hell? I don't get to do much for fun. Maybe I'll even get lucky and meet someone.



Nikki's Karaoke Bar of Louisville has the sort of dive bar quality common to the part of the city we live in: exposed brick, sticky tile floors, worn pool tables in the corner of the room, a pervasive stale beer smell, and a little raised platform stage backlit by neon lights, where a group of tipsy thirty-something women currently belts out "Baby Got Back," of course. I almost turn and walk out. This is so not my scene.

Adam urges me on in front of him. Adam's friends are definitely more boisterous than me. I'm out of place, as though Adam invited his one killjoy friend who blabbers on about gas prices and takes jokes too literally. I paste on a smile. I can be fun, right? Or has residency stolen my ability to do that?

I order myself a gin and tonic and take a seat near the back of the room with Adam and the others. If this doesn't go well, I'll have one drink and take a cab back home.

My eyes catch on a woman in a glittery dress by the bar. My gaze travels down.

And oh my fuck. She's gorgeous. My lips freeze at the edge of my glass. The owner of said dress possesses a pair of gorgeous tan legs, thick,

long brunette hair threaded with caramel, and a dip at the front of her outfit highlights some of the most luscious cleavage I've ever seen.

Bingo.

I have to talk to this woman. I barely glimpse a hint of her profile, but I stare, transfixed, as she turns my way a little more. I've never wanted to see someone's face so badly.

Time swells, then collapses, as she faces me. An icy cold sensation sweeps over my skin.

My mouth drops open. Damn it. We're in a large city with hundreds of bars, and the one person I don't want to see is in this one.

Kendall. Of course it's her. She's dominated some of my recent thoughts, and though I'm serious about not hooking up with coworkers, she looks delicious enough to eat, even if she won't deign to give me the time of day. She's dressed like she might be attending the Grammys in her sparkly blue dress, but it isn't ridiculous on her. Her personality is big and loud.

I keep watching as she turns to her friend. Kendall's tall, and her blonde friend, an athletic-looking woman in a more subdued cotton sundress, is even taller than Kendall, around six feet, if I had to guess. They navigate back to their own table, moving through the crowd like two towering, elegant queens, drawing other eyes as they go.

Adam nudges me. "Earth to Grant." He follows my gaze to Kendall's table, where she and her friend join another woman with short, blue-tipped hair. "Yeah, I noticed those three when we came in. Pretty girls."

Pretty seems an understatement, especially for Kendall, but I nod. "The one in the blue dress is the nurse who hates my guts." I down a swallow of my gin. "So, that's fun."

"Ah. Yikes." Adam grimaces. "Hopefully she doesn't think you followed her here. It's going to be awkward if she thinks you're stalking her."

"I wasn't even thinking that, but thanks."

"You aren't going to say hi?"

"Nah. Maybe she won't see me." My eyes are still fixed on Kendall.

"Good call. Don't say anything, just sit in the shadows and stare at her."

I swing my face toward Adam. "And what would you have me do? She won't want to talk to me. She hates my guts."

I return my attention to the stage, where the first notes of “Girl on Fire” play. To my shock, Kendall takes the stage. She clutches the microphone with an easy confidence, smiling at her friends and the rest of the crowd. She still hasn’t seen me, apparently.

She doesn’t look nervous at all. She winks at someone in the crowd, shimmying her hips a little, and blood rushes from my head in a dizzying wave. My God.

She can’t stand me. Frankly, I don’t like her either. But I’ve never found someone so attractive in my whole life.

Her mouth opens, and my jaw drops. She has rich, sultry vocals, a beautiful alto if I remember choir sections correctly, and I straighten in my seat.

“Jesus,” Adam says. “She can sing.”

“Yeah.” I’m unable to look away. She sways with the beat and closes her eyes when her voice crescendos. Is this girl good at everything?

Something about her singing scratches at my subconscious. Where have I heard it before? Is she some secret starlet or something? Has she been on the radio? No, that’s stupid. Still, I cock my head, trying to place the sound.

She belts out the whole song, then takes a bow at the end of her performance, giggling in front of the drunken crowd, who all cheer for her. Her friends high-five her when she returns to their table. Her smile widens. How can she do that? How can she be so awful to me when she’s so joyous with everyone else? Her hatred is a blemish on my otherwise mundane life. No one has disliked me this way for a long time.

I lean toward Adam, whose friends look like they might be gearing up for some performance of their own. “I think I’m going to go,” I say.

Adam starts to protest, but I hold up my hand. “I know, I’m boring,” I say.

The truth is, I can hardly stand to watch Kendall anymore. I say goodbye to Adam and his friends, then I move toward the exit. I spare one last glance at Kendall, though, and unfortunately, she looks toward me at the same moment. Her eyes widen.

“Dammit,” I mutter.

We both freeze, and then I sigh and move toward her. I at least have to say hello. I squeeze by a few tables. Someone sloshes beer on me, and I curse.

Kendall, for her part, purses her lips before stretching them into a forced smile. It looks painful. Good grief, what is her fucking problem?

“Sorry,” I say, unsure what I might be apologizing for. I continue as she lifts her eyebrows. “My roommate dragged me here.” I gesture behind me.

She nods, then perhaps realizing she should be polite, points to her friends in turn. “That’s Joan,” she says, indicating the tall blonde, “and that’s Gwen. Girls, this is Grant.” She emphasizes my name with enough malevolence that my own eyes widen.

Gwen, the woman with the blue in her hair, glares. The venom in her gaze could burn me.

All right. I’ve had it now. When she said it was personal, I chalked up her distaste for me to something offhand I said or did the first time we met, but whatever it was, it must have been absolutely awful. Her friends look like they hate me too. To be the object of such unmitigated ire bewilders me. What the fuck have I done? And why won’t she tell me? Has she lied to her friends about me? Created some weird fantasy where I’ve wronged her?

“Nice to meet you.” I offer my own tight smile. I look at Kendall again. “You have a beautiful voice.”

Her smile falters. “Thank you.”

“Okay.” I incline my head toward the door. “I was just heading out.”

I turn and walk away, my steps gaining speed as I near the exit. I’m done talking to that awful woman. I mean, sure, she’s beautiful and talented and smart. It’s too bad she’s unreasonable.

Someone tugs on my arm. I turn around, expecting Adam, but my mouth drops open at the sight of Kendall standing before me. She speaks to me over the low warble of a man singing “Wonderwall.”

“I know this doesn’t make any sense to you,” she says. “Me being such a bitch.”

My heart moves in my chest, a thumping rhythm that announces my discomfort. “I don’t understand why you hate me, no.”

She chews on her lip. My eyes fall there, to where she’s painted on some bright pink lipstick. For a quick flash, I imagine smudging it with my own mouth. I shake my head.

“You also don’t mince words,” I say. “At least from what I’ve seen. And you still won’t tell me what I’ve done.”

“Maybe you should think a little harder.” She fiddles with the hem of her dress, and my gaze flicks down.

God, her legs are sexy. I'm also trying to keep my gaze from her phenomenal cleavage, but it's a losing battle. Her words confuse me even more, though. I've come up with nothing in all the time I've spent thinking about it.

I tug at the ends of my hair. "What the hell does that *mean*?"

"Come on, now. Have you always been respectful like this?"

I scoff. "No. I was an absolute menace when I was younger, but I've matured."

Her mouth drops open. "I'm surprised you would admit to that."

"And I don't understand your shock." I narrow my eyes. "You knew me when I was younger?"

"I never said that."

"Where exactly are you from again?"

Her lips fall apart and her eyes dart to the side. I'm under the distinct impression I've made her nervous, though that seems ridiculous. I thought she was unshakable.

"I told you," she says, "most people have never heard of it." She stands there staring at me for a few more moments, then turns toward her friends, who watch her. "I'm gonna head back." She mutters a goodbye and scurries away.

I watch her go before moving toward the door again. I'm going to lose my mind trying to figure this out.

I'm getting pissed off again too. I mash the button for the rideshare app with more force than necessary as I think about it. She despises me, evades all potential explanations, and admits to being hateful without any promise to do better. I've tried several tactics, and none of them have worked. I'm done with her games.



I've worked up a good temper by the time I have my next meeting with Kendall. She's beat me to the conference room, and when I walk in, she doesn't even look up from her phone at me. Her hair lies in a thick braid over her shoulder, and she wears her glasses, a picture that elicits an unfortunate stern teacher fantasy in my brain for half a second before I quell it. I keep thinking of how she looked in that stupid dress at the karaoke bar.

Not to mention her sultry voice. The vision has been playing out in my brain for the better part of the week.

I settle myself in the chair next to her. She still isn't looking at me.

Fuck that. She doesn't get to treat me like an old shoe.

I clear my throat.

She finally glances at me. "Sorry." She doesn't sound sorry at all as she sets her phone on the gleaming conference room table. Her stare, now directed at me, sends an electric buzz up my spine. I don't want to have a reaction to her, but my body lights up without my permission.

She holds my gaze for a beat longer than necessary. An errant notion crosses my mind: Could she be attracted to me, and she's angry that I've been dismissive of her or something?

But that would be absolutely unhinged behavior. Besides that, I overheard her talking about a recent date, and she didn't seem to give a flying fuck about whether or not he called her after that.

She finally looks away. "I've made a little progress on a new packet we can give patients," she says. "It's got all the stuff we talked about. I checked with our health disparities office to make sure it's at the right reading level. I thought you could have a look at it, modify it with your own ideas."

I rake the papers toward me, heart pounding for reasons I can't discern.

"Wow." My eyes track over the different sections. "This is amazing. You've done a lot of work here."

When I glance at her again, her lip is caught between her teeth. *God.* I've never experienced this lightning-strong, electric pull before. I'm a professional. And I can't stand her, so there's that.

"I've been thinking on some of these things for a while now." She shrugs. "And we don't always do a great job with expectations in healthcare."

I study her, eyes tracing over her face, down the column of her throat. "Can we have a reset? Maybe set aside whatever differences we have so we can get through this?"

She sighs and pinches the bridge of her nose. "Differences," she mumbles. Her hand comes back to the table. "Fine. Yes. We need to get along for this part, I guess."

That's not exactly glowing acceptance, but I'll take it. I take a breath. "You got an interview, I heard?" At her nod, I continue. "Did you take your pre-reqs in undergrad?"

“By ‘getting along,’ you mean we have to chitchat?”

“Jesus. I guess not.” My fists grip the armrests of my chair.

“Okay, okay.” She holds up her hand. “Yes. Chemistry. Physics. Biology. I thought I might go to med school back then. The credits are still good, though.”

“And how did you do?”

She scowls and lifts her chin. “I did well. Why?”

Is she ever going to stop antagonizing me?

“It’s just that I figured, that’s all.” I drum my fingers on the table. The scent of her coffee stirs my nostrils as she lifts the lid from her cup. “So, what’s your thing, then?”

“My thing?” She narrows her eyes as though she suspects me of mocking her.

“Yeah, like your passion. The frosting.” I gesture toward the papers. “I know it’s not ortho. You mentioned women’s health, maybe?”

“Oh.” She sucks her lip between her teeth again. “Yeah. I’ve tried a few settings to get different experiences and see what I like the most. I’m not, like, flaky or anything. I just wanted to know what’s out there. So far, I’m interested in helping fix the problems with maternal outcomes in the US.” She smiles, and it softens her face, smooths the angry lines between her brows. “Kinda silly, huh? Thinking I can help in any way with something so big?”

“No. That’s not silly at all.”

She stares at me again. “I wish you weren’t trying to be nice. It makes this difficult.”

“You know I don’t know what you’re talking about, right?”

She shrugs, but the slow spread of her grin makes it clear she’s kind of enjoying my discomfort. Is this whole thing just her messing with me?

My gaze tracks the edge of her profile. She does seem a little familiar. I thought it was just the accent at first, but maybe not. The idea nudges at my brain. Nothing breaks through. I don’t recognize her name, and I honestly think I’ve been nothing but cordial to this woman.

Something Adam said comes back to me. I snap my fingers. “Did you go to Pine County?”

A startled laugh leaves her. “What?”

“I dated a girl from there. It ended really badly, and she swore she would hate me forever. You were friends with her, I guess?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

My heart skips. “Pine County High School. It’s the county bordering my home county, back in Blacksburg.” My shoulders slump. “I thought maybe you knew her. The girl I went out with.”

“I know where it is. But no, I didn’t go there.”

“Damn it. I thought I had it.”

“Keep trying. I like seeing your wheels spinning,” she says.

I knock my fist against the table a few times. “I would remember dating *you*, though. Even if it was only one time.”

She laughs in delight. My hands clench. She’s infuriating. I don’t know how she keeps pulling me in like this, only to piss me off again. At my expression, she rakes the papers toward her.

“Never mind. We need to get started with our day, anyway,” she says.

“Fine,” I say. I stand quickly and walk toward the door, hoping to rattle her, but when I look back, she’s taking a sip of her coffee with a distant expression on her face.

6

KENDALL

On our next clinic day, I take a call from Margaret, one of the physical therapists in the outpatient clinic downstairs. Her voice pitches high and thin.

“I’m concerned about Ms. Lopez,” she says. “Her left leg is really swollen. Like, way more than normal. And her calf’s warm and tender. I’m worried about a DVT.”

I pull up Ms. Lopez’s chart. She’s seventy-three and had a hip replacement last week, but no complications at that time.

“Who’s she with?” I message Grant on our interoffice system as I’m talking. He’s not the only resident here today, but he was in on Ms. Lopez’s case.

“Her husband.”

“Okay. Send them up here, then. We’ll do an ultrasound.”

I intercept Ms. Lopez and her husband on their way to the clinic. She’s using a walker and has a limping gait, which I would expect after a joint replacement, but her red, bulging lower limb sets off alarm bells in my head.

I talk to Grant in the hallway after I get her vitals and after the ultrasound is performed.

“It’s textbook,” I tell him. “Her skin’s red and hot to the touch. Positive Homan’s sign. I could tell even without the ultrasound, but that confirms it.”

Grant drops his head. He's got dark circles under his eyes, and his skin has taken on a little pallor, like he was up for most of the night. Maybe I shouldn't care about him, but a little twinge of sympathy squeezes my chest anyway. It's unethical what residents are put through.

He pinches the bridge of his nose. "Okay." He lets his hand fall. "I'll talk to her and her husband. She'll probably need to be admitted for observation. She's got a lot of compounding diagnoses."

He knocks softly at the door where we have her roomed, then pushes it open. Ms. Lopez's eyes are wide. She's tearful as her gaze darts over each of us in turn.

"Am I going to be okay?" She clutches her husband's hand.

Grant squats down in front of her. "I'm Dr. Wyndham. I'm one of the residents who works with Dr. Fields." He holds her gaze. "You'll probably need further testing, but we think you have a blood clot," he says. "Do you know what that is?"

She nods, her movements wooden. "Yes, I do."

"Have you had any shortness of breath?"

She shakes her head.

"That's good news, then. We might have to admit you to the hospital for more observation. You'll get treatment, and we want to make sure you don't develop further complications, which can be serious. I want to emphasize that it's a good thing we found it. And it's a great thing your PT called us."

Her shoulders relax a little. She's hanging onto Grant's words. I find myself captivated by him as well. He's being patient, and so gentle that if you'd told me in high school this is how Grant Wyndham would turn out I would have laughed in your face.

"Will your husband be able to stay with you?"

A hint of concern crosses her face. She glances at the man in question. "He has to work tomorrow."

Grant looks at him, then back at Ms. Lopez. "Can he take off?"

I clear my throat. A wash of anger rises in my chest. "I think she's worried because he might not have much sick time."

"It's okay," her husband says quickly. "I'll make it work."

Grant's cheeks redden. He's been really sweet with her, to the point I would be swooning like an old Southern lady with the vapors, if I didn't know him. But he's clearly still the same as always, deep down. He doesn't understand what it's like to need money.

“What other questions do you have for me?” He’s still crouching down in front of her.

“Um.”—she looks at her husband, who squeezes her hand—“you said something about treatment?”

“Medicines, most likely, in addition to the observation.” He nods to her husband. “I know he’ll be with you for now, but is there anyone else you want us to call?”

She shakes her head.

“Okay. We’re going to take care of you. I’m going to make some calls so our inpatient staff know to expect you. And I’ll be checking up on you as well.”

She nods. “Thank you, Dr. Wyndham.”

When we’re back in the hallway, I look at him. “You managed to calm her down.”

“Don’t hurt yourself with the praise,” he says, smiling. “You look uncomfortable.”

“Yes, well. I wasn’t expecting it, is all.”

His brow creases. I walk toward the office, and he follows me.

“You think I would be mean to a terrified lady I’m supposed to be caring for?”

I spin around. My shoulders stiffen. “I wouldn’t put it past you.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

I roll my eyes and turn around again, ignoring his sputtered protests. I’m going to have to tell him soon. I don’t want that conversation, not when I know it’s going to be worse than passing kidney stones.

I *am* being ridiculous. I realize that. Aside from his threat to interfere with my med school interview, he’s given me no indication he’s the same person he used to be. I should be able to bring this up with him. Maybe I’ll feel relieved, having this out in the open. Maybe he’ll be contrite. I at least have to give him that opportunity.

“Look,” he says, but I don’t face him, “I can’t do whatever this is anymore. If you continue to behave like this, I’ll have to talk to Dr. Planck again. I don’t want to, but I will.”

I drop my head into my hands. Here we are again. I failed at faking niceness, and this is what I get.

“All right,” I say, pulling my shoulders back to look at him. “I’ll do better now. I promise.”

And I'll talk to him. As soon as I get back from home this weekend, we'll have an important conversation.

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I notice the pull as we get closer to my hometown. The terrain changes, moving from rolling hills to higher mountain peaks and lower valleys, and my chest tightens.

I give the place too much power. It has shaped me, yes, but it doesn't rule me.

"Am I going to be, like, okay here?" Gwen frowns at me from the passenger seat as I breathe through my oncoming anxiety. "I know these rural areas aren't as, uh, friendly to the bisexual community."

I prod the inside of my cheek with my tongue, thinking. "In terms of my brother and his wife? They'll love you." I pause again. "It's not like being in the city, not like Louisville, I'll give you that."

I think of Grant as I turn off onto the exit that will take me toward Blaine's house. Grant came from here, and he doesn't seem to be bigoted. It's the one good thing I can say about him now. He even wears one of those rainbow badges on his nametag, the ones the hospital gives out for providers who want to demonstrate they're safe.

"It's better now than it was when I was a kid. And maybe different than people think. I don't think they will, but if anyone looks at you sideways at this reunion, I'll beat them up."

"Aw. You'd do that for me?"

"Absolutely. I love you, and I would do anything for you." I slow to accommodate the curvier road. "Just like you'd run over Grant with your

car if I asked.”

Gwen cocks her head. “You know what? I think I would.” She sighs. “But thanks for offering. Sometimes I feel like I love this state more than it loves me back.”

“Oof.” I slide a glance at Gwen as I take another curve. The mountains rise around us like tree-covered sentinels, the cloudless blue sky at their backs. “You want to go back to Louisville? I’ll turn around right now.”

“It’s okay,” she says. “I trust you.”

“I know what you mean, though. And I’m sorry. I know what it is to love and hate a place at the same time. You can love it for what it gives you and be angry at its shortcomings all the same.”

Gwen gives me a once-over. “You do kinda look like my trophy wife.”

I laugh. I’m wearing a hot pink dress with a little dip in the front, showcasing some of my curves. Gwen has on black pants and a loose, short-sleeved blouse.

“I’ve got mixed feelings about showing up like this,” I say. “Like, this isn’t some revenge body bullshit. If I had the money, I would have worn this kind of stuff back then too.”

“It doesn’t have to be. You look fabulous in it now, and I’m sure you would have been fabulous in it then.”

The road straightens, and I speed up again. We’re about twenty minutes from Blaine’s house, where we plan to stay, given it’s almost three and a half hours back to Louisville. We pass a man on the side of the road who’s taking a nap on a mattress in the back of a truck bed, and Gwen’s eyes widen.

“Can I just talk through this, though? I’ve got some complicated stuff going on. And you know how I hate having feelings,” I say.

“Ugh. Fuck feelings.”

“Exactly. I’m just angry that I’ve been treated differently by everyone because I’m skinnier now. I feel like exactly the same person I was, just with more resources. It’s absolute bullshit.” It’s true. I’ve been fat, I’ve been thin, and I’ve been in between, but nothing changes about me except for how people approach me. “But by the same token, there’s a tiny part of me that wants to be seen as hot in front of the people who were cruel to me.”

Gwen smiles at me. “Your accent gets thicker the closer we get to your home. Wild.”

I flip her off.

“You’re just human, babe, like the rest of us,” she says. “I’m so sorry you had to deal with assholes. For the record, though, even if you looked exactly the same now as you did then, you still deserve to be treated with the same dignity and respect. And you’re hot no matter what size you are.”

“Ah.” To my horror, I blink away tears. “Thank you for that.”

We eventually pass my old home, and I don’t say anything, though I do crane my neck a little to look at it. The siding isn’t dirty, since my mother makes sure to keep it at least looking somewhat clean, but it droops in places and features a few large cracks. A large rise extends behind it, making it appear as though it’s built into the side of the hill. The battered wood framing the windows looks like it might not hold up against the next round of winter weather. A wooden ramp for my brother runs parallel to the house and then angles in to meet the front door, even though he can make it up the stairs and sometimes kicks up a fuss about not needing the accommodation.

Blaine and I have offered our mother money, but she’s too proud to take it. She worked two jobs at times when we were younger, as a gas station clerk and a cashier at the local grocery store to feed and clothe us. She had some health problems of her own, though, and after Blaine’s accident she had to take him to various appointments that took her away from her job. We pieced things together with food stamps, hand-me-down clothes, and my dad’s occasional offerings.

I whip my head around again to watch the road. My mother’s visiting her sister in Pikeville, and luckily Blaine’s house is much nicer.

I pluck my dress away from my chest as we exit the car. It’s so hot it feels like a film covers the air, and the trees stand still in protest against the wrath of the humidity. A dip in a pool sounds heavenly.

“How is it still hotter than Satan’s asshole outside? It’s going to be September soon.” I approach the front door and Gwen follows. “I was promised fall by the shopping gods. I’ve already got a new pair of boots.”

A cracked piece of siding stands out next to Blaine and Gloria’s front window, and the gutter bends just a little, but Blaine, like me, has done well for himself after our upbringing. He got some grants and scholarships after his injury, and Gloria works as a teacher. We both have more than we could have dreamed of as children.

My brother has his cane in one hand when he answers the door. He's a big dude with a trimmed beard under his wide smile. He greets me with a hug, then shakes Gwen's hand. He's met her several times, and they exchange pleasantries.

We make our way through the living room and into the cramped kitchen. Blaine takes a seat in one of his wheelchairs, the one made for basketball that has cambered wheels and Kentucky Wildcat decals. He plays in a league in Lexington.

Gloria, Blaine's wife, strolls into the kitchen as she's sweeping her dark hair up into a loose ponytail. She's tiny compared to my own five-foot-ten frame, with compact features and skinny limbs. She throws her arms around me, and to my amusement, does the same thing with Gwen, who responds with more enthusiasm than I would expect.

Blaine has prepared a lasagna for the occasion. We gather around the wooden kitchen table to eat. The scent of garlic reaches my nose as I scoot in.

"So, how's the setup going at work?" Gloria turns to me. "You like being in two different settings?"

I love it," I say. "I never get bored. And I feel like it's good for me." I wrinkle my nose. "There's a resident doing a new rotation there, though. You guys would know him. Someone from here."

The table quiets.

"Well don't leave us hanging," Blaine says. "Who is it?"

"Grant Wyndham." My voice comes out sounding small. I clear my throat. "You remember him, right?"

"Wait." Blaine's fork hangs in midair. "You're working with Grant Wyndham?"

"Yes." My cheeks warm.

"He's a fucking doctor now?" Blaine sets his fork down.

"You worried about me, big brother?"

"I hated that guy," he mutters, "and everything he did to you. So yes, I guess I am."

"I can handle him. I've got a lot of pent-up anger to release. Seems like he's as good a target as any."

Gwen clears her throat. "We've also decided to murder him if he's mean to her. That's worst-case scenario, but still. It's an option."

Gloria giggles.

“I appreciate the support from everyone.” I rub my hands along my thighs. “But once he’s done in three months, I can just move on. I do really like this job. And it’s a break from how traumatic labor and delivery can be.”

“Yeah? Why’s that?” Gloria chugs from her glass of water. She faces me.

I shudder. “I love women’s health, and it’s super rewarding. The highs are the highest there is. But I need to make sure that’s what I really want to do, because when things go bad, they can go really bad. I saw it all. I witnessed broken tailbones, significant tearing. This particularly awful situation called uterine inversion where your uterus turns inside out. I saw a woman almost die that way. I swear, it’s put me off pregnancy.”

Gloria’s mouth hangs open. Her face has taken on a pale cast.

“God, I’m sorry,” I say. “I get carried away. I apologize for being so graphic.”

Gloria emits a little squeaking noise. “It’s not just that,” she says.

I pause. The whir of an electric fan punctuates the silence. I take in Gloria’s pained expression, then clap a hand over my mouth.

“Oh.” I touch Gloria’s shoulder. “Holy shit. Am I going to be an aunt?”

Moisture pools in Gloria’s eyes. “Well I wasn’t going to say anything just yet. But yeah. That’s happening.”

I stand, scraping my chair against the floor as I throw my arms around Gloria, then Blaine. Gwen watches the whole exchange with a smile on her face. “Congrats, Gloria. That is amazing news. And forget all the shit I just said.” I sit back down. “Those types of things are really rare. And you two will be amazing parents. I’m so sorry for scaring you.”

Gloria swipes at her eyes. I kick myself mentally. I tend to open my big mouth all the time, and I’ll never forgive myself if I terrified Gloria just because I have my own hangups involving pregnancy.

“I can’t believe I’m going to have a little niece or nephew.” I grasp Gloria’s hand, and my sister-in-law finally smiles at me. “That little baby is going to be the light of my life. I can already tell.” I take a bite of my garlic bread. “Have you told Mom yet?”

“Not yet. We were going to try and tell her in person,” Blaine says.

“She’s gonna be thrilled. Tickled, she would say.”

Gloria folds her hands over her stomach. “So far, only you know. And my doctor, of course. The nurse at the office did congratulate us and asked

if we conceived ‘the natural way.’”

“Ew.” I drop my fork. “None of your business, lady.”

Gwen nudges me. “No? Sounds like something you would ask.”

“I’m not that uncouth.” I crunch on some ice from my drink. “Besides, I already knew Blaine’s equipment still worked. We talked about it a long time ago.”

“Good Christ Almighty.” Gloria buries her head in her hands. “I always forget what you two are like together.”

I cock my head at Blaine. “You going to tell Dad?”

“I don’t talk to that asshole,” Blaine says. “You know that.”

Next to me, Gwen’s shoulders inch toward her ears. I chew on my lip. Our father’s been in and out of our lives, and there isn’t any way to perfume that reality—he abandoned us several times, only coming around occasionally to offer some crumbs of hope. Our mother struggled to make ends meet. I’ve been talking to him some, though, and I’m somewhat optimistic about it, which probably sounds naive, but he seems to harbor genuine remorse over how he’s been absent.

I always wanted some acknowledgment from him, and now that he offers it, I have trouble turning him away. So far, he hasn’t disappointed me. We’ve talked some and had lunch a few times.

Blaine has no such sympathy for the man, and I don’t blame him.

“I know,” I say, and then drop it. I grasp his hand, glancing at Gloria as I do so. “I love you two. Start preparing a guest room, because I’m moving in when this child gets here.”

Blaine laughs. “We have a shed out back with your name on it.”

I swat at him, but I’m smiling.

Once we’ve finished eating, Gwen goes to freshen up, and Gloria moves into the living room to watch television after Blaine shoos her out, telling her he’ll do the dishes.

I follow him to the sink, helping him load their dishwasher. Blaine pulls forward.

I squawk. “You just rolled over my foot, asshole.”

“Ah. Oops.”

“You do that shit on purpose, don’t you?” I hand him a glass. “I deserve it for upsetting your wife. I feel like a piece of dirt for that. But you just get that one.”

I continue to gush over how much I'm going to love their baby. Blaine laughs into my hair when I hug him again, pulling him up into a shaky stand.

"All right, all right. I know you're sorry for scaring the shit out of Gloria." He sits back down. "You going to be okay, though? I know how awful Grant was to you."

"I'm fine. Promise."

Blaine studies me, finally nodding after a moment.

I can't believe my big brother is going to be a dad. It almost makes up for Grant showing up in my life like a painful splinter.



The reunion's being held at an event center built to look like a barn. Gwen's eyes track over the wooden planks, and her lip curls as the first notes of some bro country song floats out the open doorway.

"Perhaps this was a mistake," Gwen says.

"Nah, it will be entertaining, I promise." I point out some of my former classmates. "That's Beetle." I gesture to a lanky man with a mullet. "He'll take his glass eye out for you if you ask. He lost it in a fight."

"Jesus."

"I know." I nod toward a blonde woman in a black dress. "That's Amy. She was pretty terrible to me in school."

The woman in question looks back at us, squinting. Her eyes trail over my face, likely trying to place me. She slows to talk to us.

"Do I know you?" She has her finger on her chin.

"I'm Guinevere, and this is my friend Lancelot," Gwen says. She grasps my arm and tugs me away.

"That was all you could think of to save me? She's going to think I'm an even bigger weirdo than I was." I laugh.

"She doesn't deserve to make nice with you."

Just inside the door, I see Clay, my high school crush, hanging out with some of my old friends. He's less gangly now, but he's still got the same wide eyes and pale skin. He studies me when I approach the group, then his mouth hangs open.

"Kenzie?"

“It’s Kendall now, usually. But yeah.” I do a little twirl. “In the flesh.”

Gwen and I catch up with my friends, none of whom live in town anymore. Clay’s married now, and I meet his wife, who’s lovely. They all seem to like Gwen. I start to enjoy myself as we banter. I chat with some other former classmates, careful to engage only with the ones who were nice to me. Several men check me out, and I shelve my complicated feelings about it.

I go to get some punch and a small commotion at the door draws my eye. Some of the old football players are clapping someone on the back, exclaiming over his presence like they might be receiving a king. I stare. As the group parts, the sight of blond hair and a brilliant smile stops me dead.

Grant showed up after all.

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I always feel itchy in my hometown. I've already been in one argument with my parents about Rachel, the woman my mom wants me to talk to. I found out the "good job" she got was with a company her dad's friend owns. I didn't even think about that possibility, that her lucrative job might be the result of nepotism.

Not that I'm interested, anyway.

I'm sure our next argument will be about where I'm going to work after I'm done with residency. They know I can't find work in Blacksburg, but there are hospitals in Eastern Kentucky that need orthopedic surgeons, and my parents want me closer to home.

I don't want that, though. I don't like what home reminds me of, and I don't like their snobbery. I'm not sure why I don't shut them down when they bring things up. It's hard to do that with the people who raised you, even if they do need to be put in their place.

When one of my old high school teammates texted to see if I was coming to the reunion, I originally said no. I've changed so much I no longer know how to relate to my old friends, and honestly, the fact they liked me in high school seems evidence of their dubious character. But I'm trying to repair my image at least somewhat, and besides that, it's been a long time since I've seen some of these people. Maybe they've changed too.

Brayden, one of the other former football players, claps me on the back. "Have you seen Amy yet? She's gotten even hotter since school." He nudges me.

Okay, so perhaps these people haven't matured much. I dated Amy in high school, and I offered her a polite hello, but I have no interest in rekindling any old flames. Or kindling anything with anyone from home, for that matter.

Brayden shoulders me again. God, that's going to get annoying. "You seen the girl in the pink dress? Don't know who she is, but she's smokin'." He dips his chin at her, not being subtle at all. "You think she's here with anyone? She definitely didn't go to school with us."

I find myself looking despite the fact I don't want to talk about hot women all night. He's right, though. The woman in question wears a pink dress that hugs her body, highlighting curves and smooth skin. She's got a light tan. A long table covered with a cheap white tablecloth spans the length of the wall in front of her, where she picks up a plastic cup of water. She turns our way.

What in the . . . ?

My blood turns to ice. A ringing starts in my head and throbs with every heartbeat, like I've been hit in the skull with a frying pan. And maybe I have.

Kendall. She's here.

I stroll toward her, moving with purpose. She's seen me, and she waits on me, arms folded over her middle as she stares at me in defiance. My body continues to pulse.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I plant my hands on my hips. A thread of unease curls around my throat. Has she followed me or something? Have I attracted a stalker?

She scoffs. "Jesus Christ, you're stupid. Put the pieces together."

I throw my hands in the air. "What pieces?" This woman. "Are you out to get me here? You have some sort of vendetta against me?"

A smile spreads on her face. She lays her hand on her chest. "I'm from this town. I graduated with you ten years ago."

I twist my lips to the side. I study her, my eyes trailing over her features as I process this new information.

I picture my graduating class. She doesn't fit anywhere, at least not that I can remember. Although . . .

My eyes widen, heart punching against my ribs. Oh, God. I can see it. She's more polished and has a lighter hair color in a different style than she had in high school. She's thinner, too, and she's had orthodontics. She looks so different I have to squint to picture her teenage image. But her hazel eyes, the shape of her face, her height, her brilliance, her beautiful voice—it's her. "Kenzie Amburgey?"

"It's Kendall Hodges now. I took my mom's last name."

"I always thought Kenzie was short for Mackenzie," I say, and it's the dumbest response anyone has ever come up with. Her jaw slackens.

She pushes by me, heading for the door. Meanwhile, all the blood drains from my face, leaving me dizzy.

"Wait." Kenzie. The things I said and did to her. "Fuck!"

I run after her, noting how her steps gain speed. I look like some crazed ex-lover chasing her, but I can't let her leave without talking to her. Apologizing, if that's possible. God, what a mess I've created. No wonder she hates me. I was her tormentor.

I'm an idiot. The biggest idiot. King of all the idiots.

I find her outside, straightening her dress and fiddling with her heel like she only came out here for a breather. Just like the night at karaoke, she's more dressed up than almost everyone else, but it suits her. She owns it. Even as she glares at me, cheeks pink with anger and exertion, the sun filtering through her hair like a golden backdrop, she's gorgeous.

"Don't go," I say. "I swear I had no idea it was you. I never knew you left town."

She snorts. "Of course you wouldn't think I went to college," she says. "Even though I was smarter than you."

I open my mouth to speak, but she talks over me.

"I can't leave, anyway," she says, straightening. "My friend is in there. I just left her alone, and she's definitely wondering why I ran out."

I lift my hands. "You had every right to do that, Kenzie. Kendall, I mean." I grip the ends of my hair. I want to rip it out. "How can I ever say sorry for the way I treated you? I wish I had known it was you. I'm sorry I didn't." I shrug, helpless. "How could I not have known?"

Maybe I've blocked it all out. That's the only viable explanation.

She's back to looking composed again. If not for the tension in her jaw, I'd think she was fine.

"You want a good working relationship, right? That's what you said."

“God.” I rake a hand down my face. “I am so sorry. You must have wanted to hit me.” I swallow. “Hell, *I* want to hit me. I’ve wanted to apologize for years, but everything I read about apologizing made me feel like it would be more for me than for you. And I didn’t want to dredge all that up.” I rub the back of my neck. “And except for that one time senior year, sometimes I wasn’t even sure I got to you. You always seemed so hard to shake.”

“Of course you bothered me, you absolute ass. I’m a fucking human being. I cried all the time. Alone in my bedroom, but still.”

Ouch. *Ouch*. I want to reach back in time and strangle that stupid kid I’d been. Maybe I thought I had reasons, but honestly, I was just a little shit. Maybe I would say that she bothered me because she didn’t seem to care about the things I cared about—namely, what people thought of her. I was taught that the superficial stuff was important. But it doesn’t really matter. I did so much damage, and I can never atone for that.

“I don’t know what else to say. I was horrible and I know that.” I step toward her. “I don’t even think I believed the things I said to you at the time. I always thought you were beautiful—”

She shoves a finger toward me, making me take a step back. “Don’t fucking do that. Don’t act like you bullied me because you had a crush on me or some other bullshit. If that’s true, that would make it worse. Then you’re making it *my* fault. So don’t tell me you thought I was pretty. It’s actually better if you were just a shameless dick.”

“Okay. All right. I deserve that.” I nod, head shaky, and lace my fingers together behind my neck. Sweat collects at my hairline. I continue to fuck this up.

She starts to walk back toward the door but swivels to face me again instead. “Actually, I’m not fucking done.” She inhales. “You crawled out of the same holler I did, and you aren’t better than me. You were just high on your tiny amount of power. And now you’re supposed to be alleviating human suffering, and it just shows how unfair this world is, because you were the source of mine.” Her eyes water, and she blinks it back, as though she can’t bear to be vulnerable in front of me.

Bile churns in my stomach. I was awful to this amazing woman, and now I can hardly speak around the guilt clogging my throat.

“What can I do?” I want to reach for her, to give her a hug, though I know it would be unwelcome. *This* is karma—this lovely bright person who

entered my life again to remind me of how I was the villain in someone else's story.

Kendall's friend—the one with the blue at the ends of her spiky hair—now stands at the doorway, eyeing me with unabashed hatred. And no wonder her friends hate me. She must have told them she was working with her former bully.

That word. Bully. The force of it hits me like an avalanche. Despite all the therapy, I haven't truly reckoned with it until now.

"For what it's worth, I believe you're sorry," she says, "but I don't think I can truly forgive you. I'm trying to be more polite at work. That's the best I can do for now."

I nod. That's more than I can ask for.

She turns to join her friend at the door, and I watch her walk away, wondering if I can really go back inside and chat with my old buddies when memories of my crimes dance through my head like ghosts in a haunted house.

I keep staring after her until she disappears. She doesn't look back at me. I kick a piece of gravel and watch it skip across the outside lot, obsessing over whether or not I should follow her. I tug at my collar—I'm wearing a button-up and it's still hot and humid out, even with the sun sinking behind the trees—and look around me. Though the venue here is new and beautiful green scenery surrounds me, the hills and hollers cradle dilapidated homes and rusted truck beds. The message rings out in the lines of the sagging roofs and stacks of tires in front yards: poverty. It's such a huge problem here. Kendall clawed her way out of it, no thanks to me. She's a goddamn superhero, and I'm an absolute sack of dirt.

I chew on the inside of my cheek. After a few deep breaths, I trudge back into the big, absurd barn structure, hands stuffed into my pockets, to find my old friends again.

The lights have dimmed, and a few people file out onto the dance floor, Kendall and her friends included. We've had a decent turnout with a few dozen people here. I find Brayden staring at Kendall across the room.

He startles when I speak.

"Sorry about that," I tell him, along with some of my fellow former teammates. I'm not sure what else to say about sprinting out of the gym like a weirdo.

His eyes widen. “Were you following that woman?” He inclines his head toward Kendall. “You know her?”

I glance toward the woman in question. She and her friends bounce along to the music. A banner with our mascot and graduation year hangs in the background. The scent of beer drifts to us.

“I work with her now. It’s, uh, Kenzie, if you remember her. Kenzie Amburgey. We went to school with her.”

He narrows his eyes as though trying to place her. My old friends have stopped to listen.

“You remember her,” one of them, a guy named Luke, says. He puffs his cheeks out. “Kinda chubby, wore glasses. Super smart.”

My neck starts to burn.

“Wait. No way!” Brayden smiles at me. “You serious? What happened to her? She win the lottery or something? She looks way different.” He grins wider. “Have you been hooking up with her?”

Dear God. My skin crawls. I knew these people hadn’t changed. He doesn’t think it matters how mean I was to her, if he even remembers. Several of us were terrible to her and her friends.

“No,” is all I say.

I make excuses a little while later and sneak off to my car, where I lean my head against the headrest. My gut tightens. What am I going to do now?

The answer—I knew it as soon as she told me who she was—is whatever she wants.

Grant finds me in the clinic on Monday morning while I'm combing through some of our patient messages at my desk. I'm responding to someone's question about using paper towels as a wound dressing for their incision—the answer to that is no, and also what happened to the adhesive dressing we gave you?—when he pulls up next to me in a rolling chair. He holds his hands up like I might be about to arrest him.

"I know you don't really want to talk to me," he says.

I look around to make sure we're alone. "Yeah? What gave you that idea?"

Grant winces. I study his face. His smooth skin, sharp jawline, and long eyelashes make for a striking combo. And an orthopedic surgeon too. He doesn't deserve all that.

"Now that I know it's you, it's obvious," he says.

"Huh. I'm glad I still look like myself."

"I'm sorry. Is there anything I can do to make this better?" His soft lips turn down, and my gaze snags there. I loathe him, yes, but I do wonder what it would be like to kiss him. I shake off the errant thought. What the hell is wrong with me? That would be absurd.

"You have a quarter million dollars for med school for me?"

He laughs. It's such a bright, sunny sound, even in his deep voice, that I'm startled into a smile.

“I don’t even think that would be enough,” he says softly. “I would give you some money if you really wanted. But I can help you in other ways. I can help mentor you. Or I can leave you alone, like you asked.”

Grant *shouldn’t* get to feel better. He should have to stew in his regret forever. I throw him a bone anyway.

“You can give me the kindness you didn’t give me when you were younger,” I say. “And to everyone else. I also wouldn’t say no to a couple free lunches.”

He smiles again. “Done.”

“What’s done?” Dr. Gambill, another third-year resident and the most aggressively average man I’ve ever met, walks into the room. Grant calls him George, and I think it rankles him that his peers don’t use his title.

“Grant’s career in ortho,” I say. “He’s switching to dermatology.”

George—I’ve heard his first name so much I’ve started to think of him that way—wrinkles his nose. “Ew.”

Well, that seems uncalled for. “You’d both get more sleep that way, I bet.” I grin at George, but he doesn’t return it. Hmm. Tough crowd. I’ve noticed that about him, that he’s stuffier than Grant ever was.

Grant turns toward me and rolls his eyes. I’ve also noticed he and George don’t get along very well. At first I thought that could be a point in George’s favor, but now I’m not sure.

We disperse to get on with the rest of our day. At lunchtime, I find a mini-cheese pizza on my desk, still hot in its cardboard container. The note on top says, “Enjoy. I went out on a limb because everyone likes pizza.”

I sigh. I hate him, but he keeps making everything confusing.



The next day, Grant talks me through his hip revision surgery with Dr. Fields. The attending is doing a lot of this one since it’s more complex, but Grant narrates along with Dr. Fields.

“You want to come see this part?” He gestures at me, and even though I’m scrubbing in again today, and I’ve gotten to see this surgery before, it’s still nice to be included. “You can stand at my back here if you want.”

I do just that, inching up behind him until his body heat brushes against me. I peer around his shoulder.

“She’s had some bone loss here,” Grant says. “We have to augment it before we can put in the new prosthesis.”

I watch Dr. Fields work. Grant’s assisting with the retractors. I’ve seen these surgeries a lot, but it is fun when I get to observe for just a moment, especially since Grant’s making an effort to teach me.

I ask a few questions before George speaks up.

“Does she need to know all of this?” He nods toward me. His tone isn’t mean-spirited, exactly, but it grates on me all the same.

“She’s going to med school,” Dr. Fields says, not looking up from the patient. His lips purse. “And besides that, there’s nothing wrong with learning. The more we all know, the better.”

“Right. Of course.” George nods but doesn’t look convinced. I guess he’s one of those almighty surgeon types who doesn’t think nurses deserve his time.

I’m standing opposite of Grant now and his expression turns murderous.

He catches me in the lounge after the procedure and glances around to make sure no one is listening.

“Don’t worry about George,” he murmurs.

“Dr. Gambill, you mean?” I inch a little closer to Grant so that we’re not overheard. We’re almost brushing elbows now.

“He’s . . . difficult,” Grant says, swallowing. His eyes find mine as we lean against the counter. My heart gives an unfortunate little lurch, and I have to remind myself that I hate him. “You kind of get used to it, but you don’t have to take anything lying down. If he’s rude, call him out on it.”

A slow smile spreads across my face. “What about me makes you think I would just roll over when someone mistreats me?”

He winces. “Ah. Yeah, I can see that. I’ll back you up if you need it, though.”

My heart shifts again. Dammit.

“Thanks, Grant,” I say. “I look forward to that.”

He laughs. “Any time.”



I see Grant intermittently throughout the week. Sometimes I’ll run into him when I’m rounding a corner, and I have a moment of visceral panic before

remembering he's mostly safe now. It's like seeing a malignant-looking apparition before realizing it doesn't mean to harm you. On Thursday, he offers to buy me lunch from the hospital cafeteria.

"I have twenty-five minutes," Grant says, looking at his watch. "You want to walk with me?"

I chew on my lip. Do I want to voluntarily spend time with him? Not really, but I do want a turkey wrap.

"Okay," I tell him. "Don't get any crazy ideas about friendship, though."

"I wouldn't dare," he replies. We walk down the hospital corridor together, dodging other staff members and equipment as we go. The fluorescent lighting paints his skin a bluish color, and yet he still manages to look indecently attractive. I observe his profile for a moment.

"You're cute, you know that?" I face ahead again, but I feel him startle next to me.

"Excuse me?"

"Oh, stop. You know what you look like. It's just that you always ruined it with your attitude."

He laughs. "Ugh. That's fair." His voice lowers to a murmur. "I meant what I said about how pretty you are."

My chest tightens. "Careful, there. If we can't have friendship, we definitely can't start a workplace affair."

I can sort of picture it, though, in seductive clarity: making out in supply rooms with my enemy. Stolen glances in the OR. Satisfying a tiny, ugly part of me that wanted attention from guys like him when I was younger. Leaving him wanting more.

That's ridiculous, of course. I still don't even like him, and I just can't go down that road.

He shakes his head. "You are . . ." He chuckles again. "Something else. But I know that's not what this is. I'm not a total idiot." He pitches his voice lower. "I gave up on that idea as soon as I realized who you were."

My blood heats. He's just confirmed he was thinking about me in that way, even though I had already suspected it. My breaths quicken.

I need to rein this in. "Yes, well." I clear my throat. "I don't dabble with coworkers, anyway." My gaze slides to him. "Especially not you."

"Yeah. I know."

The moment has deflated. We get our lunches, and he pays for mine, despite my halfhearted protests. We start walking back to the clinic. There's a bit more space between us now.

"So," I say once we are in the hallway again, "seen any good movies lately?"

"Ha," he breathes. "I wish I had time for that actually. I love movies."

"Really?" I roll my lips inward. "I can't picture you as a leisure guy. You seem like you do bicep curls and critique scholarly articles for fun."

"Nah." He smiles at me, and my stomach flutters. "I'm into movies and television. And books. I love disappearing into fiction."

"Huh."

"I've shocked you into silence?"

"I guess I just never knew you were a human being."

His smile drops, just for a moment, but it's enough for a tiny fissure of regret to burrow into my chest. Maybe he has a heart, after all.

We get back to the lounge, where he unwraps his lunch and begins eating it in a standing position, like he's prepared to take off the second he gets done. He opens his mouth again to say something, but a few others filter into the lounge, so we aren't alone anymore.

I find him watching me as I eat, though, and the back of my neck prickles. What am I going to do here? It almost feels like we're becoming friends, despite my protests, and I can't have that. I can't let my guard down.

I wear three-inch heels to my med school interview because they inject a little confidence into my posture.

One of the faculty members, Dr. Phillips, gives me a warm smile. He's a white dude in his late sixties with silver hair and a penchant for clearing his throat frequently. He's got two colleagues with him, and we're seated in a large office with a floor-to-ceiling window overlooking downtown Louisville. We've been chitchatting, and I get the sense they want to put me at ease before they get to their written questions.

"So, you've been working as a nurse for six years. Is that right?" He's got a little file open in front of him.

"Yes." I clear my throat. "I've had an opportunity to work in several different settings too. I think it's given me a unique perspective."

"I would imagine it has." He smiles at me again, looking for a moment like a kindly grandfather, and my heartrate settles a little more. "One of the doctors who wrote a letter of recommendation for you said that you faced adversity growing up, and that's why you didn't apply sooner. Can you tell us about that?"

Are we getting to the meat of the interview? The other faculty members watch me.

I inhale. Normally I don't think of my upbringing as something I overcame—that's just some bullshit people like to imagine. I endured it, but I don't think it helped me or made me a better person. I think that's what the

interviewers are hoping for, though, so I give them what they want. At least my sob story is good for something.

“I did experience poverty growing up,” I say. “I worked hard for my grades in high school because I knew that could be a way out. I got scholarships for my undergrad, and that helped tremendously.”

I feel gross recounting all this. The interviewers hang onto my words. I did work hard for my grades, and I wanted to go to college, but it’s like I’m inspiration porn for them or something.

“I do think it helps me connect with some of my patients, though. Those who are struggling financially.” That part is true, anyway.

One of the women nods. I forget her name—it starts with an S, maybe? Dr. Smith? Dr. Sullivan? She looks at me as she speaks. “We’ve heard other good things about you. I happen to be friends with one of the residents you’ve been working with, Dr. Wyndham, and I spoke to him recently. He mentioned to me how impressed he is with you.”

My mouth falls open, but I quickly close it. My heart pounds. How could he not let me know he said something to one of the interviewers? And does he think I can’t do it by myself? I’ve done *everything* myself, damn him.

I know my smile is strained, but I can’t help it. My thoughts whirl for the rest of the interview, one of them rising to the surface often.

What is he playing at here?



I find Grant early the next morning before our day at the clinic begins. He’s at his computer, checking his appointments.

“Hey,” I hiss. His head snaps to me. “Why the hell didn’t you tell me you contacted the interviewing committee?”

His lips purse before he speaks. “I know Dr. Sanders and her wife well. I see them all the time. It was just a casual conversation.” He lifts his hands. “And I meant it. All I said was you’d make a great physician.”

I roll my eyes. “What is this, then? Another attempt at getting into my good graces?” My fists clench.

“I thought we established there isn’t a way for me to do that.” He lowers his brows. “Right?”

“I mean, no. There’s not. But just so you know, I don’t really like surprises. I don’t want things to be just sprung on me.” I wave my hand around.

He nods. “Noted.”

I turn away. When I face him again, I catch his gaze flicking over my ass, and I smirk. His cheeks color.

He really *does* want me.

“I’m going to get your first appointment started,” I tell him. I lower my mouth to his ear, and my lips graze the shell. He shudders. “Seems like a conflict of interest, you checking me out all the time. You like what you see?”

He sighs and scrubs a hand down his face. “I’m sorry. Weak moment.”

“Yes. I think you must have lots of those.”

Thirty minutes later, I watch Grant as he instructs our patient in what to expect after his knee injection. The patient, a tall, ruddy-cheeked man in his sixties, listens and nods along. The man is likely headed for a knee replacement at some point, but he wants to try some other conservative measures first. Grant has already talked the case over with Dr. Fields, who seems to trust him.

Grant maintains a warm, polite bedside manner. It’s infuriating.

I prepare the tools for Grant. I’m trained to give cortisone shots, but he wants to do it himself. He aims a little smile my direction as he reaches for the syringe.

He is so cute, damn him. A flash of heat covers my face and neck. I can’t even tell who’s messing with who anymore.

He deserves to be tortured a little, though. I can capitalize on this electricity buzzing between us.

After finishing our procedure, I stop him in the hallway with a hand on his arm. He jolts at the touch.

He glances down to where my hand rests. When he lifts his head again, his gaze holds mine, his stare dark and intense. I always thought the notion of “eyes darkening” to be a case of overzealous literary description, but I would characterize his attention that way, noting how his pupils swallow his irises.

Yikes. Did I say this wasn’t a sexy rivalry? The room temperature suggests otherwise. I snatch my hand away. “Sorry,” I mutter, “I just wanted to talk about the next lady on your schedule.”

“Oh.” He straightens and shakes his arms out, seeming to clear fog from his brain.

We talk a little more, but my mind spins the whole time. I’m not sure I can mess with him without getting all muddled myself. I almost lost control of that situation, and I won’t let it happen again.



Our next surgery day sees me eating vendor-supplied lunch in the hospital lounge. The other residents are there, along with the attending physicians and the other nurses. Some dude in a button-down and khakis is showing us shoulder orthotics for reverse shoulder replacements.

I really shouldn’t even be here, but I’ve never turned down free food. The hospital has a rule against meals from vendors, and somehow they’ve gotten around it today with some bullshit exception. I don’t know. I don’t really care, either.

Grant sits to one side of me, legs spread a little like he owns the fucking place. The *awareness* of him heats the side of my body. Each time he so much as scratches his arm, my skin prickles. I steal a glance at him. I could take my finger and trace a path along his thigh if I wanted.

Our charged moment from the clinic is mucking around in my head. This current version of Grant blurs the lines a bit, softens the worst edges of his treatment of me. I need to remember why I can’t be too nice to him.

Isaac, one of the third-year residents with the reddest hair I’ve ever seen, gets my attention from my other side. We’re all seated in comfy rolling chairs in an arranged semi-circle.

“I heard you might be joining our ranks soon,” he says. “Is it too late to talk you out of it?”

“I’ve lost my mind,” I tell him, “starting med school this late.”

“I was thinking less about your age and more about how it consumes your every waking moment.” He points to a tiny scar near his eye. He has so many freckles I wouldn’t have seen it if he hadn’t pointed it out. “Plus it’s dangerous. This is from an unfortunate incident my intern year involving this really high dude I treated in the ER. A literal physical scar.”

“It gives you character,” I tell him. “Besides, if you think I haven’t had to deal with some real wild stuff as a nurse, you would be wrong.”

I can feel Grant watching us from his position. What is he thinking? I find myself wondering that a lot.

George, who I'm gradually coming to dislike intensely, speaks up next to Isaac.

"That's a big jump in difficulty. From nurse to physician."

"Is it?" I prop my hand on my chin. "I would love to hear more about that."

"The curriculum isn't even close," George says. "You'll have a lot more responsibility."

"Dude." Isaac nudges George. "She's fucking with you."

Grant's low chuckle sends a thrill shooting up my spine. I glance at him, but he's already looking away again.

I also find myself watching him in the OR that afternoon. He's so incredibly competent as a surgeon. Focused, meticulous, and steady.

I look at him as we're washing our hands after the last surgery of the day.

"Good work today," I tell him.

His hairline lifts. "Thanks." He walks with me after we're done at the sink. "I'm a little confused."

"Yeah? What has you so baffled?"

"I can never predict how you're going to treat me at any given moment."

I tilt my head. "Yeah, I can't either. I can't decide how I'm supposed to interact with you now."

"You aren't going with polite disinterest?"

"It's just . . ." I grit my teeth, then unclench them. "I wish you weren't who you are."

He hangs his head once we step in the office door. "I'm sorry," he says. "I owe you so much. Much more than just an apology."

I think about that for a while as I document. When else am I going to have one of my former bullies at my mercy like this?

We end up walking out of the hospital together. It's late, and we're headed to the mostly deserted parking garage.

He peeks at me. "Are we friendly now?"

"I wouldn't go that far." I shrug. "I'm not sure what I'm doing. I did have something to ask you about, though."

We stop by my car. I bite my lip, unsure if I really want to extend our relationship beyond the strained politeness and weird awareness we've adopted this week.

"You said you would give me money if I wanted." I grin at him and lift my eyebrows a few times.

He chuckles. "Have you always been so blunt?"

"Yes. In case you were wondering, it was extremely out of character for me to leave you in the dark about how I knew you. But I kind of liked watching you stew."

He laughs a little more at that. I lean against my car, feigning a casualness I don't feel. A breeze touches my cheek. It's finally blessedly cooler now that it's September, over five weeks into Grant's three-month rotation, though blazing heat will likely appear again like an uninvited guest.

"Before I make my request," I say, "aren't you ever going to ask me about the changes? About why I look so different you didn't even recognize me?"

"You have changed," he hedges, "but you seemed familiar. I just wasn't expecting to see you in this setting. You have to admit, it's a big coincidence."

"You figured I was struggling, like my mom?"

"I knew you were smart. You had a lot working against you, though." He shrugs. "And most of us have changed since high school. Not so much physically, for me, but in other ways."

"Back then, you wondered how I managed to be poor and fat at the same time. It seemed to perplex you."

He winces. "God, what an asshole. I know better now."

He's saying some of the right things, but I still have trouble letting it go. I've never really gotten to say my piece.

"I wasn't trying to lose weight," I say. "I have an autoimmune condition I wasn't treated for. And once I had my own money, I started doing some of the activities that made me feel good, that brought me joy, like dance classes. I have access to different food, and not so much anxiety about having to go without. But it wouldn't happen that way for everyone. I'm sure they teach you it's some moral failing, in med school, being fat. But that's not true."

“I know. I promise. We need to do better as a profession, that’s for sure.”

“Well, yeah,” I say. He’s taken the wind out of my sails a little bit. I expected to hear a lecture, but he seems sympathetic. I point to my hair. “Dyed.” Then my teeth. “Braces.” Then my body. “Better clothes.”

His eyes track my hand as I gesture to myself. He bites his lip, and even though I’m wearing scrubs, I feel naked the way he stares at me. A little flush creeps up his neck and into his face.

“Which brings me to my request,” I say.

His eyes flick to mine. “What’s that?”

I’m going to lose my nerve. I thought this would be fun, but now I’m not sure. I hesitate.

“Kendall,” he says, “I told you I would do anything you asked. I meant it.”

“Okay.” I inhale. “There’s a dress I want. It’s more than I usually pay for clothes, so I didn’t buy it.”

He stares at me, perhaps waiting for the punchline. His expression morphs into disbelief. “Wait. I made your life hell when we were teenagers, and in penance, you want . . . a few lunches and an article of clothing?”

I laugh. “Well, we wouldn’t be even, but maybe it would make you feel better. I’m taking pity on you, giving you this opportunity.”

“So what happened to never forgiving me?”

A horn honks from somewhere on the level below, startling me. I plant a hand on my car again. “This isn’t forgiveness. But I can’t help poking the bear, unfortunately.”

“You’re fucking with me.”

The scent of exhaust swirls as a car drives past us.

“Yes,” I say. “But I don’t know, I wouldn’t turn down some guilt gifts.”

He moves closer to me. My heart lifts into my throat.

“I absolutely terrorized you in high school, Kendall.” To my surprise, his voice cracks. “I’ll do more than a dress. I’ll give you more money. I can help your mom out. I know she struggles. You name it.”

My mouth drops open. “You’d do that? You’re just a resident. You don’t even make that much money.” I cock my head. “Unless your parents give you money? But that doesn’t sound like them, either. I always thought they wanted you to make your own way.”

“My grandfather left me some inheritance.”

“I’m sorry to hear that he passed,” I say. “I remember him. You were his golden child.”

He scoffs. “He didn’t know what I was really like.” His gaze finds me again. “He would be happy if I did something good with his money.”

I’m tempted. God, I’m tempted. People often ask about how to help the disadvantaged, and for me and Blaine when we were kids, the answer was straightforward: more money. My mom won’t take anything from me, but she might take something from an anonymous donor.

“Did you mean it?” Grant asks. “When I said I was sorry, and you said you believed me?”

“I do. At least, I think I do. I also meant what I said about forgiveness. I don’t hand that out so easily. But I can’t take your money.”

We study each other. His eyes trace over my collarbone. I feel like I have the upper hand, and it’s a good feeling. I want to revel in it. Maybe *this* is why I haven’t stuck to my dedication to be courteous but distant with him. I actually crave this power. It’s a startling revelation, but I’m just going to own it.

“There’s something else I might want,” I say. My voice trembles. “You’re going to think it’s crazy.”

“I’m intrigued.” He shifts his weight to one leg, and a ripple of thigh muscle bulges against his scrub pants. “But I said I would do whatever you wanted. Even if it’s some kind of punishment. Lay it on me.”

I puff my cheeks out.

“You’re shaking,” he says. His frown pulls at his features.

“I’m not sure I should ask for this.”

“Kendall. I’m serious. *Whatever* you want. Anything.”

Am I really going to do this? I think I am. “There’s something here,” I say. I gesture between us, and he watches my hand with the same small frown. I look at him again. “I thought maybe we could act on it, only once, and only if I’m in control. Just to see. And maybe to torment you, if I’m being honest.”

He jerks his head up, studying me intently.

“There’s also a tiny part of me,” I say, voice still trembling despite my best efforts, “that wants to indulge in a little fantasy. High school me hated you, but there was an ugly part of me that also wanted some different attention from you. I thought my life would be better if you thought I was hot.”

“You were,” he rushes to say. His voice lowers in register. “You are.”

The seconds expand. The stillness envelops us as he waits for me to talk. I clear my throat.

“Can I kiss you?” I murmur. “Just to see what it’s like?”

He stills. “Pardon?”

“You heard me.”

“I don’t think I could have heard correctly. It sounded like you asked me to kiss you.”

“No, I asked if *I* could kiss *you*. There’s a difference,” I say.

“So, my punishment here is being nice, buying a dress, and kissing a gorgeous woman? That doesn’t seem like atonement for my crimes.”

I sigh. “Yes or no?”

“Yes.” He swallows. “Obviously.”

I inch closer to him, mindful of the fact that someone could walk, or drive, by. Another gentle breeze blows, ruffling his hair. He smells of cinnamon, like maybe he’s been chewing that flavor of gum. His jawline tightens as I come near. I can’t believe what I’m about to do, but I’m dying to see what happens here.

I’ve always been a sucker for impulsive decisions.

I lay a hand on his shoulder and one on his hip. He watches me, not speaking, like he’s afraid to puncture the tension. His tongue darts out to wet his bottom lip. A rush of desire spreads over me, warming my skin, and judging from the heated look on his face, he knows what I’m feeling. My fingers tense at his waist. He doesn’t touch me, though. He’s waiting for me.

His huff of breath just before my lips touch his will remain stamped in my memory forever. And oh God, now it’s real, we’re doing this. My mouth moves against his, a gentle kiss, then another. We’re soft, restrained, until I press harder, then he groans into my mouth before cupping my face with both hands. I touch my tongue to his, savoring the delicious way he strokes mine with his own. He’s tender. Reverent, like I’m a precious commodity.

I grip the back of his arm and tug him toward me. I want more. Our kisses turn hotter, rougher, more needy as I angle my head.

I roll my hips against his, and he breaks the kiss for a moment to stare at me.

“Fucking hell,” he breathes. He yanks me toward him again.

We're feverish. Our heads rock back and forth to get at each other. He moans again, an obscene sound that lights me up from within. My hand slides up his back to grasp at his neck, then at a handful of his hair, and that spurs him on. We're savage, on fire, licking and plundering.

It's incendiary. An explosion of fireworks in my brain. My nerve endings sing with each new sensation—his hot lips, his strong hands, his erection where it presses against me. The restless sounds we make.

He hauls me into him as his hands rove over my back, down to my ass, and back up again. I would chastise him, given my assertion about being in control, but I don't have it in me to care at that moment. My thumb grazes the skin at his waist where I've rucked his scrub top up, and he rewards me with a little shudder. I might have taken the damn thing off if it wasn't for the sound of an engine revving from the street below.

I tear my mouth away, and he starts to follow me until I push a palm against his chest.

We stare at each other. Our chests heave, and my mouth hangs open. That was the hottest kiss of my entire life.

And it was with *Grant Wyndham*. There are very few people I hate in my life, and he lives at the top of that list.

"That's it," I say, still a bit breathless. "I got what I wanted."

Was that cruel? I don't even know anymore.

He drops his hands, but his fists are clenched and his chest fills with his deep inhalations. His eyes track over my face, down my body, and back up again. He looks absolutely wrecked by lust. Longing. That's how I would describe the expression on his face.

And God. My body thrums with wanting, but also with a heady sense of power. To have this man at my mercy produces a thrill I could get addicted to.

I need to cut it off at the root, though, or it will grow like a weed.

"That can't happen again," I say.

His face drops. "I understand." His dark stare sends another bolt of awareness through me. He touches his mouth. "But damn. That was, uh . . ."

"Yes. But it doesn't matter."

He backs away and stuffs his hands into his pockets. "Send me the link. To the dress you want, I mean."

"I'm not doing that. I don't have your number, anyway."

He tugs his phone out of his pocket. "Tell me yours, then." He sticks his bottom lip out. "Please? I won't bother you. I just want to do this for you."

"Fine." I rattle off my number. "And I'll see you tomorrow." I turn to get in the car. I sense him behind me still, wanting to say something, but he doesn't. He doesn't walk away until I'm behind the wheel.

He's texted me. My stomach riots as my thumbs hover over the keys.

Before I can overthink it, I look up the dress I want, a beautiful green confection, and text it to him with my size. My head hits the headrest, and I drop my phone like it might be on fire.

But the more I think about it, the more I don't feel *too* bad. I mean, he bullied me. He made me feel inadequate because of my class, something I struggle to make peace with even now.

And he wants me bad. That much is clear. I succeeded in taunting him with something he can never truly have.

The problem with this, of course, is that part of me wants him too.

11

GRANT

My apartment smells like coconut when I walk in, probably from some smoothie Adam made, and the scent reminds me of Kendall. She wears this tropical-smelling lotion that might have succeeded in rewiring my brain, because even though I was calmer on the way home, I'm hit with a bolt of lust so powerful I almost shut my eyes against it.

My place is empty. I march straight to the shower, telling myself I want to wash off the grime of the day, but I know what I intend to do. I'm shaking with need. I shuck my clothing and set the shower temperature to a steamier setting than usual. I'll perish if I don't indulge myself.

I'm just about to hop in when my phone chimes. I look down to see Kendall's number—I saved it in my phone—and my eyes widen.

KENDALL

One more request. If I'm allowed to make another.

My heart gallops in my chest.

ME

Of course. What's that?

KENDALL

No taking care of yourself yet, if you know what I mean. I want you to squirm a little longer.

KENDALL

If I have any say, that is

I hang my head and chuckle. This woman. She's the boldest person I've ever met.

ME

Okay.

KENDALL

Wow. Can't believe you agreed to that

I chuckle again and it morphs into a frustrated groan. Because I have one particular fantasy on my mind, and it involves a certain nurse wearing her glasses and telling me I've been bad.

I had no idea that would do anything for me, but here we are.

Other scenes shuffle through my mind, too, repeating in a rotating carousel of real instances and fevered imaginings. Kendall's beautiful face staring at me in challenge. Her body on display in that sparkly dress. Her dazzling mind. That *voice*, so sultry and gorgeous I want to wrap myself in it. Our kiss, so unexpected, and the hottest moment of my life. And then: bringing her back here to strip her out of her scrubs and put my hands, my tongue all over her body. I want it so much I'm faint with it.

Instead, I turn the shower a little colder and yelp when I hop in. I'll do what she says. Maybe there's some kind of redemption here, but I'm not sure. There's no way I can ever truly redeem myself.

I dry off, dress myself, and fix a sad-looking salad with wilting lettuce and the spoonful of what remains in a bottle of dressing. I settle into the recliner in the living room.

The door to the apartment opens and Adams waltzes in just as I'm dissolving into self-loathing. We're usually ships passing in the night, but of course he would come home now, when I'm lower than I've ever been.

“Hey,” he says. He walks into the living room. When he sees my face, his brow furrows. “You okay?”

“Um.” I hesitate. We don’t usually discuss serious topics, but I need someone to talk to. “No, actually. I’m really not.” I set my salad on our wooden coffee table.

He sits across from me on the couch. I witness what must be his bedside manner as a physician: open, sympathetic expression and steady eye contact. I bet his patients really love him. He lets his backpack fall to the floor and leans forward so that his elbows are on his knees. He smells like the hospital, I note: a combination of antiseptic, perspiration, and nitrile gloves.

“You know how I work with that nurse who doesn’t like me? And I wasn’t sure why?” My fingers dig into the leather arm of the recliner.

“Yeah, I remember our conversation about it. Did you figure out what’s wrong?”

I rake a palm across my jaw and look out our window. It’s still light out, and a kid glides down the sidewalk on a skateboard. I look at Adam again.

“I went to high school with her.” I inhale, thinking I might as well rip the Band-Aid off. “That’s why she hates me. I, uh, bullied her when we were teenagers.” That word, bully, still makes me cringe. “I honestly made her life hell some of the time. I know that’s horrible, and I was shitty for it. I don’t know how else to say it. And I’ve felt awful about it for years, but her being in my life again is a mindfuck. I don’t know how to handle it.”

Adam’s staring at me. A little divot forms between his brows. The kids outside shout about something, and the dishwasher rumbles in the kitchen, but Adam still hasn’t made a sound. I wonder what he’s thinking, if he’ll hate me for this. He should, probably. Sometimes I don’t feel like I deserve to be a doctor, what with the way I treated people, especially Kendall.

He finally speaks. “You didn’t recognize her?”

“No. She’s changed a lot physically, and it’s been a decade. I should have, though. I didn’t expect to run into her again. I apologized. I probably should have done that years ago, but I honestly thought it would have been selfish to seek her out just to make myself feel better. But given the situation, I kinda had to.”

Adam’s quiet again. He sits back on the couch, an old hand-me-down from my grandmother that makes a creaking noise when you lean back on it. My stomach twists while I wait for him to speak.

“Okay,” he says. “You’re right, that’s pretty shitty. I’ll be honest and say I’m surprised. And disappointed, if you’ll forgive me sounding like a parent. You’ve bettered yourself since then, though. I’m a decent judge of character, and I can vouch for you, at least now.” He taps his chin. “Maybe you can just get through your rotation and move on. In the meantime, I would be pleasant with her and just stay out of her way.”

I wince. “So I shouldn’t, like, try and start something with her, for example?”

Adam lets out a burst of laughter, though it seems more like shock than actual amusement. “Fuck no,” he says. “Why would you think that’s a good idea?”

I push my head against the back of the recliner and gaze at the crown molding in our apartment, just so I don’t have to keep making eye contact with Adam. “I know. She’s just gorgeous and brilliant. And I’m the biggest asshole there ever was. I can only hope she didn’t need years of therapy after high school.”

“Yeah, one can hope.” He stares at me again. A piece of hair comes loose from his ponytail when he scratches his head. He’s growing his hair out to donate it, I think, which is just the sort of guy he is. “Sounds like you might have needed it too.”

“Oh, I did. Spent thousands of dollars on it. It doesn’t change how I treated her, though.”

“Well, it sounds like you feel genuine remorse. And for what it’s worth, I really do think you are a good person now. But for God’s sake, leave the woman alone.”

I nod. “Yeah. Thank you. I needed to hear that.” I drop my head. “I worried about what you would think. I’ve made a lot of strides, but sometimes I’m not sure I deserve all I’ve got now.”

I look up at him again and he shrugs. “You don’t deserve one-hundred-hour work weeks and sleep deprivation?”

I laugh. “Point taken.”

“I don’t know, man. People behave terribly as high schoolers sometimes. You didn’t keep doing that, so I’d say you’re on the right track.”

I bite the inside of my cheek. Is he right? Teenagers are notoriously stupid, after all.

My phone rings as I walk back to my bedroom. For one wild second, I think it might be Kendall.

I sigh when I see the caller. I've already ignored one call from her.

"Mom?" I tap the button for the speaker.

"Hi, hon." Her thick twang pours down the phone line. My parents are probably the wealthiest people in one of the poorest counties in the US—we always had shiny cars, a manicured lawn, and working appliances—but even they have the thick accent. "Thought you might still be mad at me."

"I'm not angry anymore," I say. "As long as you aren't calling to tell me I should date Rachel. Or move back home."

She produces an indignant huff. "Well, Rachel's mama said she's dating another lawyer now, anyway. And I don't see what's wrong with being back here."

"Mom—"

"I know, I know. I'll let it lie."

"I did run into someone from high school, actually," I say carefully. Mom knows that not everyone was an admirer of mine back home, though she doesn't know the extent of what I was like. "You remember Kenzie Amburgey?"

I can almost hear my mom's wheels spinning. "I think so," she says, a hint of distaste coloring her words even though she tries to hide it. My stomach burns with irritation as she continues. "I know her brother was in that awful accident, poor thing. But I heard he does taxes now." She pauses. "Didn't their daddy run off?"

"I think so," I say, gritting my teeth. "And yeah, her brother went back to school after the accident. She's a nurse. She works in the ortho clinic where I'm doing my rotation."

"Oh, I see. Well good for her, then."

My stomach sours. I get the feeling Mom wouldn't care if Kendall had climbed all the way to millionaire status. It wouldn't change how she sees her family.

"I gotta go, Mom."

"But I didn't get to ask you about your mamaw's eighty-fifth birthday. It's coming up in a couple months and we're having a big party."

"I'll be there," I say. "I have to go now, though."

She starts to protest, but I make an excuse, wanting to quell my burning ire before I say something ugly.

I press my fists to my eyes. No wonder Kendall hates me so much.



Kendall stops me in the hall before our first surgical case. Her hair's braided again, a style she seems to like, and God help me, I want it wrapped around my wrist. She also wears her glasses instead of her contacts again, and that along with the hairstyle is proving to be a powerful combo. I practically salivate.

I think of Adam's words. *Leave the woman alone.* Even though she did ask to kiss me, and I would oblige if she asked me for anything, I need to remember what he said. It's difficult, though, when she's been on my mind for days. Weeks, really.

"You really went and bought me that dress," she says, eyes wide. Her lashes curl up toward her brows, long and thick. Her beauty strikes me every time I see her.

"You sent me the link and your size," I say, discreetly scanning her figure. I can imagine it on her, how it would look with her long legs showing.

"Yes, but I was mostly kidding."

"Were you?"

She scoffs. "Okay, I was goading you a little. I didn't think you would actually go and do it."

"Do you like it?"

"It's gorgeous. Fuck you."

I laugh, and it echoes around the empty hall. "You're welcome. It is literally the least I could do. I meant what I said about making things up to you."

"You can't just buy things for me and expect me to forgive you. I mean sure, that's fun and all, but I have more pride than that."

"I know."

She scoffs.

A bit later, I listen as she questions Dr. Planck about our surgery, another knee replacement.

"How do you deal with someone who has a knee flexion contracture like that?" She nods toward the patient.

"Ah." Dr. Planck talks as we work. "We can usually correct it here in mild cases like this. We can resect the femur by a couple more milliliters

distally. And we can remove the larger osteophytes from the posterior compartment.”

She watches him. I sneak a few glances at her, but she only has eyes for our procedure. Her curiosity about everything intrigues me. I remember how brilliant she was in high school—she outperformed me, even with the disadvantages she faced—and the fact she still loves learning seems natural.

“It takes a lot of upper body strength,” George says, making a show of looking Kendall up and down. He’s assisting with this surgery. “These joint replacements.”

God, I hate that guy. I’ve hated him since the start of residency. He reminds me of the worst parts of myself.

“I’m not going into ortho,” is all Kendall says.

I find her in the hallway again after we’re done. I shouldn’t do this, Adam’s right, but I need to talk to her. I glance each direction to make sure we’re alone, then tug her into the closet where we keep the linens. Rows of sheets, pillowcases, and pads surround us.

“What are you doing?” she hisses it at me.

“I’m sorry.” I stare at her. “I can’t stop thinking about you.”

“And you needed to tell me this in the closet?”

“I know! I can’t figure out what I’m doing.” I carve my hands through my hair. “I just wanted you to know.”

“Well, I was going to get a snack. Now I’m going to be hungry, you dick.” She backs up a little but ends up bumping into a metal cart full of cleaning agents. I steady her, but she twists away.

“Are we back to being just polite coworkers again?”

“We aren’t anything!” She glances at the closed door. The dim lighting paints shadows over her already angry expression. “And keep your voice down.”

My shoulders slump. “You haven’t thought about me at all?”

“I’ve pictured your public humiliation a few times since I last saw you,” she says. Her shoulders pull back as she straightens.

“What else can I do?” I’ve never begged anyone for anything before, but I’m about to do it. If she won’t kiss me again, that’s fine, but I’m prepared to do anything she wants if it will keep making her feel better. Anything at all.

She pulls closer to me, and my breath stalls. She smells a little like coconut again and I want to bury my face in her neck.

“This is interesting,” she says. “Here’s what I think. You haven’t been good enough yet. You have a long way to go.”

“I know. I’m trying.”

“And I’m not going to fuck you, so you can get that out of your head.”

I shudder. God, why does that make me want her even more?

“At the reunion, you told me you hadn’t apologized because it would have been more for you than for me. Now you’re seeking absolution? What changed?”

I shake my head. “Not absolution. I can’t achieve that, I know. But the least I can do is help make your life better.” I step toward her, crowding her a little, and she doesn’t back away. I’ve lost my goddamn mind. “Plus, I meant it when I said I can’t stop thinking about you.”

She lays a hand on my chest. My heart pounds against my ribcage. She pitches forward a little, raising up to her toes so she can put her lips next to my ear. I suppress another shiver.

“Whatever I want?”

I gulp, then nod. “Anything. I swear.”

Her lips graze the shell of my ear. I’m half hard and spending too much time in here when I have things to do, but I can’t stop.

“Leave me the fuck alone,” she whispers.

Then she wrenches the door open and stomps out.

My dad hugs me on the sidewalk outside the place we just had lunch.

“Tell your brother I said hello,” he says. Like my brother, he’s a big, bearded dude. He almost sounds shy now. He stuffs his hands in his pockets.

It’s on the tip of my tongue to admit that Blaine’s wife is pregnant, that he’s going to be a grandfather. That feels cruel, though, especially since Blaine doesn’t speak to him.

“I will,” I say instead.

We each look away. I’m not even sure why I’m doing this. At this point, my memoir would be titled, *My Life With Shitty Men: A Story of Second, Third, and Fourth Chances*. But it’s clear he’s really trying here. He drove to Louisville and he’ll drive back today, literally six hours of travel. He braved traffic, which he loathes, just to see me.

I haven’t really forgiven him for being a deadbeat much of my life, but I’m getting a tiny bit closer to making some amends. The anger I’ve harbored sometimes feels like it could consume me, and letting go of it is a little cathartic.

I wonder, sometimes, if I could forgive Grant too. I have to work with him for several more weeks, and it saps a lot of energy, hanging onto this hatred the way I am.

“I’m sure glad you’re doing well,” my dad says. “I can’t believe I might have a kid who’ll be a doctor.”

“Ah. Well, I’ve got a long way to go,” I say. I drag my foot along a crack in the sidewalk. I’m still not looking at him. I’m really bad at feelings and shit. “I haven’t got an acceptance letter.”

“Well, still. It’s amazing you’ve gotten this far. No thanks to me.”

I make a noncommittal noise.

“Well, goodbye again. I hope I see you soon.”

I wave to him before I head to my car. I sit in the driver’s seat for a few minutes, tapping my fingers on the steering wheel.

I want to talk to someone. Blaine’s out—he doesn’t want to hear about me seeing our dad. My friends understand a little, but none of them grew up where I did. It’s not quite the same. I scroll through my contacts and find my finger hovering over a name. Am I going to do this?

Screw it.

ME

I know I told you to leave me the fuck alone

It takes a full two minutes, but Grant replies.

GRANT

Ah. We’re going on another fun ride, I see

ME

I’m sorry I’m hot and cold. You’ll have to bear with me.

I startle when my phone rings. I stare at it. My palms begin to sweat.

“Hello?” My voice comes out breathy and I clear my throat.

“I thought you weren’t going to answer.”

“I almost didn’t.” I cough again. “I didn’t want to.”

He laughs. The sound is rich, deep, like honey poured over river rocks. “Sometimes I can’t believe the things that come out of your mouth.” He’s typing something in the background as he talks. “I thought this would be easier since I’m documenting. What can I do for you?”

“Do you remember that time you finally made me cry? When you asked if my dad didn’t like me?”

He’s quiet.

“I can’t believe you didn’t just punch me in the face the first time you saw me again.”

Now it’s my turn to laugh. “I seriously thought about it.” I inhale. “I’m talking to him again. My dad. Do you remember what everyone thought about him?”

“Kendall, I don’t think—”

“It’s okay. Just say it.”

He sighs. “Well he abandoned you, didn’t he? What do you think we all said?”

“And did you really think it was my fault?”

“Of course not.” He stops whatever he’s doing. “No.”

“And if I asked you if you think someone like that can change?”

He pauses again. “It’s possible. But I’d tell you to be careful, I guess.”

“Yeah. Well.” I lean my head against my steering wheel.

“Touché.”

“I gotta go,” I say. “But I appreciate your insight.”

“Kendall.”

“It’s okay. You gave me what I needed there. I’ll see you at work this week.”

I hang up the phone and rest my forearm over my eyes. What the hell am I doing?

I'm eating catered lunch today with the other orthopedic residents, and it's such a luxury I could cry. Which is sad, but such is the life of a resident.

We talk shop as we eat. My thoughts keep straying to Kendall.

Isaac, a fellow third year, nudges me. He's doing the same rotation as me, with Dr. Planck and Dr. Fields.

"Hey, is Kendall off today or something? I didn't see her at the clinic this morning."

I've noticed Isaac's attention snagging on Kendall occasionally. He's made a few comments to me here and there. I feel a little weird indulging him—we're in a resident program made up of over eighty percent white men and we're confirming so many stereotypes I'm almost embarrassed for us.

"She's not here," I say, shrugging as though I'm not obsessing over her every movement. "Why? You interested?"

"No. That would be gross." Isaac makes an exaggerated face.

Blake, a fourth-year resident, laughs from across the conference room table. "Getting involved with coworkers is a terrible idea," he says. "Do not do it. I repeat: Do not go there."

It's a bit too late for that for me, even though it's only been one kiss. There's no way in hell I'm telling either of them, or either of our attendings, for that matter. I have no desire to wade into that complicated mess.

After that, we chat about some other cases. One of the first-years brings up a manipulation being done under anesthesia on a woman who had a knee replacement but never regained good mobility.

“I don’t think she was doing the recommended exercises,” he says. “And the surgeon told her she needed to get up and walk at least every hour, which she admitted she wasn’t doing, either.”

The back of my neck prickles. “Wait,” I say, “you said this lady was living at St. Peter’s house. Isn’t that a transitional housing place?”

The first-year shrugs.

“How the hell is she supposed to go for walks living there? Does she even have transportation to her therapy appointments?”

A little blush stains the tops of the guy’s cheeks. “She uses public transport, but she did indicate that it’s not always reliable.”

I nod. I don’t really have much else to add, or viable solutions, but my stomach churns all the same. This is exactly what Kendall has been talking about. Circumstances are powerful predictors of outcomes. She has more resources now, and therefore better access to good healthcare.

Later that evening, I find myself staring at my phone, thumb poised over Kendall’s name. I can’t get her out of my head. I type out a message and hit send.

ME

What have you been up to today?

KENDALL

Plotting the demise of my enemies. Why?

ME

Am I still on that list?

KENDALL

You’ve moved down a spot. Congratulations.

KENDALL

I just got back from Pilates, actually. Went with some friends of mine

ME

Did you have a good time?

I smile as I sit down on my bed.

KENDALL

Of course. My friends are amazing.

ME

Yeah? And do they still hate me too?

KENDALL

I mean, was I supposed to tell them not to?

My chest squeezes. Of course she's not telling her friends about me. She doesn't want them to know she let her former bully kiss her. I can't blame her, but it hurts. I guess she wouldn't have wanted to spill anything the way I did with my roommate. After telling Adam the whole sordid story, I'm still worried he might feel differently about me, but I deserve that.

ME

Yeah, I guess not.

ME

So when do you find out about med school?

KENDALL

A few weeks, maybe? I don't know. I'm feeling pretty good about it actually.

KENDALL

Other than the tuition, that is. But Dr. Fields has been helping me look for scholarships. There are some aimed at older students going back to school.

A wild idea prods at my mind. I can help her, maybe, but it would be absolutely ridiculous—even with how I treated her, I'm not sure I can really consider it, not least because the amount of money I've inherited doesn't have quite enough zeros to make that an easy thing. Besides that, she wouldn't accept it from me.

ME

I have confidence in you

KENDALL

So do I, actually. But thank you.

I chuckle, drumming my fingers on my bedside table as I think of how to bring up what I want to talk about.

ME

So...

KENDALL

Yes?

ME

Let's say, theoretically, that you still don't want me to...you know. And let's say I'm adhering to that. In theory, how long would this go on?

KENDALL

Are we talking about jerking off?

KENDALL

Wait. You still haven't?

ME

...

KENDALL

Wow.

KENDALL

I'm sorry

ME

You don't sound sorry at all

KENDALL

You have no insight into my tone of voice.

KENDALL

But I'm not sorry, you're right. I just didn't think you would take it that far

ME

I'm trying to do what you ask. I'm going to die though

I lay a palm over my cock. It's not like I haven't gone a while without touching myself before, but I'm not lying when I say I can't stop thinking about her. It's unbearable.

KENDALL

Well it's your dick. But if you are trying to prove something to me, I think you can wait a little longer 😊

I groan. I know I don't have to do this, but it feels like some weird atonement thing now.

ME

Alright. I'll wait.

ME

I'm honestly not sure how much longer I can make it, though

KENDALL

poor baby

ME

Again, you don't sound sorry at all

I fidget on my bed. I don't know why I'm doing this to myself. If it somehow makes her feel better, I'll do whatever it takes. I turn to my side, ruthlessly pushing thoughts of sex from my brain.

ME

Tell me about the charity you were talking about at work the other day. The Appalachian one

KENDALL

You heard that conversation? Also, that was some transition just now. You okay?

ME

No, but I will be.

KENDALL

Ha!

KENDALL

As for the charities, there are several I like. The one I was talking about works toward combating illiteracy and hunger

ME

send me the link

KENDALL

really? You going to donate?

ME

would that make you happy?

I pick at a thread on my comforter. The seconds tick by and my legs clench together. She's typing something.

KENDALL

Yes. That would make me happy, actually.

I smile and click on the link and read a little about it. The more I talk to Kendall, the more her upbringing takes new shape in my mind. Something as simple as getting care for a medical condition becomes complicated when you don't have gas money to get to the doctor, and when providers don't listen because of how you look or talk. Life narrows down to survival, because living in poverty is an acute emergency. You can't think about anything else, much less put as much time and energy into how you present yourself.

I know all of this, and I've learned a lot in med school, but it humbles me to think I still have so far to go. It's also a different image when I have someone in front of me who's had to work ten times as hard to get where I am.

ME

How much should I donate?

KENDALL

hmmm

KENDALL

Enough to make it hurt

I enter an amount that makes me wince a little. I send her a picture of the receipt.

KENDALL

Damn!

KENDALL

I'm actually impressed

ME

I'm chipping away at my debt, right?

KENDALL

A little, much as I hate to admit that

ME

So you're working tomorrow, right?

KENDALL

Yes

ME

See you then.

I sit against my headboard, clutching my phone as she types her response. My heart pounds.

KENDALL

Only if you're good.

This girl. I drop my head back and blow out a long breath.
She's going to drive me out of my mind.

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Grant cannot stop looking at me, and I'm basking in his discomfort. I want to drink it down like a smoothie, to take his fixation and absorb it into my body like a nutrient.

We've been texting a little, and seeing each other at work, but that's it. It's the middle of September, halfway into his rotation, so our time is limited, but I'm not sure how I want to proceed. I can't kiss him again.

I *cannot* kiss him again.

He's been on the ortho floor of the hospital doing rounds. Now he's back in the clinic pretending to study an x-ray even though I can feel his gaze burning a path up my thighs when I pass him.

I room his next patient, an unfortunate case of a young woman with avascular necrosis who needs a hip replacement. She's chipper, though, and doesn't seem devastated, so I chat with her a little as I take her vitals and get her history.

The door opens, and I startle. Grant's there, looming in the doorway with his blue scrubs and his white coat, looking like someone in a hot doctor Halloween costume. The patient glances at him, and her mouth drops into a little round "O." A few flutters skip through my abdomen.

I turn my attention back to her and pull the pulse ox off her finger. We are better than this, I want to say to her.

"I'm obsessed with those bracelets," I tell her instead, nodding to her wrist.

She turns back to me, seemingly surprised that I'm still in the room.

"That Maple brand, I mean," I explain, determinedly not looking at Grant. "The gold one."

She smiles and touches her wrist. "Yeah, it's my favorite."

When I turn to leave the room, Grant's hot stare threatens to melt me on the spot. I almost admonish him for looking at me like that in front of a patient, but I can't find the words. Instead, I walk out the door with a muttered, "Nice to meet you."

Later in the day, Grant finds me in the break room. We're almost done with our patients. I lean against a counter and eat a pack of trail mix while he rips into a protein bar. My gaze snags on his long fingers, and I do not imagine them skimming along the skin of my torso, because that would be obscene.

"First thing you've eaten today?" I nod to his snack.

"Since breakfast, yeah." He takes a swig of water and steps toward me. "Kendall."

"What?" I glance around the room. "If you're looking for a heart to heart I don't think this is the place for it."

He's close to me now. His Adams's apple slides up and down his throat with his swallow, and I watch it, noting the little kick my heart issues at his nearness.

"I do want to talk." He ducks his head to look at me even though I'm not much shorter than him.

"If I'm still here when you leave, you can walk me to my car."

He nods. Dr. Planck steps through the door, and we jolt apart. The older doctor barely raises a brow, but I feel like he just caught us naked in here.

"You on call tonight?" Dr. Planck pushes a mug under the one-cup coffee maker. Not all doctor stereotypes are true, but orthopedic doctors do drink enough caffeine to kill a regular person.

Grant leans against the counter and crosses one ankle over the other. "Yeah," he says. "Hopefully it's a little smoother than my last one."

"I don't know how you guys manage nights on call after working all day," I say.

Grant smiles at me. "You might have to do it yourself someday, huh?"

"Yeah, I guess so. I'll have to figure it out then." I toss my trail mix package into the trash can. "What happened the last time?"

“Just a shitshow of epic proportions. One of our post-ops became hypotensive, another one had uncontrollable pain. Got called to the ED for two gunshot wounds. Felt like the world was falling apart around me.”

Dr. Planck shakes his head. “I have some of those stories from residency.” He almost looks wistful as he gulps his coffee.

We all exit the room at the same time to finish our day. Grant’s hand brushes along the small of my back, an unintentional graze, and I shiver. He aims a smoldering look in my direction as we walk behind Dr. Planck.

We don’t usually leave at the same time, but it works that day, in part because I linger a bit when I’m done. I won’t examine that.

“I didn’t know you were on call tonight,” I say as we walk down the hall together. It’s a bit of a hike to the parking garage given how large the hospital system is. “You don’t have to walk me to my car if you’re just going back to the hospital.”

“I need a little break anyway. Might grab some dinner too.” He turns his head toward me as we pass a large window. “What are your plans for tonight?”

“Dinner with my friends,” I say.

He nods. “You spend a lot of time with them, huh?”

“My three best friends from nursing school, yeah.” I swallow. We approach the door to the stairs, and he opens it for me to usher me ahead of him. “Maria, Gwen, and Joan. It’s hard to overstate what they mean to me, actually. I can’t explain it. We just clicked, and we all stayed in Louisville.”

“I’m glad you have that.” We finally reach the door that will take us out to the parking garage. “And what about people from high school? I noticed you talking to them at the reunion.”

“I see some of them occasionally.” I shrug. “None of them live in Blacksburg anymore, but they aren’t in Louisville either. So we have to be intentional about getting together.”

We’re almost to my car now.

“Are other people from home as obtuse as me? About recognizing you, I mean?”

“Some of them are. I’ve had others recognize me when I go back,” I say. I position myself next to my car door, and Grant edges closer to me. “They fawn over me. It’s uncomfortable.”

He laughs. “Yeah?”

“People love to talk about the weight loss. Like, what if I had cancer or something? They all act like I did some great, noble thing. It’s maddening.”

He’s so close now I can scent his gum again, spearmint this time. He’s probably chewing it so he can stay awake, and a little dart of empathy pricks me, something that’s been happening more frequently with him lately.

“For the record,” I say, “I’m not making out with you on hospital grounds anymore. That wasn’t a good idea in the first place.”

He hangs his head and groans. “I know.” He looks at me again. “Do you have any idea . . .?”

“What?”

“You know,” he murmurs. “How sexy you are.”

A flush starts in my toes and climbs up my body. This man is proving to be a problem for me. I don’t want to want him, but I do. He keeps doing sweet things like donating to charity and apologizing to me. He also seems to feel genuine remorse. A pang of warmth overwhelms me. I thought it was just horniness, but this could be something else. Indigestion, maybe.

“What did you want to talk about?” I take a deep breath to steady my heartrate.

“I just wanted to see how you’re feeling. About what’s going on here.” He gestures between us. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I don’t know. I hate talking about my feelings.”

“I gathered.” He plants a hand next to my head. “Have you always been like that?” His eyes are a little shiny. Is he okay? I’ve never seen this expression on him.

“I had to toughen up in high school, that’s for sure.” A sigh escapes me. “But honestly, a lot of that is just me.” I tap my foot. “What are you thinking?”

His frustrated laugh seeps into my skin. “Lots of things. But mostly, I’m so angry at myself for what I’ve done here. What I did. I like you, Kendall. I think we could have always been friends.”

“I know you’re sorry,” I say. “That’s just the bare minimum, though. I’m having a little fun with this, but I’m not sure what you could do to make me forget what you did.”

“I am sorry. You have no idea.” He bites his lip, a vicious pinch, before he speaks again. “I really, really want to kiss you again.”

God. I want it too. I’m trembling with it.

“I don’t think we should do that again.”

He drops his head into his hands. “Damn it.”

I laugh. “All right. Go get some dinner so you don’t pass out while you’re on call.”

“Okay.” He stares at me. “I understand.”

“I don’t think you do. Not yet.”

He frowns, then gives me one more longing look before he turns to go. I settle into the driver’s seat and take a deep breath.

And again, I ask: What the hell am I doing?

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Two days later, Grant walks me to my car again. I try not to read too much into the implications.

“Do you want to do something?” Grant pushes through the door to the parking garage, and our steps echo in the cavernous space.

“What do you mean?” My heart rate picks up. I stumble on the downhill incline to our cars, and he steadies me with a hand. The warm, dry sensation of his palm on my bare arm shoots a little rush of pleasure along my skin.

“I don’t know, it’s a gorgeous day. One of my favorite parks is nearby and sometimes I like to go clear my head there. They’ve got a nice walking path. I was hoping you could join me.” When he sees my skeptical look, he rushes on. “It can be a platonic walk, if you can tolerate my presence.”

Warmth suffuses my body. Unfortunately, part of the problem is my uncertainty about wanting things to remain completely chaste, but a walk before I go home for the night *does* sound nice. He’s right about it being beautiful out—one of those real chamber-of-commerce days with warm sun, a nice breeze, blue skies, and an absence of the mugginess that plagues summer like a thick soup hanging in the air.

“You know what? Why not.”

Surprise registers on his face, but he covers it with an easy smile.

“You can follow me there.”

I’m jittery on the drive. Am I becoming real friends with Grant? Is that what’s happening here? The very notion is absurd, but I can’t ignore the

evidence. Or I can, I suppose, but not if I'm being honest.

He meets me at the entrance, where tall lampposts mark each edge of the sidewalk. Trees and foliage line the low stone walls framing the park, and it's gorgeous, though I don't know enough about vegetation to name any of them. The scent of charred onions from the taco truck just down the street follows us. My mouth waters, both from the food cooking and the vision of Grant in his fitted scrubs.

"I'm surprised you didn't change your mind," he says. He's smiling, but there's real concern on his face, too, a tightness at the corners of his eyes.

"I'm a woman of my word." We start down the path together, our steps in sync. I watch his long stride, his easy athleticism, with some fascination. "How come you wanted me here with you?"

"Would it be wrong to say I'd like for you to hate me a little less?"

I turn my head toward him. The dappled sunlight catches the blond in his hair and patches of his smooth skin. He's trouble wrapped in a beautiful package, but there's a hint of vulnerability there too. My chest squeezes without my permission.

"No, that's not wrong." I don't say anything else.

We pass under a stone bridge. A little stream gurgles nearby. No one speaks for a couple of minutes. It's pleasant, but I still don't trust this shaky peace we've adopted.

"This is a new tactic, then?" We take a turn on the path, and I yelp as a bicycle nearly sideswipes me. Grant's strong arms pull me into him.

"Sorry!" the cyclist calls back once he's past us. Grant shoots him a dirty look, and I giggle.

"That's twice you've saved me from falling this afternoon," I tell him. I bat my eyelashes. "My hero."

He scoffs and lets his arms drop from where they've wrapped around me. I don't tell him how close I was to actually swooning. "Right. I've been a real gentleman to you." He glances at me. "What did you mean, my new tactic?"

"I just wondered if you'd moved on from buying me things."

We pass another park-goer, this one with a big dog who nudges my hand with its cold nose, and I smile. A bead of sweat rolls down my stomach, so I adjust my bra as we walk. Grant watches all this with the kind of interest one might reserve for a particularly good movie. Ha! Platonic, my ass.

“I do like buying you things,” he says. The look he gives me could keep me hot all winter with its intensity. I shiver. “But yeah, I’d like the chance to show you who I am now. In some small way, even though I don’t deserve it.”

We round another curve. We’re over halfway through the loop now.

“Okay, then,” I say. “Tell me what you like to do for fun. That’s a good start.”

“You think I have fun? I thought you said I was a passionless automaton?”

“I don’t believe I’ve ever used those words in that combination.”

He chuckles. “I do like what I do,” he says. “Being a physician. I love sports, obviously, really of any kind. Books and movies, like I said. And travel. That’s one of the things I want to do with my life. I want to see as much of the world as I can, or as much as my job allows for.”

A little wave of sadness crests over me. I’ve always wanted to travel, too, and I could never have dreamed about it back when I was just surviving. It’s uncomfortable how human he sounds—he’s not as hollow as I thought. There’s depth there.

“That’s why you wanted to get out of our little holler,” I say.

“That’s one reason.” He gently kicks an acorn out of the way. “Mostly I just want to experience as much as I can. Once I’m done with residency, that is. I think my goals aren’t as virtuous as yours.”

“You don’t have to complicate it, though. A life well-lived can just be carving out time for things you enjoy. And being kind. You don’t have to aim for the stars.”

We walk in silence for a few more steps. The dislike is still simmering beneath the surface—or it is for me—but it’s almost companionable, this togetherness. It scares me.

“What about you? I know a little about what you like. Do you get the chance to sing very often?”

“Not as much as I’d like,” I admit. “Unless you count the shower.”

His eyes close for a brief moment, and I get the sense he’s holding back from commenting on that. Is he thinking about me in the shower? I’ve certainly imagined him in that position. My skin burns.

I get another whiff of tacos as we near the exit, and my stomach rumbles.

“You hungry? We could get something to eat.” Grant stops on the sidewalk outside the fence.

“No, I’m good,” I say quickly. It’s a blatant lie, given the noise my stomach just made.

His shoulders drop. Was that mean of me? And why do I even care?

Something has to give here. This limbo is killing me.

“See you tomorrow,” I tell him. I scurry toward my car. When I turn around, he’s still standing on the sidewalk, head hanging low.



The stillness in the conference room suffocates me. Almost no one is in this part of the building, so Grant and I sit in absolute silence together as I glance over the changes he’s made to the educational packet we’re working on.

It’s 4:45 a.m. this time, since we have a busy day ahead of us. I woke up in the middle of the night to get here, and I would give anything to crawl back into bed. Grant, for his part, looks pristine, not a hair out of place. He’s eating a muffin, and the scent of blueberries reaches me. I’m a little surprised, honestly. He seems like the type to stir protein powder into plain yogurt for breakfast.

He doesn’t meet my eyes when he talks about the things he added. “It’s got a little more info about pain control,” he says. “Staying ahead of it, I mean.”

I nod. When I touch his arm, his head jerks up.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “That I’ve been so fickle. We have to work with each other, and I need to stop whatever it is I’m doing.”

“It’s not like I don’t deserve it.” He eyes me. “Not like I don’t enjoy it.”

“Yeah. Well.” I shrug, because I don’t have much else to say to that.

We’re facing each other now in our cushy office chairs. He looks down again.

“I wish we could start over,” he says. “I honestly think we’d have some interesting things to talk about.”

“Without our clothes on, you mean?”

His unrepentant grin sends this little jolt of lightning through my abdomen. He leans back, and I let my gaze roam over his smooth skin, his

long eyelashes, his prominent biceps. I'm sure a lot of women would be into a cute orthopedic surgeon, but he is *exactly* my type: a buff blond with a penchant for stony-faced expressions, like a hotter, broodier Ken doll.

"I actually do like you," he says. "You're fun. I would want to know more about you, if you didn't hate me so much."

"Yeah? What do you want to know?"

He studies me. "Tell me about a patient you'll remember forever. I know you have one. We all do."

"I have a few. You go first, though."

"A kid I treated last year," he says without hesitation. "He almost lost his leg in an accident. Almost lost his life, for that matter, and we saved him. I thought I would have done absolutely anything to keep him alive. I would have given my own life, I swear."

I gulp. I think he means it, and it's so hard to square this version of Grant with the tormentor of my youth. What happened, to change him so much?

"When I was working labor and delivery, I was assigned to this woman who had just given birth to her fifth kid," I tell him. "She was a refugee. Didn't speak fluent English, so we had an interpreter there. She admitted to us that her husband was abusing her at home." I can picture her face even now, sweaty with exertion and fatigue, detailing the unspeakable tragedies she'd endured with what looked like shame. "I think about how we give women advice on what we can do to get ahead, to succeed. The things I had to do. But what the hell is *she* supposed to do? That advice does fuck-all to help her. Our stupid platitudes are meaningless if we can't do something for her. She was trapped."

Grant watches me, his face intent. "What happened to her?"

"We got social work involved. If I'm not mistaken, though, I think she ended up going back home with him. I haven't seen her since, so I'm not sure where she is now."

"Damn."

"I think about her all the time. It made me feel useless."

"I know what that's like. You just can't solve everything, though." He scoots a little closer to me. "I don't think you give yourself enough credit for how far you've come in your own life."

I shrug.

“I’m serious,” he says. “You and your brother. You’re so fucking resilient.”

“Don’t start talking about him like he’s a hero. He hates that. He’s just a person.”

“That’s what I mean, though. He had this catastrophic injury, then moved on with his life. I can’t imagine everyone would handle it like that.”

“Maybe not. He’s fine, though. People want to assign all kinds of meaning to it. I’ve learned that he wants to be treated with the same dignity and respect as everyone else, but he doesn’t want to be a tragic story or be put on a pedestal. He’s still my annoying brother.” I smile.

“I feel like I can’t win, no matter what I say,” Grant mumbles.

“Probably not. I kinda like challenging you. Makes me feel alive.”

“I’m not being patronizing when I say I’m impressed by you. I always was, even when I was angry about how you always did better than me in school.”

“You might feel that way, but I had a lot of help escaping my situation. Scholarship money. Some people who really made a difference for me. Not everyone gets the opportunities I did.” My stomach dips. “I’ve got close friends who have to deal with things I’ll never understand. As for me, I was just trash, right?”

“Did I call you that or something?” His voice is quiet.

“Fucking verbatim.”

“God.” He covers his eyes with his hands. “Kendall. How can I ever say I’m sorry?”

I pull his hand away from his face. I can’t believe my own brazenness. “Tell me what you’ve done since then,” I say, “to have changed so much.”

“What do you want the story to be?”

“Ooh, I get to come up with a story?” I rub my chin. “Your college girlfriend broke up with you because you smelled bad,” I say. “Like, really bad, and everyone made fun of you. And you were so upset you failed an anatomy test, then all your tests that week. You went for a hike to forget your troubles, and you were unfortunately mauled by a bear. Now you have a new lease on life.” I scrunch my nose. “Am I close?”

“Sounds like you wanted me to suffer.” He leans forward. “It’s not an exciting story, really. Lots of therapy. Moving away from home. Maturing.”

“You’re right, that is boring. There was no moment? No near-death experience?”

“Should I be alarmed that you sound hopeful about that?” He smiles at me, flashing his white teeth, and I smile back. “If it makes you feel any better, I felt guilty even in high school about what I was doing. I knew I needed to stop.”

“That definitely does not make me feel better.”

We’re left with this uncomfortable space between us now, an unbridgeable gap filled with past mistakes and anger. I almost think an outlet for all this tension would be good for us. Or maybe I’m just telling myself that.

“There’s a part of me that still wants you,” I say. “I want to know what we’re like together. When you’re done with this rotation, we can stop, consider it examined.”

He swallows. His eyes are intent on my face. “You don’t mean that.”

“I do.”

“Have me, then,” he says. He’s facing me fully now, legs spread and expression open.

I peek at the clock. It’s 5:15 in the morning now. We’re still alone, but people will start filtering into the building before too long.

“Right now?” I glance at the door.

His stare is heavy. “No one’s ever in the clinic buildings this early.”

“Who knew that you would have such a rebellious streak?”

I stand and approach him. He watches me, his eyes dark and hooded. I can’t believe what I’m about to do.

I straddle him, lowering down to his lap, and he emits a surprised grunt. My legs trap his on either side. He starts to lay his hands on my waist, but I stop him.

“Don’t touch me yet,” I say. “Please. I want to be in control here.”

He nods, still watching me with his jaw tight.

I lean forward and touch my lips to his. He moves against me, opening his mouth just a little, and we stay like that, just softly pressing our lips together. I pull back.

“I’m going to lose my mind over you,” he mumbles.

My confidence swells so much, it reaches every corner of the room.

When I arch forward again and find his tongue with my own, we tangle together, and I feel the sensuous tease all the way to my fingertips.

I straighten again. His hands are fisted on the arms of the chair. His teeth clench. He looks like the restraint might be killing him, and I’m

buzzing, riding high on a cloud of power.

“I still can’t touch you?” His lips pout.

“No.”

I take his lips again, gently at first, and then we’re frenzied. The same mind-melting, addictive adrenaline from our kiss in the parking lot rockets through my veins. He’s kissing like he might die if he doesn’t, like I’m his oxygen, like he’s pouring all his need to put his hands on me into the single connection of our mouths.

I rock my hips against his, seeking his erection with my pelvis, and his indecent groan turns my insides to jelly. I do it again, rubbing my clit against him as shamelessly as I can, chasing the little sparks of pleasure that dance up my spine.

“Fuck,” he whispers, drawing the word out, his face a mask of apparent agony. I’m so into it I want to frame this picture of him so I can bask in it every day.

I move harder, faster, rolling my hips over his cock until pleasure starts to build. I wrench my mouth from his as I seek some selfish relief. He moves his own hips under me. The tendons in his neck stand out, and his cheeks are flushed. He’s hard and thick. His focus on me is singular, intent.

“Please. Please, Kendall, let me touch you.”

“No.” I open my mouth and lay it against his neck, tracing my tongue along his shoulder.

“I can’t stand this,” he pants. His teeth snap together. “I need to come. God, I really need it.” His heated, frustrated stare finds me. “I have to touch you.”

“No,” I say, smiling. I sit up a little as I continue to rock against him. “I’m close.”

He watches me, cheeks flushed, pupils blown.

I grind against him. The pleasure builds, and builds, until it shatters.

“Oh, fuck, Grant,” I moan. Starbursts explode behind my eyelids when I close them.

He lets out the sexiest, most tortured sound I’ve ever heard. “Kendall.” His voice nearly cracks when he speaks my name. His knuckles turn white where he squeezes the arm rests of his chair. His hips buck up into mine, like he’s seeking any friction he can get. “This is—I can’t handle this. I’m going to come.”

“You can’t,” I breathe. “We can’t have you doing that in your pants at work.”

“I don’t even care,” he says. He widens his legs under me and his eyes find mine. “But you’re not going to do anything for me, are you?”

I shake my head.

“Damn,” he says. He’s breathing hard and waiting on me to say something, but I’ve got nothing. I just had an orgasm at my place of work, and now I’m going to go curl up in a corner to die.

“Now what?” he asks.

“What do you mean?”

He shakes his head. “It’s going to get damn distracting if I don’t take the edge off soon. Everything makes me think of sex.” He laughs, but it’s a strained sound. “I haven’t been this strung out in a long time.”

“You’ll be okay,” I tell him. “You can make it a little longer.”

“Fuuuck,” he says, and it’s so whiny I almost laugh. “How the hell am I supposed to wait?”

“Poor thing,” I say, climbing off him. He’s still hard, his erection tenting his scrub pants. “You’ll figure it out.”

“What do you mean someone sent you a check?”

“Well, it’s a money order, not a check,” my mom says. “With a note that it’s for me, from a well-wisher. Plus there’s a bunch of gift cards and somebody delivered groceries. You sure it ain’t you or your brother?”

“I swear,” I tell her. She won’t accept help from me or Blaine; we’ve both tried multiple times. “It doesn’t have a name?”

“Nope. I checked the gift card balances, though. They’re real.” She pauses. “I can’t keep this, anyhow. Altogether it’s five thousand dollars worth of stuff, Kendall. Who do we know with that kind of money to spare?”

My breath freezes. That bastard actually did it.

“You have nowhere to send it back to, Mom. Just keep it. Maybe you can pay it forward someday.”

She scoffs. “Now wouldn’t that be a sight.” I hear scraping noises over the phone, like she’s stirring a pot of something. “If this is some kind of trick you or Blaine are up to—”

“It’s not, Mom. I promise.”

“Well.” She sighs. “What do I do with all this?”

“You keep it. That’s what you do.”

“I wish I knew who sent it,” she says quietly. “I’d have a word with them.”

We chat for a little longer, and I think I convince her to keep the money. When I hang up, I lie back on the couch. My heart pounds, so I inhale, exhaling slowly to calm myself.

I pick up my phone. Grant answers on the fourth ring.

“Hello?” Sleepiness coats his voice.

“Oh, shit. Did I wake you? I’m so sorry.”

“No, no.” I hear some muffled rustling noises, and he grunts. “It’s okay. I swear.”

“I was going to ask you to come over,” I say, “but I’ll let you go back to bed.”

“Oh, hell no,” he breathes. He sounds more awake. “Give me your address. I’ll come over right now.”

“I don’t want to interrupt your precious sleep time,” I say, and I’m not even being sarcastic. He doesn’t get enough sleep to be sacrificing any of it.

“Kendall,” he growls, “if you want me to come over, that’s what I’ll do.”

“Fine.” I give him my address, then I get up and pace my apartment for a little while. By the time I answer my door, I’ve ramped up to an anxiety level worthy of a tiger attack.

“Whoa.” Grant takes in my tapping foot and my twitchy demeanor. “Are you okay?”

“You sent my mom money!” I nearly scream it at him. I gesture for him to come inside, and he follows, still eyeing me with some wariness.

He follows me to the kitchen counter.

“You can’t prove it was me,” he says.

“Grant.”

“All right.” He leans onto the counter. He wears a T-shirt and basketball shorts, and his forearms are thick and on display as he pushes against the counter, though I’m not going to dwell on that right now. “The dress didn’t feel like enough, and I knew that *you* weren’t ready to take anything else from me.”

“I feel weird about it, though. You don’t think it’s icky? Also, are you trying again to buy my forgiveness? I told you that wouldn’t work.”

“It just felt like the least I could do.”

“Okay.” I sag against one of my kitchen barstools. My adrenaline has drained a little. “I mean, I do appreciate it. I’m not going to make you take it back or anything. She needs it.”

“I didn’t do it for the thank you.”

“Yeah, I know.” I move into the kitchen. “You want something to drink? Wine or something?”

“No,” he says.

When I turn again, he’s staring at me. He swallows. I watch the slide of his Adam’s apple up and down with the intensity of a starving woman at a buffet. His eyes track over my thin pajama shorts and top, snagging on my bra strap that peeks out.

He reaches for me, and I reach for him, and then we are absolutely ravenous.

He backs me up against the wall, caging me in between his arms. There are a few seconds where we take a breath together, our chests rising and falling with the weight of the moment. I twine my arms around his neck, and he pushes his thigh between mine in a reenactment of our kiss earlier this week. I start to rock against his leg, and he grabs my ass, urging me on.

“Kendall,” he moans before he kisses me.

The first touch of our lips sends a tingling spark down my spine. His lips are soft and pliant. I want to kiss him for hours, days, for the rest of my life. For that moment, I don’t care about hating him. I only want the next press of our lips together. I push my tongue into his mouth, and he nudges even closer to me, and now I’m really riding his thigh, rubbing myself against him without an ounce of shame.

I pull away, but his mouth follows, and he kisses down the side of my neck and shoulder. His warm lips find the skin just under the strap of my tank top. I shiver.

“Bedroom?” I incline my head toward my room.

He nods and extracts his thigh from between my own. “Hell yes.”

He follows me, his front plastered to my back, so that when we reach my bedroom and I spin around he’s right there. I lay a hand on his chest to stop him.

“Can we talk about the unsexy stuff?”

“I’m infection free,” he says. “I haven’t been with anyone in months, either.”

“Same for me,” I say. “And I have an IUD.” I drag my hand down his chest. “I have some stipulations.”

His face is flushed and his hair sticks out at odd angles from where I ran my hands through it. He’s beautiful, even with trepidation covering his

features.

“Okay,” he says, “I’m listening.”

“This is still just for me.”

His shoulders slump. “I’m still not allowed to finish yet? That’s what you mean?”

I shake my head. “Take it or leave it.”

“Dammit.” He bites his lip, and I want to trace my tongue over the indentation in his skin. “I’m going to die, but okay. I’m down.” He smiles. “I did say I would do anything you asked.”

“You’ll tell me if you hate it? Or if you want to change what we’re doing? I can’t have you going along and feeling awful about it.”

“Kendall. I would give literally anything to get my hands on you in any way I can. If that’s happening, there’s no way I’m not going to like it.”

I grin back at him. In the dim light of my room, illuminated by just a single gold lamp, he’s softer, almost like his former self is just a false memory. He leans against the doorframe, arms crossed.

“What now?”

I grip the sides of my tank top and in one smooth motion pull it over my head. I’m standing in front of him in my pink satin bra. My breasts look amazing in it, I know, even if a little dart of insecurity zips through my brain. I’m gratified when Grant hangs his head and blows out a frustrated breath before he looks at me again. I can almost hear his gulp.

“God, Kendall.” He takes a step toward me, then halts. He rakes a hand down his face. “Your tits are phenomenal. Like, the best I’ve ever seen. I’m not even kidding.”

I start to unbutton my shorts so I can shimmy out of them. “Take your shirt off,” I say. I inject a little command into my voice.

He complies immediately, ripping his shirt over his head and tossing it to the floor. I stare at him while I slide my shorts down my thighs. He’s muscular, which isn’t that surprising given that his only activities are probably working and going to the gym, but I still love seeing the way his biceps pop when he crosses his arms over his chest again.

His little huff of air is so sexy I almost reach for him. He follows it with a groan. “Jesus. And your legs . . .” His eyes flick up to mine. “I could fucking devour you.”

“Maybe you’ll get that chance.” I run my hands over my body, and he shivers. “If you’re good.”

“What now?” His gaze crawls all over me, up and down.

“What do you want the most?”

“To get my hands on you,” he says quickly. His fingertips dig into his forearms, then he uncrosses his arms and steps forward.

“Not yet, then,” I say. “I don’t think you deserve it.” I give him an evil little smile.

I extract some lube from my bedside table and lean back on my bed. Grant’s gaze burns another path along my body. His attention presses on me like a touch, a weighty thing that steals my breath. When I look at him, I’m gratified by his mussed hair, his glassy expression, and the tortured way he grips my doorframe, like he could crush it in his hand.

I lie down in front of him and rest my head, trailing my fingers along my abdomen. When I part myself and run a finger along my clit, Grant’s soft groan reaches somewhere primal in my brain, some long-forgotten recess of my mind. I’ve never felt like this. Knowing he’s watching me, wanting me, waiting on my instruction as I touch myself makes me incandescent with desire.

I’m trembling now, rubbing my clit as he watches.

“Kendall, please,” he says.

I sit up, shaky, and unhook my bra, slowing my movements until Grant’s fidgeting restlessly in front of me. I take it off and drop it to the floor, then lay back again. My hands find my breasts, and I run my fingertips over them, savoring the feel.

“Babe, I’m dying here.”

“You want to touch me?”

“Christ. Yes.”

I hear him move, then he hovers over me. His hands plant on either side of my hips as he stares down at my face. I grin at him.

“All right, then,” I say. I take my hand off myself. “Get me off.”

He murmurs into my skin as he kisses a trail down my chest. “You want my fingers? My tongue?”

“Both.”

He lays the flat of his tongue on my nipple, and I arch up off the bed. He kneads the other breast with his hand, and though I’m the one moaning and writhing, the look on his face is one of absolute rapture. I want to frame a picture of his face so I can go back in time to show this to him, just so he knows how he would worship me one day.

He continues his path down my body, skipping over the part where I want him the most. When he licks a trail up one of my calves, I jolt a little.

“Oh, God. Why does that feel so good?”

He chuckles.

I lift onto my elbows to watch him. He moves between my thighs, and when he licks me up my center, my breathy moan is one of relief and unabashed pleasure. He’s relentless with his tongue. I move with him as he devours me, staring as he shamelessly humps my bed. The sight of him overcome with that need to thrust might be the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen in my life—he’s bare-chested, muscles glistening and hair standing at odd angles, as he moves in time with my own hips, like he’s imagining burying himself there. When he finally plunges a finger into my body and sucks on my clit, I go off in a shower of fireworks behind my eyelids. I chant his name the whole time.

“I’m going to come,” he breathes. He moves his hips.

“Stop,” I tell him. “No you aren’t.”

“Yes I am,” he grits out. He seems like he’s on the verge of moving again, then he collapses over my legs with an agonized whine. “Fuck.” He takes a shaky breath and lets it out. “I can’t stand this.”

“Really?”

“I just need a moment.” He wipes his mouth with his forearm before he covers me again. His kiss is sloppy, wet, and full of roving tongue. I want to keep him here.

“I’m not going to make it,” he says against my lips. “But I’m also kind of into this. The whole denial thing.”

I roll my hips against his. “Yeah? Maybe you shouldn’t take care of yourself at home, either. We’ll see how long you can go.”

He pulls back from me. His mouth lifts on one side. “You’re going to drive me out of my mind.” He lets his hands drift over my waist before he rolls off me and lies next to me on the bed.

“This could be fun.” I turn my head toward him. His shirt’s still off, his lean muscles on display. I run my finger over his pec, and he trembles. He’s really wound up. “What time do you get up to go to the gym?”

“Who says I do that?”

I cock my head at him in response.

He sighs. “Usually around four.”

“Ugh, fuck off.” I smile at him. “I mean, you look good. But your schedule sounds like hell.”

He shrugs. “I make time for things I want to do.” To punctuate his point, he kisses a path along my shoulder, and I shiver in response.

We lie there for a few minutes and catch our breath. Grant’s shaky sigh tugs at my conscience, but I don’t give in to the urge to reciprocate.

“It’s amazing how much better I feel now that I’m able to exercise,” I say instead. “Not at four in the morning. But I think it helps. I’ve got this jacked up thyroid and sometimes I feel so shitty, like I can’t put one foot in front of the other, but then I feel better after I move. It’s a weird paradox.”

“It’s okay to complain about it,” he says. “I know how terrible autoimmune stuff can make you feel.”

I shrug. “I’ve never been a big complainer. I learned a long time ago it doesn’t make a difference.”

“Well, it does to me. I want to know how you’re feeling.”

I grasp his chin and turn his face toward me. “You’re being really sweet.” I eye him. “You said you did a lot of therapy, but what honestly changed you so much in ten years? You’re at least seventy-five percent less awful.”

He links his hand behind his head and reclines back on my bed. “I started to feel more secure in college. That’s all it was in high school—insecurity. I was worried about my social status. I got more comfortable with failure, with not being the best, as I got older.” He scratches his cheek. He’s not looking at me. “I met a girl in med school who talked about her experiences being bullied when she was younger. I recognized more and more that I was that person, the one who did that to others. And you got the worst of it.” Now he turns toward me. “I was insecure because I came from a good family, and you were still better than me at every subject.”

“My family’s not good?”

He winces. “Shit. I know how that sounds. I mean, that was my thought process at the time. I know now how wrong I was.”

“Thank you for helping my mom,” I say quietly.

It’s easier to say with only the soft glow of my bedside lamp. With the starless night sky outside my large window and the soft comforter at my back, I could pretend this whole conversation isn’t a huge deal.

“I’m surprised you didn’t kick up even more of a fuss,” he says. His accent’s a tiny bit thicker when he’s relaxed, I notice. He tries to cover it,

just like I do.

“I wanted to, but then I thought about it.” I roll toward him. “My mom needs the money. And the groceries were a nice touch. She won’t take any from me or Blaine.”

“Is she still working?” He’s watching me again, studying me like he wants to get inside my head.

I nod. “She had to quit for a period of time after Blaine’s accident, and she’s had some health issues over the years. She got a better job recently, though. At the nursing home. It’s even got benefits. I still worry about her, but not as much now.”

“I’m glad, then. I hate that you guys struggled so hard.”

I turn my head away from him. My eyes trace over some of the items on and around my desk—a new laptop, a stack of books, a cushy rolling chair I spent too much on. All things I wouldn’t have owned as a kid. Thank God for public libraries, at least.

“I was hungry some, as a kid,” I say, almost whispering. I can’t believe I’m being this vulnerable with him. “I know you had lots to say about that—”

“Kendall. I’m aware of what food insecurity looks like. You don’t have to explain anything.”

“Yeah, well, it sticks with you. It’s why I will never intentionally restrict myself. I have a fridge full of food and sometimes I still find myself getting nervous.”

He winces. “I’m so sorry.” His face takes on a solemn cast. “I would do anything to go back in time. I would have asked my parents to help you guys. I would have stopped being such an unconscionable dick.”

“I know. I do believe you now. It still hurts, but I believe you.” I throw one leg over his, and he traps it between his own. “Mom grew up with even less than I did, if you can believe it. And my granny with less than her.”

“Is she still alive? Your grandmother?”

“She’s my only living grandparent,” I say. “She’s ninety. Lives at the same facility where my mom works. She was the youngest of fourteen kids. She talks about how when she was growing up, the bathwater was always dirty by the time they got to her because she had to go last.”

He grimaces. “Yikes.”

“Yeah. So sometimes I think it wasn’t so bad, how I had it. And I’m okay now.” I blow out a breath. “I think I’m done feeling exposed. Let’s

talk about you.”

“What do you want to know?” Grant’s expression is a little more relaxed, like he’s not quite so tortured anymore. Pity. He has that self-assured air about him, like he knows he belongs in every space.

“Why orthopedics?”

He shrugs. “It makes the most sense to me. That’s the easiest answer. I like how you can usually draw a straight line from the problem to the solution.”

“Ah. No messy conditions for you, huh?”

“Ha.” He smiles at me. “It’s a stereotype for a reason.” He sits up, and the light from my lamp illuminates his skin, making him look like a damn Greek God. “So why nursing?”

“I meant it when I said I couldn’t afford med school. I needed a job where I could come out of school pretty quickly making decent money.”

“I understand.” He leans closer to me. He avoids looking at my naked body, and I drag a white throw over myself to put him out of his misery. “What about singing? I’ve gotta say, I knew this when we were younger, but your voice, is, ah . . .” He looks up, searching. “It’s amazing.”

“You look like you wanted a different word there,” I tell him.

“I was going to say sexy. I could listen to you sing for hours.”

My face heats. “I’m not going to serenade you, if that’s what you want.” At his chuckle, I continue. “I did think about it. That seemed scarier than anything, though. I could have ended up making a ton of money, or I could have ended up sleeping in my car. I just wanted something dependable.” I laugh. “I went stargazing with some former coworkers recently, though, and I convinced myself I wanted to become an astronomer. I was pretty high on that idea for a few minutes.”

“You can do whatever you want,” he says, “but you’re great at what you do. I meant that.”

I fidget a little, then I sit up so I can pull my clothes back on. He watches me hungrily despite the somber conversation. “I’m glad you came over. I don’t think we can have more than this, even though I really like it. But it’s weirdly healing for me.” A laugh escapes. “Having you want me.”

He swallows. “I do.” His eyes track over me again. “Want you, I mean. And not just because I think you’re hot, even though I do. I can’t believe I never saw how amazing you were.”

I gulp. This is inching toward uncomfortable territory for me, so I toss him his shirt. We need all our clothes on if we're talking about feelings.

"Well, like I said, this is all we can have," I tell him.

We're both standing now. He glances around at my room again, his gaze snagging on some of the pink accents. I know my room is girly, and I like it that way. I almost want him to say something, just so we can do battle again. This new, nice version of our relationship confuses me.

"What now?" he asks when his attention returns to me.

"I'll see you at work later this week," I say.

He nods as though he expected that. When I show him to the door, my stomach riots. I'm worried about how this will go if we continue down this road, but I think I can keep my emotions separate from what we're doing. This was too fun not to have again.

But there's absolutely no way I can give Grant a chance to worm his way into my heart.



My phone chimes with a text the following afternoon. I'm off today so I'm lounging on my cushy sofa, watching a television show that might be actively making me dumber.

GRANT

You want to keep me company before I'm on call?

I smile despite my best efforts not to.

ME

Is this a date?

GRANT

Only if you want it to be.

ME

Smooth, Wyndham. Smooth.

I deliberate. Do I want to spend even more time with this man? Really, what's the harm? We can't get up to any shenanigans if he has to be on call in an hour.

ME

Okay, sure. Where to?

GRANT

How about that coffee shop down the street from the hospital?
The Java House.

ME

Ooh, the one with the bookstore attached? I'll be there.

I start for the coffee shop before I can change my mind. I'm not doing anything today, anyway, and I like this spirited little fling we've got going on. It lights me up inside.

Drops of rain pepper my windshield on my way downtown. It's one of those days where it's just enough to be annoying, where you're not even sure you need an umbrella. I'm wearing a cute yellow rain jacket I picked up last week on a shopping trip. When I get there, Grant's talking with an older Black man who sits next to him, another physician by the looks of his scrubs and general air of authority. I hesitate, but Grant waves me over when he catches sight of me.

"Kendall," he says, and the smile he offers makes it seem like he's genuinely happy to see me. "I just ran into one of my professors. This is Dr. Walker. He teaches pharmacology."

The man in question sticks out his hand. His handshake is firm.

"Pleased to meet you," he says. "Grant tells me you've had an interview already."

Grant smiles at me proudly. It's disorienting, this kind of attention. I hang my jacket on the back of the chair and sit. It's one of those modern-looking coffee shops with exposed ductwork, Edison bulbs, sleek wood tables, and brick interior. Through the adjoining doorway, a small bookstore boasts a combination of used and new books. It's not very crowded in here at the moment.

"I haven't heard anything yet," I say.

“Well Grant seems to have confidence in you,” Dr. Lykins says. “He’s been raving about how wonderful you are as a clinician.”

“Has he?” I prop my chin on my fist.

“You’ve impressed him, and that’s hard to do, I think.” He smiles at me, then looks back at Grant. He seems to be weighing our relationship to each other. “I’ll leave you to it,” he says, clapping a hand on Grant’s back. “And good luck to you, Kendall.”

I raise an eyebrow at Grant when the professor walks away. “You’ve been discussing me?”

“Come on. You know what I think about your potential.”

I study him. He’s not looking fresh, not after a shift at the hospital, but it doesn’t matter. The soft light highlights his angular jaw. His white teeth flash with his shy grin. He’s a little more relaxed, a little less serious than usual, and I’m drinking it in.

“Let’s go get our drinks. I’ve only got about thirty minutes left,” he says.

To my chagrin, a pang of disappointment rolls through me at that. What is my deal?

We order our coffee in to-go cups since Grant can’t sit for long. He thanks the barista with more warmth and humility than he had for even a moment in high school. I marvel at his change again—one would never have thought him capable of this degree of humanity when we were teenagers.

He nods toward the open door at the side of the shop. “You want to grab your jacket and go look around the store?”

“Of course.”

A contemporary vibe continues through the bookstore, though a darker, moodier paint color adorns the walls and an assortment of plants and greenery perch on the warm maple shelving. Bean bag chairs and little mid-century sofas cluster around the space.

“I could live in here,” I tell him.

“Honestly, same.”

We browse the shelves together, each of us picking up and putting down books, until he selects a medical thriller and I land on a tome about the Salem witch trials.

“This is going to piss me off,” Grant says once we’re at the front of the store, near the entrance. He gestures to the book he purchased. “I bet the

clinical stuff is all wrong.”

I laugh. We’re standing next to the door now, brushing up against each other, while a few people file in and out. It’s raining a little harder now. It’s like we don’t want to leave the other’s company, even though I’d like to blame it on the weather.

“So, how come you picked that one?” I cock my head. “I wouldn’t have pegged you for a thriller type.”

He shrugs. The door opens again and lets in a bit of misty air, but we stay planted.

“I like most fiction,” he says. “Mysteries and thrillers, though, have this kind of cosmic justice I love. I like when the villain gets his comeuppance.”

“Hmm.” I shift closer to him. We’re alone in this corner now, and no one is paying us any attention. I’m near enough I can see the flecks of green in his blue eyes. “There is so much I could say about that. Stuff a psychiatrist would have a field day with.” My eyes meet his again. “Justice is really important to you now, huh?”

He swallows. “It is, actually.”

Once again, I’m becoming aware of how many layers this man contains. It’s disconcerting.

“I can’t stop thinking about you,” he says softly. He doesn’t take his gaze off me. The people milling about the shop, the swirling scent of coffee, and the soft patter of the rain outside the window fade away. I’m locked in his stare.

“I think I know what you want,” I say, lowering my volume even more. “You’re pretty hard up by now, I would imagine.”

He brings his lips next to my ear, brushing his soft mouth against my skin. “Trust me, I want that very, very badly. More than you know.” He straightens. “I also like your company, though. I mean it.”

My heart thumps. Yikes. We’re veering much too close to real emotion for my liking, and I can’t reciprocate. I just can’t.

I glance at my watch. “You have to go,” I tell him.

He startles. “Shit. Yeah, you’re right.” He steps away from me, but his lingering look pins me. “I’ll see you this week.”

I salute him. God, I’m such a dork. “For sure,” I say. Then I turn to go without looking back.



We aren't around each other much for the next few days, despite being at work together. I get a box in the mail when I get home one day. I didn't order anything, so I'm not sure what it could be.

I tear into the packaging. There's a little velvet bag with a gold bracelet in it. I pull it out and study it, and my heart shifts in my chest. It's exactly like the one I said I liked, the one my patient was wearing. I know they're pricey—I've looked at them online before.

I drop it on the counter like it might singe my skin. Then, thinking better of it, I pick it up and slide it on. It looks gorgeous on my wrist. Damn him.

ME

Thank you for the bracelet

ME

You're still not forgiven.

GRANT

You're welcome. And I know.

GRANT

I really like giving you whatever you want.

Should his spending move the needle for me? I'd like to say no, but I would be lying. I'm sure that's shallow, but growing up the way I did made luxury items seem like a dream I would never have access to. Besides that, it's not like Grant's a billionaire, and even if his grandfather left him some money it wouldn't be enough for him to have unlimited funds. The things he's done—the thousands of dollars—wouldn't be meaningless for him.

ME

What are you doing this evening?

GRANT

I'm home now, and I'm going to crash soon. I'm running on a criminal sleep deficit here.

ME

Gotcha. I'll leave you to it then

GRANT

No, that's okay. I like talking to you. What have you been doing?

ME

Hanging with my friend Maria

GRANT

I suppose it's karma that you have this vibrant social life and I'm a sad, lonely resident. I even have a roommate and I still feel like I'm alone too much.

ME

I had friends in high school, too, remember? We were all just beneath your notice.

GRANT

touché

ME

It's true, though. There were other nerdy kids. Lots of other poor kids. I have more in common with most people from our hometown than you do.

I stretch my arm out and study my bracelet as I wait for his reply. It glints when it catches the light. I'm at my kitchen counter now, savoring the brush of the ceiling fan's current on my warm skin.

GRANT

You were better than me. That's why.

ME

So it wouldn't have mattered that I was from the wrong side of the tracks if I hadn't beat you on everything?

GRANT

Wrong side of the tracks? Is this West Side Story?

ME

I bet your mother would use that exact language to describe me.

GRANT

Nah, she wouldn't use those words. She fancies herself a genteel lady.

I laugh as I head toward the shower and turn it on. I peel off my clothes, then lean my hip against the counter as the bathroom starts to steam a little. That has to be part of his family's problem—his mother thinks she's some kind of Southern society woman, and that's just not what our hometown is all about. We have too many pictures on our walls and junk in our yards. Our strength is in our ability to survive. I once witnessed someone from home using a saw attached to a broom handle to cut off tree limbs, which is ridiculous but also kind of innovative. It's a proud place, where Grant and I are from, one that has lots of problems and has tried to solve them with the wrong solutions. But it's also a little embarrassing.

You can be king there if you have money, sure, but it's a kingdom no one else wants.

Grant and I live in a big city now, complete with all the trappings of city life, and it's so different from my home a few hours away that it might as well be Narnia.

ME

No offense, but that's hysterical. That was the other thing I always found funny. We're from Blacksburg. It's not like any of us are aristocracy.

GRANT

Well, self-awareness isn't my family's strong suit.

GRANT

What are you up to now that you're home?

ME

Can I send you something a little risqué?

GRANT

fuck yeah

A grin stretches across my face. I snap a picture of myself, capturing the tops of my breasts and some of my ass in the mirror. I hit send.

GRANT

#&@\$!

GRANT

You don't play fair.

ME

That's funny. I just learned the word for that. The string of characters in place of a curse word, that is. It's called a grawlix.

GRANT

Is this nerdy sexting?

ME

Sure. You got one for me?

GRANT

Something something studying anatomy together

GRANT

it needs work

ME

Aww, did you try to make a joke?

GRANT

I am capable.

GRANT

When can I see you again?

ME

Tomorrow, at work

GRANT

You know what I mean.

ME

Tomorrow, at work 😊

GRANT

Fine. Go shower, you minx.

I lay the phone face down on the counter, smiling like an idiot. Do I like Grant now? Is that what's happening? Because this feels monumental, and definitely like something I should talk to a therapist about. I thought I was

giving him hell, and now I'm mooning over him like a teenager with a crush. Does it take so little to impress me?

The shower's hot enough peel a layer of skin off, but I relish it. I need to deal with these unruly feelings.

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Grant peeks at me from across the surgical suite. My face tingles. How far we've come, that my skin prickles in—what, pleasure?—instead of anger.

Dr. Planck isn't in the room yet, but the rest of the team is here. The patient is already positioned on the table.

George emits a low whistle. "Nurse. Can you hit the music?"

My lip curls. "Excuse me?"

Grant's head snaps toward the other resident. "She's not a dog, George," he says in a low voice. "That's extremely unprofessional." His eyes narrow. "Her name is Kendall."

George sputters, but he doesn't argue. The others in the room avoid eye contact with him.

"I'll start the music after the first incision," I say. George nods.

Dr. Planck scrubs in, and we conduct the time out.

"Before we make the first incision," Dr. Planck says, "does everyone agree that this is Dariush Aziz, and we are performing a right hip arthroscopy with acetabular rim decompression and labral debridement?"

Once everyone affirms, I turn on the music—classic rock, Dr. Planck's preference. The tension from earlier evaporates.

Dr. Planck's eyes sparkle. "All right, team. I've got a question. When someone dies, what's the last organ to stop working?"

I smile. I know this is a setup for something, but I play along. "The heart," I say. "Doesn't it keep pumping blood?"

The anesthesiologist chimes in. “I’m going with the brain. You can measure electrical activity for a period of time after someone dies.”

“Is it skin or something? Is this a trick question?” Grant’s resonant voice rises above the other sounds of the OR.

Dr. Planck’s grin reaches eyes behind his surgical mask. “It’s the eyes. They dilate.”

I cock my head, then groan loudly.

“What?” George cuts in. “That doesn’t make sense. They . . .” He chuckles. “Wait, I see now. That’s terrible.”

We take turns telling more awful jokes. There’s some silence at a particularly difficult part of the surgery, but otherwise the mood is light.

A little later, though, I have to correct George.

“Uh, George—Dr. Gambill,” I say, and his gaze snaps to mine. “I need you to stop leaning on the patient’s leg.”

He straightens. “I know. I don’t need you to tell me that.”

“Hey.” Grant is holding a pair of retractors, so he doesn’t look at his co-resident, but his tone is direct. “You aren’t going to talk to her that way.”

“Glorified gofer,” George mutters, presumably talking about me.

Grant’s expression, or what I can see of it, turns thunderous.

“Do I need to replace you, Dr. Gambill?” Dr. Planck continues working with methodical calm, but a thread of anger winds through his words. “Because I won’t hesitate if you can’t respect the rest of the staff.”

“No,” George mutters. “I’m fine. Sorry.” He directs this last word at Dr. Planck, not me.

After the procedure, I hear Dr. Planck chewing out the resident down the hall. Normally I feel bad for residents who get yelled at by attendings, but not in this case. George can fuck right off.

Dr. Planck finds us in the employee office. “I need to talk to the two of you as well,” he says.

A flash of cold arrows through my stomach.

Grant’s shoulders inch up, but he sounds collected when he responds. “Of course.”

Dr. Planck sighs. “There’s not a hospital policy against residents dating nurses.” The ice in my stomach turns to a heavy stone. I start to protest, but Dr. Planck holds up his hand. “I don’t want to know, even if I’m wrong, you don’t have to tell me. But you can see why it’s frowned upon. There’s some

additional tension in the OR that crops up sometimes, especially if things go bad. I want you two to be aware of that.”

I nod. My face feels bloodless and tingly.

“I understand,” Grant says. “It won’t impact patient care.”

I whip my head toward him. He’s all but confirmed that we’re fooling around. What’s the rest of the staff going to think?

I corner Grant after the attending walks out. “What the hell?”

“I’m sorry?” Grant tilts his head.

“Now I look like I’m using you to get ahead! You contacted the interviewing committee about me. People will say I’m sleeping with you to get into school!”

“Dr. Planck isn’t going to say anything,” Grant says. “Besides that, isn’t it a bad look for me as well?”

“No one cares what you do,” I practically spit the words. “You could have sex with a staff member on the operating table and people would forgive it.” I turn to pace. “We have to stop what we’re doing.”

“Kendall.” Grant reaches for me, but I dodge his hand. “It’s going to be okay. We’ll be more careful.” He grips the table behind him.

I stop pacing and face him. “We’ll see.”

“We at least have to finish our project.”

“Fine.” I tap my foot. “This just makes me nervous.”

“Whatever happens with us, you’ll get into med school on your own merits. You don’t need me, and everyone knows it.”

I chew on my lip. Things have never seemed based on merit to me, not for my whole life. I’ll have to be more cautious with him.

If this jeopardizes my future, I’ll never forgive myself.



The sun has already set by the time I knock on Grant’s door. I’m here to finish up our project, and not to hook up with him.

I am *not* here to hook up with him.

It’s a Friday night. The air’s cool enough for a light jacket. The scent of someone grilling in the neighborhood reaches me, and the combination of smokiness and crisp air is giving me a little olfactory bliss.

Grant's out of his scrubs when he answers the door. His faded jeans hug his thighs, and his old Blacksburg football T-shirt highlights his biceps. My heart rate picks up.

"Welcome," he says. He sweeps his arm inside as I step over the threshold. "You caught us on a night where we're both here." He nods to a long-haired man on the couch who offers a cheery wave. "This is my roommate, Adam."

"I'm leaving soon," Adam says. "I've got a few days off, and I'm kicking it off with a house party tonight."

"Well you don't have to go on my account," I say. I set my purse on the kitchen counter and join Grant and Adam in the living room. "But it's a good night for a party. It feels amazing outside."

"Yeah?" Adam grins at me, an easy, carefree smile that lights up his whole face. It's hard to imagine Grant being friends with this dude. He's never been carefree in his life. "October is a great time here."

I settle into the living room recliner. Grant's place is a little homier than I expected—the furniture's mostly in warm tones, and there are a few paintings on the walls.

"You aren't wrong," I say. "Fall is the best, hands down. Where you from, originally?"

I'm relaxing a bit as we talk. I can hear myself slipping into my Eastern Kentucky accent a little, and Grant smirks at me from where he leans against the wall.

"Texas. Corpus Christi," Adam says. "I love the autumn colors, but I was most excited about seeing snow. I remember asking Grant what a typical winter is like."

I laugh. "Did he tell you there's no such thing?"

"It has been a little unpredictable so far," Adam strokes his chin. "Every season is, for that matter."

"It's general chaos when it snows in Kentucky, even though it happens every single year," I say. "Multiple times. Lots of towns don't have the resources to properly deal with it. And good luck if it's an ice storm—those are brutal. We don't have snow tires or enough plows. We in healthcare just sort of go out and hope for the best."

Adam chuckles. "I gathered that."

"It's super fun when you live in the mountains like we did," Grant says. He takes his eyes off me for a moment, only to return them. "Lots of hills to

go sledding on, but it's treacherous for drivers. The roads are winding and steep."

"Some of us had to use garbage can lids, Oscar the grouch style," I say. "We aren't all made of money."

Grant finally turns his attention to Adam, who is watching our exchange with avid interest. "It's almost always small amounts though. Like last year. Usually not more than five inches at one time."

"Only five inches, you say?" I lift my eyebrows.

"Jesus Christ, Kendall," Grant says, burying his face in his hands, but Adam laughs. I can tell we would get along.

"It was right there," I say. You can't say 'don't worry, it's not more than five inches' and expect me not to make a penis joke."

Adam's still smiling at me. His gaze flicks back and forth between me and Grant. "I thought there was a lot of dislike here? Seems like you two are getting along now."

I shrug, even though a wave of anxiety crests in my stomach. "He's not as bad as he once was."

"Good to know." Adam ponders me for a moment, then stands. "I'll leave you to it, then." He grabs his wallet from the counter and says his goodbyes.

When it's just the two of us, Grant sits on the couch. The silence thickens around us.

"He seems nice," I say.

"Yeah." Grant fiddles with a stack of papers on his coffee table. "I don't really need a roommate, but it's been good. Having someone around, I mean."

My gaze sharpens on him. "Were you lonely? I always thought you were surrounded by friends. That's how it looked, anyway."

"Well, it might not surprise you to know that I wasn't very happy even when I had a lot of friends around me. Not back then, anyway." His nostrils flare with his breath. "Want to hear something sad?"

"Only if it doesn't make me feel sorry for you."

"I'm not sure my high school buddies even liked me," he says. "I had some genuine friendships in college and med school, but we're kinda spread out now."

"In that case, I *am* sorry," I tell him, and I mean it. The friends I've had have always been genuine. It makes me sad for him that he didn't feel that

way when we were kids.

He waves that off. "I'm okay. I'd rather have a few close friends than a bunch of fake ones." His fingers drum on the couch cushion. I watch as he moves them, one by one, imagining them on my skin. "And purpose. That helps too."

I lean forward and prop my chin on my fist. We're at angles to each other, but I try to catch his eye. "Yeah? What is it that's driving you?"

He sits back and rubs his hands along his thighs. "I thought it was just being a surgeon. Enjoying life, like we talked about." He swallows before he looks at me. "Hearing you talk about your passions makes me want to do something noble. To be something better."

My heart twists. "It's okay to just be an orthopedic surgeon."

"Yeah, I know. But I want to make some kind of impact."

"I understand that." I trace my finger along the seam of the chair. "Even when I wanted to be a famous singer, I still hoped to do some good in the world."

Grant smiles. "It's too bad you let go of that dream."

"Nah." I grin back at him. "I can have the same aesthetic and be in medicine instead. Big boobs, big voice, big heart."

He laughs.

"I know what you mean about impact," I say. "But that might be easier than you think. You've got lots of opportunity there." I stand up so I can move next to him on the couch. He startles when I sit next to him, but then he lets his hand brush my leg.

He turns his head toward me, his face only a few inches from mine. "I like hearing you talk about it. The way you get into maternal health, for example."

"It's hard not to. Women living in poverty have higher risks of complications during pregnancy. And Black women are much more likely to have problems. It's fucking shameful." I lift my hand. "Not that I'm some hero. Making sure people have access to good care is the lowest of low bars."

He takes my hand and runs his thumb over the back of it. Despite how much we've already touched, this feels more intimate than anything we've done. My pulse roars, drowning out the sound of the icemaker and the rumble of a car out on the street.

“I wasn’t going to call you a hero,” Grant says. “I know that’s not why you care.” He keeps stroking my hand. “Sounds like you saw a lot when you were doing labor and delivery.”

I wrinkle my nose. “Yeah, I had to take some time to decide if that’s what I want to do or not. It’s given me some pause about pregnancy, I’ll tell you that.”

“I understand.” He links his fingers with mine, and I let him. “Tell me what you meant when you said you had a lot of help escaping poverty. That’s something you said a while back.”

“Gosh, lots of things. You remember Ms. Morgan? Our English teacher senior year?”

He nods again.

“She found some different scholarships for me to apply for. She helped me with getting fees waived for applications. She even straight up paid for one of them out of her pocket.”

“Wow,” Grant says.

“I know. I sent her a check later, but she never cashed it. I had other people who helped me out—college professors, and family friends. I had a job in college, and sometimes I had to bum rides when my car broke down, but that’s just little stuff.” I swallow. “I took advantage of lots of campus programs. I was always on the lookout for free and used stuff. I had food stamps. That kind of thing.”

He nods. “I’m glad you had the help.”

“You can’t do it alone,” I say. “That’s a bullshit myth.” I stare out his front window. The dusky sky doesn’t allow for much view other than our own reflections. “Even though I have a lot of pride. Too much. Sometimes it feels like it’s been me against the world.”

“I’m proud of you too.” He tilts his chin toward the coffee table, where our work is piled. “We going to finish that up?”

I gulp. “That’s what I came over here to do.”

“And now? What do you want to do now?”

“We can’t get physical again, right?”

His thumb caresses the back of my hand. That point of contact shoots a line of warmth all the way up my arm, and down into my pelvis. “I’ve never wanted anyone as badly as I want you.”

“Grant . . .”

“It’s okay,” he says. “It’s up to you.”

I want him. So much. This is madness.

“Yes,” I whisper. “Kiss me, Grant.”

He leans in and cups one side of my face with his hands. Then he captures my lips with his own. The way we melt together is so *delicious*, I can’t decide whether I want to savor this or rush to the next part. He breaks away to trail kisses over my jaw and down my throat. His urgency makes itself clear in the frantic pace of his movements. He cups my head, slides his hands along my waist, puts his lips on my mouth again with enough fervor to make my breath catch.

I slide one leg over his lap and straddle him. We kiss and I roll my hips against his, eliciting a long moan from him. Without warning, he cups his hands under my ass and stands with me, so that my legs are gripping his waist and he’s walking us toward what I assume is his bedroom.

I tear my face away from his. “Grant! You can’t carry me. I’m not some tiny little woman.”

“I’m strong,” he says, though his voice is a little breathy and the tendons in his neck stand out.

I bounce along with him until we reach his bedroom door. “Congrats on the testosterone, I guess,” I say.

He chuckles before letting me fall back into his bed.

I look around. His bedroom is also cozier than I expected. He’s got a little painting above his bed that snags my eye, a Louisville cityscape done in bright blues, purples, and oranges with a little autograph in the corner.

“Where’d you get that?” I nod at the picture, and he looks up from where he’s started dotting kisses along my collarbone.

A touch of pink colors his cheekbones. “My, uh, ex painted it. I really like it so I kept it.”

“Ah.” If he’s worried about me being jealous, that’s not really my style. Though now I’ve interrupted us and introduced a little snag in the fabric of our intimacy, so I feel the need to say something. “I like it too.”

He smiles and continues his path down my chest, pulling aside my shirt so he can kiss the tops of my breasts. “I’ve been thinking about these since you sent that damn picture.”

“Yeah?” I nudge him off me. He’s acting like he might be in control, but I’ve really enjoyed bossing him around. I like teasing him. “Roll to your back.”

He complies, but not without a raised brow. I shift up to stand in front of him, and he puts his hands behind his head, watching me like he's settling in for a show. His teeth snag on his bottom lip.

My movements slow a little. Despite all my bluster about my confidence, there's a tiny part of me that doesn't feel like I'm good enough. I've changed, but not without scars. I have some stretch marks decorating my thighs. My breasts are perky with the support of my bra, but not so much without it. I'm toned in some places, yes, but soft and loose in others. I have this fleeting feeling I shouldn't make myself vulnerable here.

I shake that notion off.

"Can we play around with me taking the lead some more?" I toy with the hem of my shirt.

"Looks like we already are." He quirks his eyebrow again.

"Tell me again if you aren't okay."

He props himself up on his elbows. "Don't get me wrong, it's fucking killing me that I haven't gotten off in over two weeks." He squirms on the bed as though punctuating his point. A rush of arousal floods my body. "But I'm more into it than I thought I would be. Denying myself."

"You're being so good." I touch the button on my jeans. "You deserve a treat for listening."

I unbutton my jeans slowly, making a show of peeling them off my body while he watches. Then I slide my shirt up and over my head. I'm standing in a lacy, black underwear set that cost more than a fancy dinner, but it's worth it to see the way he rakes his hand down his face, followed by a softly exhaled, "Fuck."

I saunter toward him. When my legs are almost touching his where they hang off his bed, I reach behind me to unhook my bra, and lean forward to shimmy out of it. I put one thigh on either side of his, almost touching him but not quite. His mouth drops open.

I take another mental picture of this, of Grant at my mercy. Because this is my favorite thing now.

“You can’t touch me yet,” Kendall says.

She’s straddling me but not putting her hands on me. Her tits are in my face and she’s pushing them together, and my vision wavers. I might actually pass out here.

When she lets her pink nipple graze my mouth and then pulls it out of reach, I let out a whiny sound I don’t think I’ve ever made in my life. “Fuuuck off. I don’t know if I can do this.” My fingers grip the comforter.

She sits up a little. “Wait, really?”

“No, I’m okay.” I’m breathing heavily. “Keep going.”

“Put your hands behind your head again,” she says.

I comply. I’m holding my breath, waiting for her next instruction.

Instead, she reaches for the button of my jeans. She grazes my erection when she pulls the zipper down, and I suck in another breath. She moves slowly. I’m not being dramatic when I say I might die from anticipation.

She tugs off my jeans, then my boxers. My cock springs up. She leans forward again, dragging her whole body down mine, and I shudder. She kneels on the floor and kisses a path up one thigh, then the other. I’m fisting the comforter so hard I might tear it.

The first stripe she licks up my shaft rips a groan from my throat. Jesus, this woman.

“Please,” I say. “Please, Kendall, I can’t take this anymore.”

She teases me a little longer, soft little brushes of her tongue. I squirm.

“I’m not even kidding,” I pant. “Fucking please.”

She finally takes me into her mouth. The first hot suction of her lips has my eyes rolling back into my head.

“God, that feels amazing.” I watch her head move, her pink lips stretching around me. Her nails dig into my ass as she works me over. *This* is what I needed. I’m at the razor edge of bliss. I can feel it just around the corner, taunting me. Just a little longer and I’ll finally be there, falling off that cliff of sweet relief.

Then I’m right there, panting as I squeeze and relax, almost near the edge—

She stops, pulling her mouth and hands from me.

“Fuck!” I thump a fist against my bed. I want to come so bad I might cry.

She smiles at me. “You’ll be okay.” Her breasts sway a little as she climbs over me again. I’m mesmerized by this woman, falling further into this attachment. “Can you lose the shirt?”

I sit up, bringing myself flush with her, and reach behind me to pull my shirt up and over my head. Our bare chests touch. I would swear I can feel her heart pounding against me, but it could just be my own racing pulse.

“I’m begging you,” I tell her.

“Soon.” She whispers it into my ear, so close her lips touch me, and a full body shudder racks me. “I promise.”

“Then I’m at your complete mercy,” I say, swallowing. “Now what?”

She scoots up my torso. “Can I . . .?” Her cheeks pink.

“I’m intrigued.” My stomach tenses under her naked body. “Are you shy now, babe?”

“I’ve never done what I’m about to ask for.”

I pin her with my stare. “Tell me.”

I stare, transfixed, as she moves toward my head and hovers over me.

“Yeah? I mean, hell yeah.” I grip her thighs and tug her over my mouth.

My tongue finds her center. I lick her while she grinds on me. Her weight lifts off my face, and I pull her back down. She’s not getting away.

I would be happy here forever with her sitting on my face, tongue buried in her folds. I forget about my own desperate need for a few minutes. My whole body sings with sensation.

Too soon, she moves off me.

“I want you to be inside me,” she says. “With protection, though.”

My heart pounds. “Of course.”

She lifts so I can scoot over to my bedside table and grab a little packet. I roll on the condom as she watches me. I start to lift up, but she gently pushes me back down.

“Stay there,” she says.

“All right.” If she’s going to put me out of my misery, I don’t care what it takes, I’ll do it.

She grips my cock in one hand then slowly, one agonizing millimeter at a time, sinks down onto me. Her snug heat is enough to pull another moan from me. She lets out a little huff of air that’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever heard.

“You still can’t come until I say.” She’s looking down at me but I’m helpless, unable to even form coherent sentences.

“Kendall,” I say, “I’m barely hanging on. I’m not sure I can wait.”

“You can.”

She starts to grind on me, and the edges of my vision blur with how good she feels. I reach up to make circles around her clit with my finger. Her answering whimper spurs me on. She moves a little faster, bouncing now, and my climax is so imminent I have to do some math in my head to stave it off.

“Please let me come,” I grit out. “Please.” Desperation rings through me.

“Hang on.” She moves against me, grinding harder, then shouts my name, squeezing around me.

Oh, Jesus. Her sounds, her lush body, the way she clenches around me—I can’t fucking stand it. Tingles start at the base of my spine.

“Oh God, Kendall.” I grit my teeth. “That’s so hot. You’re so fucking hot. Please let me come.”

“Now you can,” she says.

Oh, thank God. Fucking finally. I thrust up into her once, twice, and then—absolute ecstasy. Fireworks. Bombs detonating. On and on, until I almost can’t stand the pleasure.

I cry out her name, and some other garbled nonsense, gripping her hips with enough force to pin her in place. I’m hardly ever this vocal, and I would be embarrassed, but I feel too good to care.

My head swims.

Wow. I suck in a breath. Well, that's it. That has to be the pinnacle of my sex life. I don't think it gets any better than that. I'm not going to be able to move for a while.

Kendall rolls off me, then after I dispose of the condom I find her putting her clothes back on.

My stomach drops. "Are you leaving already?"

She shrugs. "We can finish our project another time, since we didn't work on it. I figured I could go."

A queasy feeling washes over me. I don't want her to go. I was hoping to spend more time with her and, God help me, to listen to her talk about anything at all. I'm losing my head here, and I can do nothing to stop it.

"You can hang out for a little longer. We can find something to watch, if you want."

"I figured you would need your beauty sleep." She crosses her arms over her chest.

"Kendall." I smooth a hand over my hair. "I want you to stay, is all. I like you."

Her face collapses a little, like my admission has devastated her. Which, she should know I like her. Haven't I made it obvious?

"What does that mean?" She sits on my bed.

"Hasn't anyone told you they like you before?" I sit next to her and take her hand, and she allows that. "I can't be the first."

"No, of course not. I've always had some options, even when you thought I shouldn't."

God. Her hits always land with such brutal, targeted efficiency.

"I would like you, and I would want you, if you looked exactly the same as you did then," I say. "I was an awful person for saying things like that to you."

She takes her hand back and buries her face in her palms. "Why does it have to be you? Of all the men in this city."

"Is there any way you could move past how I treated you?" My breath stalls.

She shakes her head, and my heart thuds. "I can keep hooking up with you. I'm having fun. But if you're asking about our future, I just don't think it's possible. Once your rotation is over, I think we should draw a line under it."

"So, I have until Halloween to win you over?"

“Grant . . .”

“I know.” I hold my hand up. “I’m clear.”

I have never been more angry at my former self than I am in this moment. Even if I didn’t want her, which I do, I would be devastated about how I messed with the life and the self-esteem of this phenomenal person. As I’m walking her to the door and bidding her goodbye, I’m wishing I could go back in time and punch that insecure, entitled kid in the face.



The first Saturday in October marks the beginning of me having three blessed days off in a row, and it’s an amazing feeling. My parents are on their way to visit me, which isn’t really how I wanted to spend my day off, but I’m hoping I can hang out for a few hours and then get on with the rest of my weekend.

My mother greets me at my door wearing a sweater, pants, and handbag in various shades of beige, though it looks expensive. Her butter-yellow hair is styled and hair-sprayed, as always. My dad follows with his customary nod toward me. He’s gruff and pink-cheeked, as usual, and sporting a pinched expression as though he’s just smelled something unpleasant. I think I get my too-serious demeanor from him, but I hope to God I have a better sense of humor.

My mom hands me a clear container filled with what looks like pasta, and my heart thaws despite my ambivalence about entertaining them today. She reaches up to hug me, and I bend down to her.

“Thank you,” I say.

She looks around. “Is your roommate here?”

I glance around myself as though he might pop out from behind the couch. “He’s working.”

“Ah. Well I hate we missed him.”

My parents never understood why I wanted a roommate. To them, I’m too old to “live like I’m still in college.” Still, my mom has this Southern quality where she pretends to be disappointed by someone’s absence when I know she wouldn’t want to sit and make small talk with Adam.

I offer them some tea I made for their visit, and they accept. They sit at the kitchen barstools while I chat with Mom.

“Traffic was terrible,” my dad says at a lull. It’s the first sentence he’s spoken to me, and my skin already prickles with irritation. Louisville’s big, but they act like I live in New York City or something.

“I thought we could go to lunch,” Mom says as I put the pasta in the fridge.

Dad’s still not done, though. “You really want to live here long term?”

Are we doing this already? A diesel engine outside rumbles in the ensuing silence, the squeal of its brakes sounding at a stop sign, the wan October sun filters in from the large, adjoining living room window, and a small branch ticks against the glass in a rhythmic dance with the breeze. Inside my apartment, though, I’ve managed to get irritated with my parents in the span of less than two minutes.

I take a deep breath. “I do, actually. Or somewhere like it.”

My mom wrings her hands on to the counter. She’s watching my exchange with Dad like she wants to interject but knows it’s a losing battle. We’ve had this conversation multiple times.

“I’m not moving back home,” I say. “I just don’t think it’s the place for me.”

The finality in my voice rings in the air. No one says anything. Maybe I’ve finally made myself clear.

“I thought you had considered somewhere closer, though?” My mom’s voice is small.

“Mom.” I rub the bridge of my nose. “I don’t really want to move to a small town. Lexington is as close as I’ll get to home, but it’s really up in the air for me. And lately I’ve been thinking about doing some charitable work too. There are some good organizations I can work with.”

She perks up at that. “If your problem is wanting to work with people in need, then wouldn’t somewhere in Appalachia be perfect?”

I sigh. She does make a good point, but she’s not listening. I can’t believe we’ve been together for such a short time and we’re already having this confrontation again.

“I feel like y’all aren’t really hearing me.”

My father starts to protest this, but Mom rests a hand on her chest and speaks before he can say anything.

“We are,” she says. “I’m sorry. I just think it might be better if you at least considered your options.” She huffs. “And I hope to have grandbabies someday. It would be nice if we were close to them.”

What the fuck? Where did that come from? I think briefly of how Kendall said she might not want any pregnancies, not that we have a future at this point. Still, my face warms with my rising temper.

"I know you aren't dating anyone right now," she continues. "I'm just saying, is all."

My mother could win awards for her passive aggressiveness, I swear. Dad doesn't speak; he just sits there with his arms crossed as if to say, "Well?"

"I am seeing someone, actually." What? Why would I say that? My rational brain is screaming at me to stop talking, but my flight or fight response has taken over, and I guess I've chosen to fight. I can name the part—it's called the amygdala, and right now it's in charge.

"Oh." Mom brightens. "You never told me that. Who is she?"

Shit. She knows Kendall, and I can't go around telling people we're dating or it will get back to the woman in question.

"It's not serious," I say. "But I like her a lot." That part's true, anyway. For some reason, I can't help launching this next dagger. "She doesn't think she wants kids."

"What?" Mom's consternation almost makes me feel guilty, but I stand firm.

"I don't know. How come you only wanted one?"

"Well, yes, I guess I just thought . . ." Her nose scrunches. "I mean, I figured *you* would want them. That it would be important to you."

Dad finally weighs in. "She'll change her mind."

I chuckle. He doesn't know Kendall. If she heard him say that she would never get pregnant just to spite him.

"Do we have to do this? I really just want to go to lunch." I shift my weight from one foot to the other.

Mom's face drops a little. "Okay," she says. "Yeah, let's go."

I exhale. These people who raised me are going to be the death of me.



Kendall was right about how early I usually work out, but it's Sunday afternoon and I have the day off, so I'm relishing doing what I want. I am at the gym, yes, but I slept in this morning, and I feel almost refreshed.

Adam spots me at the bench press. It's about a hundred times more crowded in here than usual. Chatter reaches me from all directions, and the scent of stale sweat permeates the air. The place is huge, two stories high, and it's the only gym near me that's open twenty-four hours.

"Was that your last set?" Adam peers down at me.

I grab my towel and wipe the sweat off my forehead. "I'm done, yeah. You need me to spot you again?"

"Nah." Adam chugs from his water bottle. "I think I'm ready to go."

I stand up and stretch. As I'm about to walk back to the locker room, I spot a woman across the gym. She's got a thick bronze braid hanging down her back, and she's wearing a tight workout tank top. Her hips sway with her movement on the elliptical machine, where she's chatting animatedly with a petite Black woman who works out next to her. They appear to be friends, with an easy familiarity between them.

Of course it's Kendall. She did tell me she was busy this afternoon, but I never dreamed she would be here. There's a word for seeing something everywhere—I can't think of it, but it refers to a frequency illusion—and I wonder if there's a similar word for feeling like you see the same person every time you leave the house.

Adam nudges me. "You coming?"

I don't take my eyes off Kendall when I respond. "You go on ahead."

He glances the direction I'm looking. I hear the grin in his voice when I start to walk in Kendall's direction. "Good luck, man."

Kendall doesn't see me until I'm right next to her. She jumps, then falters a bit on the machine so that I end up steadying her with my hand on her back.

"Jesus." Her hand is on her chest. "Jump scare, dude."

My lips turn down. I don't love being called dude by her.

"Sorry." I smile at her, but her eyes are wary. "I didn't know you came here."

"I don't, usually. I came with my friend. As a guest." She gestures to her friend, who has also stopped moving on her own elliptical. "This is Maria. Maria, this is Dr. Wyndham. He's one of the residents I work with."

What the hell?

"Grant," I say. "Nice to meet you."

Maria lifts her hand. "Likewise," she says. She's soft spoken, but her subsequent frown is louder than anything she could say.

A few things are clear to me. Kendall hasn't told her friends that she and I have something going on. This lady clearly knows who I am, though, and she's not a fan.

Kendall's cheeks are pink, and her eyes dart around. She's embarrassed to see me here. I'm intruding on her real life, and I'm not welcome. I turn to go.

I'm several strides toward the locker room when Kendall catches up to me.

"Wait." Her fingers touch my sleeve. "I'm sorry," she says. "I don't know how to deal with this."

My throat tightens. "You mean that you're ashamed about us fucking?"

She glances around. "It's not you I'm ashamed of. It's about my own pride and self-respect. I told my friends about how you treated me, and now I'm hooking up with you? Can't you see how that looks?"

"I've changed, though." I swallow. "You said so yourself."

"Does this really bother you that much?"

I hang my head. "I know you don't want anything more serious with me." I look up at her. "I get it. But yeah, it stings a little that your friends think I'm garbage."

People flow around us as she bites her lip. We are rocks in a river, immovable. A whiff of cleaning product wafts over to us from a nearby machine.

"I'll tell them you're nicer now, if it means something to you."

"Kendall." I tilt her chin up with my finger. "I'm not concerned about my reputation in general. I care what the people close to you think of me. That's all."

She's got that devastated look about her again, like my admissions are little thorns digging under her skin.

"You're making this whole revenge plan of mine really difficult," she says.

"If it makes you feel any better, you've already achieved it. The fact I want you so much and can't ever have you is pretty good revenge." We stare at each other. My raw honesty is a shard of glass, poised to cut both of us if we so much as breathe. She opens her mouth, then closes it again.

"I'm sorry, Grant." She turns again and walks back over to her friend.

“Excuse me.” Maria waits for me next to the cardio equipment. Her arms are crossed over her chest. “What was that?” She points a blue-polished finger toward the locker rooms.

She follows me when I start to walk that direction myself. I glance at her.

“Can you keep a secret?”

She stops me with a hand on my arm. “Are you serious?” She almost looks disappointed in me, which sends an arrow of shame into my gut. “The guy who was so awful to you when you were teenagers? And to think I’ve been worried about you.”

I nod. “I know. He’s better now, though. I swear.”

She rolls her eyes, but then she smiles at me. “First Joan, now you. I’m going to start charging for these secrets.”

I just found out our friend Joan has had a secret thing going with her best guy friend, Lucas, and Maria knew about it early. She’s the best secret-keeper of all of us, though. I am admittedly the worst.

“I’m sorry. I’ll buy you a banana smoothie after this if you want?”

“Deal.”

We start walking again.

“He is cute, though,” she says. “And he looks at you like he wants to eat you. Or marry you. I can’t really tell which.”

I laugh, but my stomach churns. The idea of something serious with him still makes me twitchy.

Also, Maria and her long-term boyfriend, Jay, broke up a few months ago, and I thought they would get married. If they couldn't make it work, what hope is there for me and my high school *bully*?

And can my justification really be that he's been pleasant and he buys me stuff? I ponder this as we get ready to go.

Besides that, I feel like he might just want me because he can't have me. It drives him crazy.

It's a good thing we have a deadline. I can avoid getting further tangled up with him. We'll put a period at the end of it, and we'll move on with our lives.



An email arrives in my inbox on a Wednesday in October. It's been there all day, but I haven't had the courage to check it. It's evening, and I'm home now, which seems to be a good place to open it, but every time I try a swooping sensation fills my chest. It's from the med school, and my guess is it will instruct me to check the online portal for my results.

Is this it? Am I being rejected? I drum my fingers on my coffee table. I've poured myself a glass of white wine, but I haven't had any yet. My dinner, some leftover casserole, cooks in the oven, and the garlicky scent almost makes me feel nauseous. The low drone of the television is on in the background—a home improvement show I'm not really watching—but nothing is drowning out the thump of my own heart.

I don't really want to do this alone. I could call my brother, or one of my friends, but my first instinct is to talk to Grant, and that confuses me. Sure, we've been hooking up for a couple of weeks now, but that's it. This itchy need to talk to him crawls over my skin until I open my contacts to video call him.

He answers after the first ring. It's after nine, and we've both been at work today, but his eyes almost look bright when he speaks. "Did you miss me already?" He rubs his hand over his light scruff, and an unfortunate zip of electricity shoots up my spine.

“I’m in need of moral support,” I tell him. I have my computer in front of me now, and I swing the phone around so he can see my email account.

“Oh. Well, shit.” He’s quiet for a moment. “And you wanted to call me first?”

“Don’t read too much into it.” I push my mouse so that it hovers over the email. “But I’m logging into the portal, and I need someone to be here either way.”

“Of course.” He rubs his jaw again. Damn him. Why is that so sexy? “I’m here. You can laugh, scream, cry. Whatever you need.”

His words dig into my tender feelings like little hooks. I can’t believe how sappy I’ve become lately. It’s honestly disgusting.

He’s silent while I open the email and follow the portal instructions. He’s holding his breath with me, I can tell. His lips are pursed.

I cover my mouth with my hand. “Holy shit.” My eyes water. “I got in!”

When I look at Grant, his smile stretches wide. He gives me a little fist pump. “I knew it! Congrats. You were an excellent candidate, clearly. I never had doubts.”

To my horror, tears threaten. I never cry in front of other people. In fact, the last time I cried in front of this man, I swore I would never do it again. I fan my face.

“I’m really happy for you, Kendall.” If Grant notices my tearfulness, he doesn’t comment on it. “You’re going to do great.”

“God. This is such a trip.”

He grins at me again. “I’m so thrilled for you. It’s better than when I got my own letter. I’ve been waiting with bated breath.”

“Stop that.” My smile mirrors his.

“I’m serious. I’m ecstatic.”

“I don’t know how in the hell I’m going to pay for it, but I’ve decided that if I have to take out loans, I’ll make it work.”

“Plenty of people do that,” Grant says. “Lots of my classmates. Most of them, really. You’ll be able to pay them back on a physician’s salary.”

“Yeah.” I tug on the collar of my T-shirt. “The thing that scares me, though, is that I might take out loans and then not be able to finish school for some reason. Anything can happen. I could fail, or I could be in a terrible accident. Or maybe I’ll just hate it. Then I’ll be stuck paying back thousands of dollars.”

Grant's face softens. He's in his bedroom, I notice, lounging on his bed. He stares at me with so much sympathy I want to look away. "Yeah, anything can happen. I know it's way different for me, but I don't have unlimited funds, either. I would be devastated if things didn't work out for me as a physician now."

"Yes, but you have a safety net."

He tilts his head from side to side. "Yes. But you were talking about hypothetical bad things. By that logic, we don't know that my parents aren't going to get arrested for money laundering or tax evasion or something like that." At my raised eyebrows, he laughs. "They aren't doing those things, obviously. But you'll drive yourself crazy thinking about how life can go wrong."

"Point taken." I take my phone with me to go get my dinner out of the oven. I'm still not very hungry, so I leave it sitting on the stove. I go back to the couch and pick up my wine.

"I can let you go eat if you want."

"I don't think I can actually take a bite." I sip on my wine. "I'm full of so much adrenaline I feel like I could circle the earth, Superman style."

"What now, then?"

I laugh. "Are you suggesting phone sex?"

His cheeks pink a little. God, I love making him blush like that. "I certainly wouldn't say no to that." His molten look could melt my phone's screen. "I like just talking to you, though. You deflect a lot with sex."

My nose wrinkles. "Yes. If the alternative is pretending we're friends." I'm trying to be funny, but my comment lands like a dropped egg. His face falls before I respond. "I'm sorry. That was unkind, and I don't even mean it. You're obviously my friend. I wanted to call you first, after all."

The admission costs me. I've started to like Grant as a person, and I'm not even sure when it happened. He's become a good person, an active listener, and someone I trust.

"I don't want to be your friend, Kendall."

"Grant . . ."

"I know, I know. Can I ask you something, though?"

I suck in a breath. "Of course."

"You would give me a chance if I weren't me, right? That's what the hang up is for you. Or do you just not want a relationship at all?"

He's stolen my words for a moment. We're looking at each other as he waits for me to speak.

"Can't I just take my shirt off?"

"Come on, Kendall. Let's have a real conversation."

My eyes sting again. What is wrong with me? "I'm open to something serious." I hold his eye contact. "You say all the right things. I even like you as a person now. I just can't get past who you were."

He looks up at his ceiling. "All right." His eyes fix on me again. "I think we've had this talk enough times now that I get the point. I just had to be sure."

"Do you want to stop what we're doing?"

He shakes his head. "I'm not smart enough for that."

My hands find the hem of my threadbare T-shirt, toying with the fabric. My mouth stretches into a smirk when his gaze snags there.

"About what you mentioned," he says.

"Yes?" I lift my shirt a little.

He gulps. His Adam's apple shifts as he watches me. "The phone sex."

"You'd be into that?"

"I could not be more enthusiastic," he says. His voice lowers. "Can I see you?"

I position my phone on my coffee table so that it's propped up. His sharp intake of breath when I peel my shirt off sends warmth flooding into my pelvis.

He groans, low and long. "You've been braless this whole time?"

I work on my shorts next. I'm standing now, moving slowly, watching his rapt attention that presses on my skin like a weight. I slide them off so that I'm left in my black silky thong.

Grant looks absolutely wrecked. His eyes are glassy, like he's drunk, and his face has taken on a flushed cast.

"God fucking damn. You—"

"What?" I hesitate, just for a brief moment, then sit and spread my thighs a little for him. I can't believe I'm letting him watch this on camera.

His hand trembles a little when he pushes it through his hair. "I didn't think I could be any more into you."

My belly flutters.

"What else do you want to see?" I brush a finger along my thigh, a tease, and his eyes shoot there. "And you can touch yourself, but no coming

yet.”

“Ah.” His body shakes again as he sits forward. I’ve never seen a man like this. He holds his phone with one hand, and I can tell he’s undoing his pants with this other. “Oh, God,” he says. “Play with your nipples for me.”

I trail my hands over my chest, circling the tops of my breasts and under them, but not giving him what he wants yet. It’s delicious torture for both of us.

“Please, Kendall.” His hand disappears below the frame.

I give him an evil grin, then find my nipples and roll them between my fingers. A shock of pleasure jolts me, like a direct line to my clit, and I squirm a little.

“I want to put my hands on you so bad.” He gulps. “I feel like I’m starving.” His arms moves, and I know he’s stroking himself. The thought creates a pool of desire low in my stomach. “Will you touch yourself now?”

“Since you asked nicely.” I drag one hand down and pull my underwear to one side. I toy with myself while he watches. He’s panting. His arm moves a little faster.

“I want to see all of you.”

I stand up and get rid of my panties. When I sit down again, I spread my thighs fully for him to see, then continue stroking my clit. When I bury a finger in myself, his strangled, agonized moan reverberates on the screen. I keep moving, stroking in tandem with the finger still inside me, until I start to crest.

“Fuck, Kendall. Fuck.” His face glistens and his jaw is clenched. “I’m going to come. I can’t help it.”

“Then I might have to make you wait even longer next time.” My breaths come faster.

“I don’t care. I don’t fucking care.”

I break up and over, starlight bursting in my head, as I moan and chant his name. He throws his head back and the tendons in his throat stand out. His mouth is open in a wide, silent O. It’s maybe the sexiest moment of my life, and we haven’t even touched.

We stare at each other after. His hair is mussed.

“Hold that thought,” he says. “I’m going to go clean up.” He sits his phone down and it faces his ceiling. I pull my clothes back on and carry my own phone to my bedroom.

My soft comforter welcomes me, its weight a warm reassurance over my body. The cool sheets, with their high thread count, feel like liquid against my skin. These comforts might seem like unnecessary indulgences to some, but after spending my childhood in a state of anxiety and distress, I allow myself lots of simple luxuries. My breathing steadies.

Grant's cheeks dimple when he picks up his phone again. "Well. That was . . . something."

I stretch out on my bed. "Yeah. It was."

"I liked hearing you chanting my name, there at end." A flush covers his face. "I almost felt like it was right in my ear."

"That does something for you, huh?"

He shudders. "God, you have no idea."

It would help if everything he says wasn't so unaccountably sexy.

"I really want to spend time with you soon," he says. "What are your plans for this weekend?"

"My brother plays wheelchair basketball in Lexington and I'm headed there Saturday to watch him. Nothing other than that. What about you?"

He ticks a few items off on his fingers. "Work, work, and work." He scratches the back of his neck. "That's kind of a far drive for Blaine, isn't it? To play basketball?"

I shrug. "An hour and a half, give or take. It's worth it because he loves it so much." I smile. "When we were kids, he set up a little hoop in his bedroom that he'd made of old Hot Wheels tracks."

"Is this where you make a dig about the fancy basketball hoop I had in my driveway?"

"Nah. I won't begrudge you that. Besides, you had to develop that athleticism so you could lead our football team to victory, right?"

He shifts back. I hear the covers rustle as he climbs under them. I have a sudden vision of cuddling up to him in his bed, letting him hold me as we fall asleep.

"I remember seeing you at games." His voice softens. "You and your friends, in the stands. I always had these really strong feelings when you were around, like when I would see you in the crowd. Maybe I was too stupid to recognize it as attraction."

My teeth dig into my bottom lip. "I always thought you were hot. Me and many other girls, I bet. It was fun to watch you play even when I hated you. Come to think of it, I liked watching you in class, too. I remember

thinking in AP English, when we were reading each other's essays, that I liked how your brain works. We could have been friends, if you had been nice to me."

"I hate that we weren't, Kendall. I really do."

"I'm going to let you go now," I say. "Your eyes are looking a little droopy."

"When can I see you again?"

"At work this week, right?"

"Come on," he says. "You know what I mean."

I sigh. I think about what he said, about how he thinks I'm embarrassed to be seen with him. And about how I always deflect with sex. I have an idea, a bad one, I'm sure, especially since I just told him we couldn't have more than this, but it's sitting at the tip of my tongue. "You want to go to dinner Friday?"

He smiles at me, his face projecting a sleepy sort of affection that melts more of my resolve. "Are you serious?"

"Definitely." I hold up my hand. "I know I'm confusing, but it might be nice to actually go out somewhere while you're still on your rotation. As long as you aren't working, that is. We'll make a night of it."

"Absolutely. I would love to." His smile widens. "And Kendall?"

"Yeah?"

"Congrats, babe."

I inspect myself in the mirror. My hair cascades over my shoulders in loose curls. It's finally cool enough to wear something autumn-inspired, so I've chosen a short skirt and tall boots for my—what are we calling it? *Rendezvous?*—with Grant. I'm not ready to call it a date. That makes it sound more serious than what it is.

I'm skipping out on hanging with my friends for this, and when I think about it, guilt pinches at me. No one besides Maria knows what's been going on with Grant. I can't imagine confessing yet.

A knock sounds at the door. My heels clack on the laminate floor, each step coinciding with a thump of my heart. I throw the door open.

Grant leans against my door frame in a brown leather jacket like he's James fucking Dean. My stomach dips, and I can feel a full body swoon coming on, all the way down to my toes.

He takes a second to scan me. His eyes pop when he sees bare thigh, and his smile suggests indecent thoughts when his gaze returns to my face.

"You ready?"

There could be some double entendre there, I'm sure, but I don't comment on that. I step out the door and turn to lock it, and when I face forward again, I link my arm through his. He stiffens in surprise.

"Where are we eating?"

"I took the liberty of making a reservation." He pulls his keys out as we walk to his car. "A steak place, if that's okay."

“Ooh, fancy.” I let go of his arm and slide into the passenger seat of his car. “Sounds good to me.”

Once we’re in the car, the scent of him envelops me, a spicy essence that reminds me of sitting by a campfire in the woods. His shadowed profile stands out against the evening sky. We had to plan for a late dinner given his obscene schedule.

“On a scale of one to ten, how exhausted are you?” I turn my attention toward him.

“Before I came over? A hundred.” He shoots a grin at me. “I’m pretty awake when you’re near, though. Like I’ve had a pot of coffee.”

It’s somehow one of the more flattering things anyone’s ever said to me. And I can certainly relate. Buzzing energy loops through my veins when he’s around, constant to the point of inconvenience, and my heart rate jumps all over the place. His hands—the same ones that perform surgeries with such competence, that touch my body with reverence—rest easily on the steering wheel, despite his claims of jitteriness.

“Have you read your book yet? The one you got at the bookstore?”

He turns onto the Watterson to head toward our destination. The trees zoom by. “Yep. It was good, but the medical inaccuracies were worse than I thought they’d be. Lots of characters walking off injuries that should have incapacitated them.”

I laugh. “You gotta let that shit go. Just pretend it’s another universe where the laws of physics don’t apply.”

“I think, maybe, I’m not as laid back as you.”

“Well, yeah. That’s an understatement. You were born with a résumé and a list of career goals in your hand.”

The car rumbles with his next turn.

“That makes me sound like no fun at all,” he says. “But we’d be a good team, you and me. You would lighten me up, and I would keep you from joining a punk rock band and running off to New York.”

“Like you could stop me,” I say. “Too bad, anyway. We already established that my worst fear is being poor again. So, career stability it is.”

We’re quiet for a few moments. I shift on my heated seat. If you’d told me as a kid that I’d get to ride in a car that made my ass warm, I probably would have been ecstatic about that luxury.

I also would have been shocked at the man next to me, but life is funny like that.

We eventually pull up to a brick restaurant with a black awning. Grant swings into a parking spot across the street and meets me at my door.

"I've been to this place," I say.

"It's not the most upscale restaurant in town or anything." He sounds unsure of himself.

"Are you kidding me? I love this. Much less pretentious."

We cross the street together, and Grant reaches for my hand. I let him take it. As usual, just the touch of our skin together sets off sparks. The half-moon casts a sliver of light over the dark pavement, and the air's thick with autumn petrichor from an earlier rain. It's achingly romantic, and it's getting more and more difficult to shove my emotions into a black box, never to be examined again.

Inside, Grant gives the host his name, then thanks the man when he walks us to our table. It's not a white tablecloth sort of place, but I wasn't lying when I said I liked that better. There's a speakeasy kind of feel: dark woods, glass chandeliers, and comfy leather chairs.

We sip water and chat about the menu, our upcoming week, the weather. It's pleasant, but I can tell he's working up to a weightier topic.

He sets his drink down. We've ordered wine, a peppery red that's delightfully smooth on my tongue.

"Can we have a serious discussion for a few minutes?"

"Is there any other kind?" At his eye roll, I continue. "Okay. Shoot."

"You remember how I told you that I never apologized to you because it would have been only for me?"

I nod.

"I've been sitting with that. That discomfort, I mean. Of just knowing there's no way I can make myself feel better, and that I shouldn't make it about my feelings at all." He drums his fingers on the table. Our waiter starts to walk toward us but, perhaps sensing the gravity of our conversation, pretends he's forgotten something and walks out of the room again. "What do *you* want from me, Kendall? I know it's not just material stuff. What would make you feel better?"

"Grant." My eyes sting. Damn it.

"Come on, Kendall. Please talk to me."

I sigh. "At first, I thought that answer was nothing. Then I thought a sincere apology would suffice, and you've definitely given me that. But I

think what would help me most, honestly, is your real understanding of what you did. Of how it impacted me. I want you to know it, deep down.”

He doesn’t look away from me. We’re in a private corner here, and in the dim lighting my courage builds.

“You once wrote something in Sharpie on my backpack. I don’t remember the whole phrase, but it was something cruel.” He winces, but I continue. “I scrubbed at it, but it wouldn’t come off, so I tossed it. I was too proud to keep carrying it. So, I used a plastic grocery bag for a while, because we didn’t have money for a replacement. I felt like such a loser.” I look down. “If I didn’t have good friends at the time, it would have been worse. Luckily, they helped me deal. But it left a mark.”

His eyes stay trained on me.

“I’m okay, now,” I say. “And I’ve enjoyed what we’re doing here. You asked what I want from you, though, and I think it’s just that. Your awareness of how you actually influenced my life.”

Grant opens his mouth to speak, but the waiter comes to take our order before he can say anything. He thanks the man with a smile—I’ve noticed how well he treats service staff—and grips his napkin.

“I get it,” he says. “I really do. I’ve tossed and turned over it for years. I’ve imagined what your life would have been like.”

“Are you sure? Because it could have been worse than it was for me. Much worse.”

His face crumples inward, and I watch him school his expression before he speaks again.

“Someone told me something once,” he says. He pauses, ducking his head like he’s searching for words. “A therapist, actually. She said that all of us hurt people, that’s just a part of being human, but the kind of prolonged bullying I engaged in leaves an indelible mark.” He gestures to his heart. “Like a tattoo. And that mark grows bigger and uglier over time, especially if the hurt continues. The person can cover the tattoo eventually, but it’s still there. I know I left a mark on you. I wish I could erase it completely.”

I still. For once, I don’t interject.

“I notice everything about you,” he continues, speaking softly. “How you take your coffee with hazelnut creamer. The way you hum to yourself quietly when you’re washing your hands, or typing on your laptop. How you wear your glasses on clinic days but braid your hair on OR days.” He

looks at me. “But I also notice how you flinch when someone compliments you. How you shy away from anything that leaves you unguarded. And I wonder how much of that is my fault.”

Something sharp and aching arrows through me. I’ve been waiting years to hear those kinds of things from him, and he couldn’t have put it better if he tried.

He means it too. His sincerity projects with each word. For the first time, I allow room for a sliver of a foreign concept, at least when it comes to him: forgiveness. It builds in the corners of my heart.

“Grant,” I whisper, then clear my throat. “You really have done so much work.”

“Yeah. That’s an understatement.”

We stare at each other. Chatter from other diners reaches us, but it feels distant. Like we’re in our own bubble. What am I going to do now? He’s just swept away some of the pall hanging over my adolescence.

He reaches across the table to grasp my hand, and I let him, savoring the feel of his thumb sweeping across my skin. The intensity of our eye contact plucks at tender spot in my chest. I almost can’t stand it.

I pull back. “All right,” I tell him. “Enough serious talk.” I prop my chin on my hands. “You mentioned travel, before. Tell me some of the places on your list. I know you have them.”

He chuckles, and the atmosphere changes. We talk for a long time, and eat, and then talk some more. He tells me about his favorite football memory (a Hail Mary to win the district), and I give him my reasons for enjoying musicals above all other forms of entertainment (because they are objectively better, that’s why). I tell him about how I want to go to a real Broadway show someday. He wants to visit Switzerland. We discuss how we’ve both developed a begrudging appreciation of Appalachian culture. Neither one of us wants to leave the restaurant.

By the time he takes me home, we’re both yawning. He walks me to my door. We linger on the sidewalk in front of my apartment.

“Would it make you skittish if I said I want to do this again soon?”

“Actually, I think I’d be okay with that.” I cock my head. A streetlight shines overhead like we’re lovers being spotlighted in a play. “And I’m shocked I actually mean it.”

His cheeks crease with his open beam. He leans in to kiss me, a soft press of lips that soon turns more passionate. His fingers toy with the hem

of my skirt.

I pull away. “Do you want to come in?”

He closes his eyes. “More than I want my next breath,” he says. He steps back. “I want you to know how serious I am, though. This means more to me than just a fling.”

I lean back against the doorframe. A car horn honks somewhere nearby, but I don’t take my eyes off him. “I would still believe you even if you came inside.”

“I know.” He brushes his hand over his hair. “Maybe you should try this denial thing. It’s kind of a fun experiment.”

I laugh. “I’ve never denied myself a single thing. Not since I could indulge myself, anyway.”

He pitches forward and presses his lips against mine again. His mouth is soft.

“Goodnight, Kendall,” he says.

I watch him walk away.



“This pizza might be the highlight of my week.” I take a huge bite and savor it. There’s goat cheese, paprika, spinach, and some kind of cream sauce. I’m in heaven. “Other than seeing my big brother, obviously.”

Blaine smiles at me with his mouth full, so he’s got marinara sauce all over his teeth. It’s disgusting and he definitely did it on purpose. Gloria swats at him.

“Behave,” she says.

We’re at a tiny little pizza place together. It’s in a residential area and other than the sign outside, it could be another nondescript home with tan siding. The mismatched chairs and tables lend it an air of haphazard fun. The food is delicious and the fact the service is slow is almost a feature.

I need to get back home, and I’m sure they do, as well, but we’re enjoying ourselves. I’m close to my brother in a way I can’t easily explain to other people. I’m sure growing up poor could drive some people apart, or foster resentment, but we formed a strong bond. I can remember a few winters where we shivered under a blanket together at night despite our mom doing all she could to keep the house warm. We stood up for each

other in school. Once he got out of school and got a job, he helped me here and there, sending money when he could and offering encouragement. Despite my talk about him being my asshole brother, I would do anything for him.

“How you feeling?” I aim my question at Gloria.

She tilts her head, her shiny dark hair swinging. She’s not really showing yet, but she lays a hand on her abdomen anyway. “Kinda yucky, actually. Some heartburn, and I didn’t even know that could start yet.”

“Well for your sake, I hope it stops soon.”

“I’ll be glad when he or she is here. But I’m not enjoying the process, that’s for sure.”

“I can’t wait to meet them.” My cheeks ache from smiling. “I’m going to love this little baby. You have no idea.”

“I saw you talk to a little girl at the game,” Blaine says. “I was wondering what kind of stuff you were telling her. Looked like you were talking about me.”

I laugh. “It’s funny you mention that. She asked why you use a wheelchair when you can walk.”

“Yeah? And what did you say?” He takes a bite of his pizza.

“I told her to mind her own fucking business.” At his laugh, I continue. “Nah. I explained it to her, and I think she understood. I’m going to be such an awesome aunt, really. I’m going to teach your kid all kinds of shit.”

“Well that’s not worrisome at all.” Blaine leans back and loops one arm over his chair. He’s smiling. “Supervised visits only for you.”

We eat for a little longer. We’re nearly alone in the tiny restaurant, though the scent of wood-fired pizza from to-go orders wafts through the place. Something scratches at my brain, and I’m terrible at biting my tongue, even though I should in this case. I blurt it out anyway.

“I know you aren’t telling Dad,” I say. “Do you want me to keep it secret, too? I’m supposed to see him again in a couple weeks.”

The silence that follows presses on me like a brick. What is wrong with me? My conversation skills are a masterclass in sticking one’s foot in one’s mouth. Blaine speaks before I can say anything else.

“You can tell him if you want to,” Blaine says quietly. “He’ll probably see us around town here and there anyway, so he’s going to find out. But I don’t want him in my life. This isn’t an invitation from me.”

Blaine is right—I see my dad when I want to, in small doses and controlled environments. He and Blaine live in the same area, fully three hours away from me, and I don't have to deal with accidentally happening upon him at the grocery store.

Our dad has settled back in Blacksburg, where he works as a mechanic, after moving around some when we were younger. We even heard he was working as a logger out in Oregon at one point. He always promised to send money, though it didn't happen often. It seemed at the time he would do anything to avoid taking responsibility for us. When he started coming back around, trying to make amends, I challenged him on that. He cried and told me he was sorry, that there was no excuse.

For Blaine, forgiveness might never happen. The damage cuts too deep. And I have no right to ask that of him, not when his mental health is better without the man.

"I know. I'm sorry I said that." I sigh. "You shouldn't have to spend time with someone who hurt us. I've been doing too much of that lately."

Blaine leans back in his chair. His eyes are intent on me, though his arm loops around Gloria and his wedding ring makes a *tick tick tick* sound against the wood of her chair when he taps his finger. "What does that mean?"

I wince. "I've become sort of friends with Grant Wyndham, actually. He's changed a lot."

If the silence before was heavy, this one is oppressive, like an elephant sitting on my chest. I keep digging myself a deeper hole.

Gloria stops eating. "The guy who bullied you?"

"Yes," I say. "But he's a completely different person now."

"I know that look." Blaine's face has paled. "Are you, like, involved with him or something?"

"Um . . ."

"Kendall. What the fuck?" His face takes on a reddish cast. He looks like he wants to yell at me.

"He's changed, I swear." My voice is small. I've never sounded like this before, and I'm not used to defending my actions. Usually I just barrel ahead, consequences be damned.

"I should hope he's changed," Blaine says, "because he was a fucking monster to you. Didn't he steal your clothes in gym class once? That day you had to come home in the cold without long pants on?"

"I know. I fucking know, Blaine. He was terrible." I give him a pained smile. "I mean, he did give me my clothes back after that. And now he's trying to make all that up to me."

"I'll bet he is." He sneers. "Is this about trying to fix him yourself? Like you're doing with Dad?"

"That is not what I'm doing here." For the third or fourth time in the last month I find myself tearing up, and I have no idea what's happening to me. "You think I've got some kind of daddy issue or something? That's not what this is. People have been disappointing me my whole life, and I choose to think they can do better." I blink a few times. "And he gave Mom money."

"He what?"

"Anonymously. But yeah. A few thousand dollars."

"What the hell? He's trying to buy your forgiveness?" He exhales through his nose. "And why didn't Mom tell me about that?"

Gloria holds up her hands. "Guys. Chill out."

I take a deep breath. I do need to calm down. Blaine and I have argued before, and we've both got strong personalities, but this feels like it's headed toward something we can't fix easily.

"If you bring him around, I don't want anything to do with him, either," Blaine mutters.

"I'm not going to bring him home or anything," I say. "It's not serious."

Our little argument has put a damper on the evening, and it's my fault, as usual. I don't know why I can't just leave things alone. I didn't even get to tell them I got into med school, and now I feel like the moment to do so has passed. Before we leave, Gloria hugs me and whispers something in my ear.

"He loves you no matter what," she says. "He just worries about you."

I pull back and squeeze her hand. "I know. I'm not going to force him to play nice with people he hates."

Apprehension fills me. It doesn't matter how lovely the dates with Grant are, or how good the physical stuff is. Blaine's reaction is reason number 1,323,827 why I can't actually be with Grant.

A few days after my date with Kendall, we're in the clinic together. I only have two weeks left on this rotation, and I'm savoring the days I get to see her.

What am I going to do if she decides she doesn't want to continue this? An image of myself a few weeks from now flashes through my mind, a hypothetical where I'm nursing emotional bruises in various stages of healing and putting myself back together, hoping I can eventually forget about her. A dart of anxiety pierces me. Despite how she seemed on our date, if she makes good on her promise to go our separate ways, this is going to hurt.

I pass her in the hallway, and, after glancing around to make sure no one is watching, I let my fingertips trail over her waist. She gives me a wicked little smile that lights me up inside.

Dr. Fields catches me after lunch. "It seems you've resolved whatever issues you had with Kendall." He clears his throat. "I'm glad for that."

Thankfully, Dr. Planck hasn't told Dr. Fields about how we're "getting along."

"It was a misunderstanding," I say, though that's not really the truth. I'm not about to tell the attending physician about my history, though. "We're fine now."

I wish I had more time to spend with her. We can't really talk at the clinic, and I spend so much time working right now that my hours outside

of my job are limited. I sit next to her near the end of the day when we're both documenting in our shared office. I need to work on my administrative stuff or I'm going to be here forever, but I can't pass up a chance to be in her presence.

The room we're in is closed off from the rest of the clinic, and no one else is using it right now. I shift toward her. The wheels of my office chair squeak in the silence. "How's your brother?"

She grimaces a little, then tries to cover it with a more stoic expression. "He's okay." She looks at me, and her hazel eyes flash with hurt. She squeezes the mouse she's using. "He reminded me of that time you stole my clothes, and I had to go home in the cold with shorts on. I tried to defend you by saying you gave them back, but I don't think he bought it."

Damn it all. Just when I think I've come to terms with how I treated her, I'm reminded of some other awful thing I did. Hot shame clogs my throat. It takes me a second to even register what she's actually telling me.

"Wait. You told your brother?"

She looks around, likely to make sure we're really alone. "That we're having sex? Not in those terms, obviously. But I mentioned we're involved."

"And, uh, how did he take it?" That's a stupid question. She just told me how he reacted.

"He's angry at me. Rightfully so, I guess."

"Yeah." I swallow. "For what it's worth, I'm so sorry for that particular incident. I know you didn't have a lot of clothes to spare. Especially in the winter."

"Summer was worse, anyway. Our air conditioner never worked very well. The heat and humidity was awful. I remember Mom telling us to lay really still and we would feel better."

I glance toward the door again, then I cover her hand with my own. "You don't ever have to live like that again."

"Yeah?" She gives me a tiny smile. "How are you going to make sure of that?"

I swallow and pull my hand away. "For one thing, you're going to be a physician." I lower my voice. "But also, I would give you my own clothes now. I'll walk out of this clinic in my underwear if you need me to."

She laughs. The bright sound cuts across the guilt covering me. "God, that is so tempting. Would you actually do that?"

“Without question. I’m sure I would get some looks, but it’s the least I could do.”

“My secondhand embarrassment would be too strong to allow it,” she says. “But I appreciate the offer all the same. You can stick to buying me new clothes if you want.”

“Done.” I angle myself so I’m fully facing her. “You have anything else in mind?”

“No. You want to take me shopping, Pretty Woman style?”

“Sounds like a good time.”

“Well.” She turns back to her computer. Her soft lips purse. God, she’s so beautiful. “I don’t think I need any other material stuff from you. Or apologies, for that matter. Your debt is paid.”

I swear my heart stops for a minute. “Wait, what? That’s it? Does that mean what I think it does?”

“It just means I’m leaving the past alone for now. Forgive, but don’t forget. All that. I’m not saying I’m going to fall in love with you now or anything like that.”

There’s been an ember of hope burning in my chest, but her words snuff it out again. She’s forgiving me, maybe, but that doesn’t mean she’ll give me a real chance. Still, this feels like a step in the right direction.

“I’ll take it.” I lean in so that I’m next to her ear. “Can I see you this weekend? Please? I’m not on call.”

“You free Sunday night?”

“Hell yeah.”

I’m close to her now, and I startle when George speaks up behind me.

“Sorry to interrupt,” he says.

Kendall’s eyes widen next to me. I turn to look at George, who inspects us with a grin on his face. His ruddy face fills with glee. Shit.

“No worries,” Kendall says. Her skin is a little pale, but she’s otherwise composed. “We were just talking about shopping. Grant here wants to wear cowboy boots and chaps in the OR, and I was trying to talk him out of it.”

I laugh despite the pounding of my heart. “I was thinking a hat too,” I say. “Just go all in.”

“Sure,” George says. His eyes ping back and forth between us. “I’m just documenting. Don’t mind me.”

I look at Kendall, whose color has returned somewhat. “It’s okay,” I mouth at her.

She shakes her head.

How can I reassure her? I'll think of something. I'm not going to let that weasel derail us.



I knock on Kendall's door, then stuff my hands in my pockets. It's almost dark by the time I make it over to her apartment. I've got to be up in ten hours for our first surgical case, but I'm accustomed to the sleep deficit.

The cool autumn air blows across the back of my neck. When she opens the door, my eyes snag on her skimpy blue pajamas, but a shot of alarm pierces me when I see her face. She's got a pale cast and shadows under her eyes. Her frown pulls at her cheeks.

"What's wrong?" I step inside, desperate to remedy whatever's hurting her.

"You can come on in and sit down," she says. "You probably don't want the whole story."

I follow her into her living room. I've been here before, but I'm struck again by her place: She's got a penchant for immaculate cleanliness, and pieces of pink, gold, and white decor brighten the room. Fresh flowers perch on her kitchen counter. I make a mental note that she likes them, that I could bring her some.

She sits on her couch. I note the heating pad on the floor, and the bottle of ibuprofen on her end table. I'm not as smart as I thought I was, but it doesn't take a genius to figure out what the problem is.

"Ah. Monthly troubles?"

She wrinkles her nose. "I don't know why I feel weird talking about this with you. I'm not shy." She looks away, then back at me again. "But it's really awful right now. I don't know if it's the thyroid stuff or if this is just me, but I'm in a lot of pain. I'm almost nauseous with it. Like, maybe I have some kind of bug or something."

"Don't feel weird. I'm a physician. I can handle this kind of talk." I tug her closer to me and snake my arm around her shoulders. "I thought you had an IUD?"

"Copper. So I still get the period."

"What can I do?"

She settles against me, and my heart skips.

“You don’t have to do anything,” she says. “You don’t even have to stay if you don’t want. I’m not going to be much good for anything.”

“Kendall.” I lean forward so I can turn and look at her. “What in the hell are you talking about? This isn’t transactional.”

“Sorry. I’m not used to being this incapacitated.”

“What can I do?”

She waves me off, but I pull my arm out and tilt her face to mine.

“I’m dead serious,” I say. “What would make you feel better? Or do you have laundry you need to do or anything? What would help you the most?”

“You can just sit with me if you don’t mind.” She leans back so that her head hits the pillow, and I pull her feet into my lap. “We can watch something. No one’s ever really done this for me before.” Her voice cracks, and she claps a hand over her mouth like she wants to stuff the vulnerability back in.

“No one ever took care of you when you were sick?” I use my thumb to put a little pressure on the arch of her foot, and she sinks further into her pillows.

“Mmm, that’s amazing.” She closes her eyes. “But no, not really. My mom worked a lot. Then after Blaine’s spinal cord injury, we were both helping him get back on his feet for a while.” She giggles. “He would think my phrasing there was hysterical.”

She’s softer like this with me, more open.

I pinch the hem of her pajama top with my fingers. “What about abdominal massage? Would that help?”

She shrugs. “Maybe. You can try.” She scoots down so that her legs drape over me fully, then lifts her shirt up to the edge of her bra.

I smile at her. “I like how free you are with your body.” I take the heel of my hand and put some pressure on her stomach, making little circular motions as I do. Kendall winces at first, then settles.

“I think this might work, actually. Thank you.” She cracks one eye open. “And my body is just my body. I’ve been fat and thin and in between. I’m pretty neutral about it now. I try to appreciate what it does for me despite some of the problems it’s caused me.” She moans a little, and I squirm, trying not to get turned on.

“Your hands are amazing,” she says.

“Yeah? Is there anything else you like about me?”

“You want a real answer? Not me telling you I like how big your dick is something like that?”

I laugh. “I won’t object to that. But I would rather have something real.”

She lets out a dramatic sigh. “You’re driven, and even though it’s made you an asshole in the past, I do like that about you. You’re actually considerate now. And watching you operate, watching you talk to your patients—you’re a great physician, and top notch at problem solving. It’s sexy to watch you work.”

A wave of shock passes over me. I hadn’t expected her to be that complimentary, even though I was fishing. I stare at her face while my hands are still moving on her stomach.

“That was really genuine.”

She opens her eyes and presses her hands over mine. “Thank you for that. I do feel better.” Her eyes crinkle. “Don’t worry, you don’t have to tell me what you like about me.”

“I’ve already told you what I like about you, anyway.” I roll my eyes. “Pretty much everything.” I swallow. “And you’re so beautiful I can’t keep my eyes off you.”

She rolls to her side with a groan. “You keep being adorable. It’s maddening.” Her hands cover her face. “I can’t stand this.”

I pull her hands away. “I’m *glad* you like me.” I inhale, then speak on a rushed exhale. “I was starting to feel lonely.”

“Lonely?” Her forehead scrunches.

“Yeah.” I roll my lips. “I thought I was alone in how I was feeling.”

Her gaze turns wary. “And how is that?”

“You know what I mean,” I say softly. “The pining. Yearning.” I brush a hand along her foot, and she shivers. “Aching.”

She turns her head to the ceiling. “Damn you.” When she looks at me again, her face shifts to an expression of resolve. “Okay. Tell me more about you then. Something I don’t know.”

“Hmm.” I scratch my chin. I run my hands over her gorgeous legs, admiring the view as I think. “You remember Tom? That gangly guy I used to hang with in high school some? He played football with me.”

“Tom Buckman? Yeah. Me and my friends used to call him the chinless menace.”

I laugh. “He deserves that. But I hated him even then. Not as much as I disliked myself, but close.” I trace a path along her shin. Her legs are so

smooth I want to rub my face against them. “I know that I had a problem with feeling like having money meant I should automatically be more successful than those who didn’t. I cared too much what other people thought of me. That guy, though. He would have committed terrible crimes if he thought it would win him points with his friends.”

“Sometimes belonging to a group is more important than the truth,” she says.

“That’s a lot of wisdom for a Sunday night.”

She pulls her legs off me and sits up. “I have some good thoughts occasionally.” She bends forward to put her elbows on her knees. “So you aren’t still friends with him, I take it?”

“Hell no. I don’t know what happened to him. He’s got an uncle who’s a politician, so for all I know he’s into that. Or he went to prison. Who knows.” I scoot closer to her so that our thighs press together. “Tell me about your friends. The ones you’re really close to. The other nurses, I mean.”

“Well, you met Maria at the gym. She’s kinda shy, but she’s a steady rock, like the heartbeat of our group. Gwen can be grumpy when you meet her, but she’s actually really soft and loving inside.” She gives me a sly smile. “She grew up rich. Way richer than you. East coast, Connecticut kind of wealth.”

“And you don’t dislike her on principle?”

She shrugs. “I never claimed to be consistent. My friend Joan, the blonde one, is tall like me, even taller than me, actually. She’s this amazing athlete. She’s our peacemaker, and probably the most optimistic out of all of us in some ways.” She laughs. “I feel like I’m talking about the seven dwarfs. Bashful, Grumpy, Happy. But they’re obviously much more complex than that.”

“Which dwarf would you be in this case?” I nudge her leg.

“Doc, I hope.” At my groan, she laughs again. “Sorry, that was really corny. Ugh. Gwen says I’m our shit-stirrer, which sounds about right, don’t you think?”

“I like that about you, though. You’re just not intimidated by anything.”

“Isn’t that what you were trying to squash, though? When we were younger? I always thought that’s how bullying worked. It’s a power dynamic.”

I blow out a breath. “Honestly, even after hundreds of hours of therapy, I still don’t know. But I’m glad you fought back. I’ll say that. It drove me crazy at the time. You just didn’t seem to care what I thought.” We’re leaning on each other now. “Are you going to move back there you think? After you’re done with school?”

“I don’t know. I know they need doctors. It’s hard to imagine, though. Sometimes I think it’s better for me to be away from there. What about you?”

“Definitely not.” I shake my head. “I know the area needs help, and sometimes the people promising that aren’t the right ones to help them. But I’m not sure it can be me.”

“I totally understand.” She stands. “You want a drink or anything?”

“Nah.”

She cocks her head. “You want to stay here with me?” Her voice is quiet. “Is that a weird thing to ask?”

“Kendall. I’ll spend any extra time I have with you. All my minutes.” I smile. “And I’m wearing sweats. I can sleep in those.”

“I have an extra toothbrush. We can go watch something in my room, if you want.”

“Yeah.” My heart dances an erratic rhythm in my chest. “I would really like that.”

She finds a toothbrush for me, and we get ready for bed together. I keep extra clothes and scrubs in my car, so I don’t need to go home in the morning. We settle under Kendall’s covers together, and she turns the television on.

I reach for her, and our limbs tangle together. My hands wander over her back, up to her shoulders, and she does the same to me, like we can’t get enough of this contact.

“What are we going to do about Dr. Gambill?” she murmurs into my neck.

“What do you mean? You want to kill him?”

“He jokes again,” she says. “That’s two in one month.” She pulls her head back. “He knows.”

I shrug. “He can’t prove anything. And anyway, we aren’t doing anything wrong.”

“I’m worried.”

“Don’t be.” I stroke her back again. “It’s going to be fine.”

“Easy for you to say.” She squeezes me around the middle. “This feels an awful lot like a boyfriend sort of sleepover.” Her voice trembles a little.

A flash of heat travels up my body. I could play that sentence on a loop for the next few weeks and never tire of it.

“Is that a bad thing?” I scoot closer to her, even though we are already plastered against each other.

“Grant . . .”

“Yeah. I know.”

This is hurting both of us, but I can’t seem to stop. Our self-imposed deadline is less than two weeks away, and it’s approaching with lightning speed. I’m going to soak in her presence in the meantime, whether or not it’s actually a good idea.



It’s Friday, and Kendall and I have spent almost every night this week together. We’ve been bouncing back and forth between each other’s places and pretending that isn’t a huge deal. Now we’re together again. My roommate is at the hospital, so I have her alone. I’ve got big plans for her involving a lack of clothing and more than thirty minutes together.

She sits on the couch. I like how she looks in my apartment—with the beige walls, muted wall art, and soft lighting, she’s like a splash of vibrant color, even wearing something neutral like she is now.

“I’m surprised you aren’t dead on your feet,” she says. “This week was brutal, wasn’t it?”

“At this point, I’m used to the punishing schedule. And the lack of sleep. You learn to grab leisure time where you can.”

I’m walking for the couch when my doorbell rings. What the hell?

I consider ignoring it, but someone presses it again. I walk over and through the glass planes I can just make the edges of my mom’s coat.

“Fuck.” I mutter. I turn to Kendall. “Can you play along here?”

She’s standing now. “What are we doing?”

“A little rebellion.”

She aims a mischievous grin at me. “Ooh, I love rebellion.”

I open my door. My parents are both there. Mom’s smiling like she hasn’t just driven to Louisville and invited herself over for the second time

in a month.

“I didn’t know you guys were coming up,” I say.

“I texted. And called,” Mom says. She peers around me. “Can we come in?”

“I have company.” My teeth are gritted.

“Oh, you have a friend over?” She steps over the threshold, and Dad follows. “Well, hi there.” She smiles at Kendall. “Aren’t you pretty.”

Kendall wears a bright smile. She’s got on jeans and an oatmeal-colored sweater, so she’s not dressed up, but somehow she makes everything fancy. The bracelet I got her glints on her wrist.

She steps forward. “Hi there. I’m Kendall.” She sticks her hand out. “How are ya’ll?” She’s laying the accent on a little thick, and I cover a laugh with my hand.

Mom grins like I’ve given her the best present she could imagine. “Nice to meet you, Kendall. I’m Cindy.”

They’ve moved further into the house now. My Dad offers a polite wave and introduces himself to Kendall. We’re all standing awkwardly in the living room.

“What are you all doing here?” I offer Mom a stern look, not that it puts a damper on her enthusiasm. “It’s a long drive for another visit.”

“We’re going to look at some flooring tomorrow,” Dad says. “There’s a place up here our friend recommended. Ain’t anywhere around home to get that kinda stuff.” He holds his hands up. “Don’t worry, we aren’t crashing here. We’ve got a hotel room.”

There are places closer than Louisville for them to look at flooring, but I let that go.

“Have a seat.” I gesture to the couch.

They sit on the couch, and Kendall moves to sit in the recliner, which doesn’t leave a lot of room for me. I pull a chair over from the kitchen table. Mom’s looking at Kendall, and Dad alternates between glancing around and opening his mouth like he might be about to say something.

“So Kendall,” Mom says. “Where you from dear? I hear the accent.”

Kendall looks at me, perhaps for permission, and I give her a nod. Let her shock them. “Oh, I’m from Blacksburg,” she says.

At that, Dad’s head snaps over. He leans forward. “Yeah? What’s your last name?”

“Hodges. It was Amburgey back then. Took my mama’s name later on.”

My mom makes a tiny squeaking noise that she tries to cover with a cough. Kendall, for her part, looks extremely pleased with herself. Her eyes sparkle. God, I'm really into this woman. I should hate making my parents uncomfortable, but I can't find it in me to care.

"You two are working together then?" My mom glances at me. Her eyes widen.

"We're also dating," I tell her and Dad. My father's frown makes him look like puppet whose face has been pulled down. "This is who I was telling you about."

"Oh." My mom fluffs her hair up, a nervous habit of hers. "You never told us who it was, though. In fact, I recall you saying we wouldn't know her."

"You don't really know her all that much, do you?"

Mom chuckles again. Dad's still frowning at her like she's a puzzle he might solve.

She directs her attention at Kendall. "You look awfully different now," she says. My shoulders tense. "I didn't even recognize you! Have you, uh, lost weight?"

"Low carb." Kendall smiles, and I nearly laugh out loud. She told me just yesterday she would count carbs when hell freezes over, so I know that joke was for my benefit. "You're just the same as I remember!"

My mom beams, even though I'm not sure Kendall meant it as a compliment. Mom at least loses some of the tacit disdain dripping from her expression.

"So, you're a nurse now, Grant says?" My dad almost looks suspicious. My muscles tense. What the hell is he about to say?

If I'm being honest, it's pretty awful having my snobbery reflected back to me like this. I know what my parents think of people like Kendall's mother, even though so many in our home county are in a similar situation. Are they even worse than I thought? My mouth tastes sour.

"She just got into med school, actually," I say.

My dad makes a noncommittal grunting noise, like he's not that impressed. "I imagine your background helped. They favor that kind of thing."

That asshole. My fists clench.

Kendall blinks a few times. Her black lashes fan with the movement. "For people who already work in healthcare, you mean?" She's pretending

not to know what he means.

“Robert.” My mom laughs nervously. She looks at Kendall. “Yes, I’m sure nursing has prepared you well.”

“I bet,” Dad says. I tense. “It’s sure nice to have a doctor for a boyfriend too. Maybe you won’t have to go through with med school.”

“What are you suggesting?” Kendall straightens in her chair.

“Nothing,” Dad says, and my blood boils. It scares me how angry he’s making me. “Just that with your upbringing, I’m sure you’re looking for someone who can . . . provide.”

The implication dangles there, that she’s shamelessly digging for money. My mouth compresses into a flat line. Mom digs her nails into the arm of the couch.

“Yes, you’ve certainly got me pegged,” Kendall says. “But actually, I think I’m going to head out. I told my friends I would meet them for breakfast in the morning.” She stands. “It was nice to meet you both.”

“You don’t have to go, dear,” my mom says, but she makes no move to stop Kendall. “We would love to chat with you a little longer.”

“You can stay,” I tell her, hoping she sees how I would rather have her here than my parents. Kendall smiles politely, but it’s brittle. What started as fun has lost its luster in the face of my parents’ clear condescension. I walk with her to the door and turn to them. “Excuse us a minute.”

I step outside and follow her to the driveway where her car is parked.

“Don’t leave,” I say. “I’ll get rid of them.”

She blinks rapidly again. I’ve seen her cry only once, back when we were seniors, and this is closer than I’ve ever seen her again. Damn it.

“It won’t matter to them if I get through med school or make millions of dollars. My status won’t change. I’m just . . . nothing to them.”

“Kendall.” I plant my hand on her car door before she can turn and open it. “I’m sorry. Again. For how they made you feel.”

She wipes a hand over her eyes. They look clear again, like she’s willed her tears back. “At least you were more blatant in your scorn. I hate that passive aggressive bullshit.” She takes a deep breath. “It’s okay, though. I’m just going to go.”

I take my hand off her car when I see her resolve. “It’s not okay. But I promise I’m going to have a talk with them. And I still want to see you again.”

She nods, then lets me give her a quick kiss before she gets in her car to drive off. My steps gain speed and force as I walk back into my house. I slam the door behind me.

My mother startles and lays a hand on her chest. "Goodness!"

"What the hell was that?" I plant my hands on my hips, my eyes flicking back and forth between them.

"Language, son," my dad says.

"Ah, yes. Since we have the sort of value system where it's not okay to curse, but it is okay to look down on someone we think is inferior."

"Inferior? I never said that." My mom fluffs her hair again. I get a whiff of her floral perfume, something she buys from a department store in Lexington.

"You didn't have to!" I shout. "It's written all over your faces. Both of you."

"I think you aren't being fair," my dad says.

"We were just surprised," Mom says. "I can't imagine what you have in common. I don't even think her family went to church."

"Oh, good God." I swipe a hand down my face. I haven't sat down yet. I'm too amped up. "I can't do this with you. For the record, yes, I have things in common with a fellow future physician from my own hometown. And it's a fucking wonder she'll even talk to me."

My mom flinches at my swearing. "What do you mean?"

"I made her life a living hell in high school. I was her bully. And the fact she'll give me the time of day is a miracle. *She's* too good for *me*."

"It can't have been that bad," my dad says. "You weren't a bad kid."

"No?" I cross my arms over my chest and stare at them. "I was awful. I took things out of her locker. Picked on her."

My dad waves that off. "That sounds like teenager stuff."

"I took her winter clothes once in gym class, and she had to go home in the cold in shorts. I don't even know if she had other warm pants. I think I wanted to see if she would cry, and she finally did. Around the time we graduated. I taunted her about how her dad wasn't around, right after I took her phone from her hands and went through her text messages."

Dad blanches.

"I called her cruel names. Made fun of how she looked. So yeah, I was terrible to her. Beyond terrible."

“Grant.” My dad looks at me like I might be a stranger, and honestly, I feel like one. I’ve never seen this degree of emotion on his face. “Why would you do those things?”

“Because I thought I was better than her,” I say. To my surprise, my throat stings. “And all the success she had drove me crazy, like she didn’t deserve it. Her being valedictorian. The way other people still liked her despite the fact she had nothing. It’s like she was spitting in the face of everything important to me.” Tears track down my cheeks. “And I own that. I’ve apologized, and I’ve done work to try and make up for it. It was my fault. But who do you think taught me that?” I gesture to the door. “Look at how you just treated her yourself!”

Dad hangs his head. When he looks up at me again, his mouth flattens. “I shouldn’t have said those things to her, I’ll admit. But I was concerned about her intentions. You have to admit you aren’t the most likely pair.”

I use my sleeve to wipe under my eyes. “Like I said, she’s the one who’s too good for me.”

My parents are quiet. My mother sniffles, and I can see that her cheeks are wet.

“Well, Son,” Dad says, “if you like her, and she likes you, too, we can accept that.” He clears his throat. “Even though it’s hard to see it working out.”

“I do have feelings for her,” I say quietly. “You have no idea how much. And I don’t know what she thinks now.” I shift my weight. “After how you two made her feel.”

Dad shares a look with Mom I don’t understand, an expression that speaks to a shared secret. A moment of curiosity arises, but I shake it off. I don’t even care.

They turn back to me, and my mom has the decency to look ashamed. She stands. “I think we’ll leave you alone,” she says.

“Yeah. I think that’s a good idea.”

She hugs me, and Dad thumps me on the shoulder. I retreat to my room, where I text Kendall another apology. She doesn’t respond, which is fine.

I flop to my bed and dig my head into my pillow. What am I going to do now?

I don't really see Grant again until Tuesday. We're in the OR together, and from the way he looks at me, he has things to say. I'm not really in the mood to hear it. God, do I like watching him operate though. His strength is mesmerizing, how he's so calm and collected. And competent. I'm a quivering puddle. Watching a man who's great at something, who has spent time honing a craft, is like a shot of erotic stimulant in my veins.

He jokes a little with the attending, even. He's getting more comfortable. I want him to succeed, despite my otherwise mixed feelings.

He finds me in between cases. I had time to go get an iced coffee during the break, which rarely happens, and now I'm standing next to the fridge in the employee area eating a granola bar.

It's unfair that he looks so hot in his scrubs. His hair is swept to one side. His triceps ripple when he stuffs his hands in his pockets, and I have to snap my lips together to keep from making a noise.

He inches close to me after glancing around. "I gave my parents a dressing down after you left Sunday," he says. "They didn't stay after that." He inhales. "I also told them about what I did to you. When we were young."

"Okay." I take a sip of my coffee. "Were they upset?"

He rubs the back of his neck. "I mean, yeah. Of course. But I think they realize their error now."

“Grant.” The way I say his name makes him blanch. He knows what’s coming. “How I felt around your parents . . . I haven’t felt like that in a long time. Like I’m garbage. It might take me some time to get over that.”

“Yeah, of course.” He nods. “And I’m sorry, again. For the hundredth time, I know. Maybe I can make it up to you?”

“Maybe.” I smile, but it’s stiff.

Another staff member barrels into the room, so we move further apart. The look on Grant’s face makes my heart pinch, but then I’m angry at myself for it. I can’t be responsible for his feelings like that.

“I’ll talk with you later,” he says, and I nod.

I avoid him for most of the day, even though I sneak surreptitious glances his way.

In a way, I understand why he still maintains a relationship with his parents, despite how snobby and elitist they are. Where we’re from, people don’t cut off family members that easily—and when they do, it tends to be for good. Young people are a bit better at boundaries, yes, but there’s still a lot of pressure to maintain that connection for mountain folks, even when you move away. It’s why I’m still talking to my dad despite what he was like when I was growing up. Even though I understand it, however, that doesn’t mean I have to subject myself to people who think I’m lesser.

I wish it wasn’t like this. That we were different people, and I could care about him without complication. It’s for the best, though, if I distance myself. I’ve gotten over everything else, and I can get over this.



Dr. Fields stops me from leaving at the end of the day.

“Can we chat?”

My heart drops. “Sure,” I say.

I follow him into his office and sit down. The glare from the lights paints a bluish glow over our skin. It’s one of the things medical dramas get wrong about hospitals and ORs—the lights aren’t dim. In reality, medical settings are so bright you can see into everyone’s pores.

“I’m not really your boss,” Dr. Fields says. Which is an interesting way to begin a sentence. It is true, though—we have a director, and Dr. Fields

doesn't have authority over me, other than the power dynamics present between doctors and nurses.

"Yeah," is all I say.

"Dr. Gambill mentioned that he's pretty certain there's something going on between you and Dr. Wyndham. Which isn't against hospital policy, but it's somewhat frowned upon. Dr. Gambill was concerned about Dr. Wyndham talking to the med school interview committee on your behalf." He holds his hand up. "Not that you needed it. And I'm aware he had a prior friendship with the physician conducting the interview, so it wasn't a formal recommendation."

I sigh. I hate Dr. Gambill. George. Whatever. I don't hate Grant anymore, but I swear, some people come in and out of my life only to fuck everything up for a while.

"I went to high school with Grant," I say, and Dr. Fields's eyebrows fly up. "He . . . wasn't kind to me. That's an understatement, but I couldn't stand him. We're getting along better as adults. But there's a history there." I swallow. "I'm not trading sexual favors to get ahead, if that's what anyone thinks."

Dr. Fields flushes brick red. "I know you wouldn't do that," he says. "Your application speaks for itself. I just wanted to let you know." He brushes nonexistent dust from his desk. "I didn't know you knew Dr. Wyndham from before."

I don't say what I'm thinking, which is that I'm secretly impressed by these mythical women who can somehow improve their career trajectory with sex.

"I didn't ask him to call the committee," I say. "And at that time, though we knew each other from before, nothing was going on. I was still angry at him, based on our history. I think it was his misguided attempt at making up for how he treated me."

"So that's why you seemed so tense around him at first." He rubs his chin. "I'm glad he has evolved as a person, then. And that you've, uh, worked things out."

"Do you plan to have a conversation with him too? Or just me?" I sit up straighter.

Dr. Fields flushes again. "Him too, obviously," he says. "It sounds like we have a few things to discuss." He smiles. "For what it's worth, though, I

am glad you got into med school. It's well-deserved. Just, you know, be careful."

I smile back. It's not until later, when I'm in my car and on my way home, that I start to get anxious. What if George contacts someone and gets me kicked out of med school before I even start the program? Could he really do that?

Damn it. Now I've got something brand new to worry about.



I'm in a foul mood the day before Halloween. Normally it's my favorite time of year. I should be high on the fall weather, the rich colors of the leaves—cranberry red, mustard yellow, fiery orange—and the ambient pumpkin scent in all my favorite places.

I haven't spent any more time with Grant this week. I've declined other invitations to hang out, which he has extended with increasing levels of desperation, and now we are at the end of his rotation. I couldn't stand it anymore, though. Even if our families come around, the road there feels too fraught. The fact he gave his parents a piece of his mind is good, but I can't decide if that matters.

I also feel icky and worried about all the stuff with George. So there's that.

Now I've left the clinic early to meet Dad for our monthly dinner, and he's not here yet. I'm standing outside the barbecue place, surrounded by the scent of smoked meat, tapping my foot against the pavement. I call him again, then text. No answer.

I sit on the curb and wait longer. The sun is setting now and it's cooling by the minute so that I have to wrap my sweater tighter around me.

We've been meeting like this for a few months now. Has he forgotten? I'm reminded of a few occasions, just after he and my mom divorced, where I waited on him—at school, at a friend's house—and he never showed, so someone had to call my mom to come get me.

He's got a new girlfriend now, this lady who works down at the post office in Blacksburg. Could he be with her? But no, he would have called or texted.

Or maybe he decided not to make the drive after all. Still, I think he would have let me know.

My thoughts circle, just like they did when I was a kid—has he been drinking? Did he get arrested? Is he dead?

Although I would have heard about that last one.

I'm left with an uncomfortable conclusion—he's always disappointed me. This stretch of good behavior lasted longer, and he seemed sincere, but it's possible he's incapable of true reform.

I stand up and brush my hands over my pants to wipe off the bits of debris clinging to them. I text him again when I get to my car.

ME

I guess you aren't coming.

I lean my head against the headrest. My emotions press against my skin, and I hold them back like a dam. I will not shed any more tears over that man.

I'm going to stop putting my faith in people who don't deserve it.



The wind sends tree branches swinging outside the car window. Another gust twists the stop sign next to me.

It's Halloween, and Gwen's giving me a ride home from a party. We celebrated with Joan's friend—now boyfriend, I suppose—Lucas, and lots of their friends. It was lovely and festive, with strings of pumpkins and lights decorating his place. I've had a couple of pumpkin ales, so I'm feeling delightfully relaxed, and I'm dressed as a blue M&M to coordinate with my best friends as well as Joan's sister, complete with a blue tutu and heels. Someone tried to talk me into orange, but I won't be caught dead in Tennessee colors. I'm a Kentucky Wildcat girl through and through.

I'm also ignoring texts from Grant. Or not ignoring, really, but I've been giving him one-word responses. Our last meeting made it clear it wouldn't work with us, and I knew that anyway. Our families would never go for it. I don't trust people who've badly hurt me. Our work situation feels precarious. It's a no-brainer, and I don't know why I tried to convince

myself otherwise. Now that his rotation is over, we can move on from each other. We had some hot sex. That's all it was.

That's what I'm telling myself, anyway.

I can be happy without a partner. I've got excellent friendships, a promising career, and a couple of supportive family members. I'll be fine.

Gwen glances at me. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I'm all right."

"You just don't seem like yourself."

I shrug, then decide to give her a little snippet of what's been going on with me. Only Maria knows about Grant at this point, and I can't bring myself to talk about it with Joan or Gwen. Joan would be great, actually, and she's the best advice-giver I know, but I don't want to feel the heat of anyone else's judgment on me. "My dad really let me down yesterday," I say instead. "He was supposed to meet me for dinner, and he stood me up. It's not surprising, just disappointing."

"I'm sorry, babe." She sticks her bottom lip out. "If it makes you feel any better, all I do is argue with my own parents. We alternate between periods of radio silence and periods of out-and-out war."

"Dad never fought with me," I say. "He pretends to be interested in a relationship, then he flakes."

"You deserve better than that."

I stare out the window as we get closer to my apartment. "Remember how I was talking about stargazing recently? How excited I was about it? When I thought I might change careers?" I look up at the sky.

"Yeah. What are you looking at now? There's only cloud cover." She giggles. "How much have you had to drink?"

"Only enough to make me contemplative." I turn back to her. "I sometimes like having the option to do something different. It feels like getting older just means more doors closing, more choices that aren't available to you."

"You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah. Just hoping I'm making the right choices right now."

"It's always scary, committing to something. Or changing your mind about something. You reconsidering med school?"

"No. I think that's my path." I sigh. "Just an observation."

She drops me off at my building with another concerned look in my direction. I reassure her that I am indeed okay and make my way to my

first-floor apartment.

I stop short before I get to my door. Grant sits on the curb outside. His hair's disheveled, like he's been running his hands through it. He stands quickly when I approach.

"Kendall."

"What are you doing here?"

"I needed to talk to you, and you weren't answering me. I realize now how crazy that sounds. I'll leave if you want me to. But I'm hoping you'll give me a few minutes."

"Okay. You can come in." My eyes close for a moment. "I know we need to talk, anyway."

Grant's gaze snags on me, then he does a double take when he sees what I'm wearing as we walk into my apartment. "Good God. You look . . ."

"You like the slutty M&M look?" I shimmy a little, and he watches. A slow flush climbs his neck. "What else is Halloween for if not this kind of getup?"

I love how he looks right now. He's wearing a hooded Kentucky sweatshirt and jeans, and the sight of him in his casual attire reaches somewhere primal in my brain and yanks, like I can't help but be drawn to him in this relaxed state. A little beard scruff covers his jaw. He's got that bleary-eyed, dark-circles-like-bruises look common to residents, like he's a member of the undead on Halloween night. It doesn't sound sexy, I know, but the fact he could be sleeping, and he's here instead brings a rush of affection to the surface.

"Aren't you freezing?" He scans my bare legs after I close the front door.

"Again, Halloween. The discomfort is kind of the point."

I know why he's here, and what we should be doing—we have things we need to discuss. As we stare at each other, though, him with the look of someone starved, I can't think of anything but how I want to lose myself with him for a while.

I close the door behind me. Before he can open his mouth, I grip his sweatshirt and tug him toward me.

When I touch my mouth to his, he pulls back, though with visible reluctance.

"Can we talk?" He grips my waist in his broad hands. His fingers pinch the material of my shirt, like he wants to rip it in half. I would let him,

actually. When else am I going to dress up like a candy?

“I want to do this first. Is that okay?” I step into him, but I don’t make another move. “Please?”

He opens his mouth to speak, then his eyes flick over me and he groans, long and tortured. “Damn it.” He kisses me with the fervor of someone discovering it for the first time.

He backs me up against the door. His hands skim under my shirt, down to my thighs, roving everywhere he can touch skin. An inferno starts low in my pelvis and spreads to my thighs, and up my body, making my breasts heavy and my breaths shallow.

“Grant.” The breathy, high-pitched way I say his name doesn’t even sound like me. It spurs him on, though, and before long he’s grabbing fistfuls of material and tugging.

“I’d like to rip this fucking thing off,” he says when he leans back again, pulling on the hem of my blue skirt.

“I was just thinking about that,” I say. My chest heaves. “Do it. It’s cheap.”

He pulls at the skirt with both his hands, tearing the fabric, then he works with it until there’s a split up the entire side. The elastic won’t give, though, so I shove the whole thing down and out of the way. He tugs my shirt over my head, too, so that I’m standing in front of him in nothing but my heels, bra, and thong.

He steps away to survey his work. “I think I would give up everything I have just to touch you right now,” he says. It’s a simple statement. The boost to my ego could power a small star.

“You don’t have to go that far. I’m here.” I spread my arms out. “Touch me.”

He surprises me by kissing me again. It’s soft, easy, until we touch our tongues together, then we’re angling our heads and gripping each other. I work at his own shirt and he steps back so I can pull it off him. I run my hands over the hard planes of his chest. His body is the kind of thing people write songs about.

I pull him toward the bedroom and we laugh together when he unbuckles his belt and almost trips over the leg of his jeans. I never pictured him as someone I could laugh with, but here we are, giggling like we don’t have anything to worry about.

His eyes stay on mine when he slips my thong off, then unhooks my bra. When I sit on the bed, he slips his arms under my legs and pulls me to the edge. Watching him manhandle me might be the sexiest thing I've ever seen.

He literally licks his lips when he opens my legs. "I haven't come in almost two weeks again. I can't promise this won't get me there, just putting my mouth on you like this." His eyes flick up to mine. I'm propped on my elbows. "I made myself wait."

"Good job."

He shivers, then chuckles. "I never in a million fucking years would think I'm into that, but you've unlocked something." He keeps smiling as he puts his mouth on me, kissing up one thigh, then the other, then licking a path all the way up to my clit.

I turn my head into a pillow to stifle my moan. My nerve endings light up as he works—and he does treat it like a job, like eating me out is the thing that gives him purpose. Soon I'm writhing and rolling my hips. When he plunges a finger inside me and crooks it so he's stroking along the front wall, I tip over, climaxing so hard I call out his name.

His smug grin when he climbs up and over me brings a rush of warmth to my chest. Should I be alarmed? I don't even care.

"How do you want me?" I tilt my head.

"Hands and knees," he says, as though he's been dreaming about it. He sits up like he might be going for the wallet he left in his pants, which are in a pile outside my door.

I start to move, too, but I look at him before I do. "Has there been anyone else?"

"No. No one but you. Not for months."

"I'm okay with going bare this time if you are. I've got the IUD, and I haven't been with anyone else either."

He gulps. "I've never had sex without a condom."

"Never?"

"Not with my last girlfriend," he says. "And before that, I never dated anyone that seriously."

We're both sitting up on the bed now, looking at each other.

"You sure?" His hand touches mine as though he wants to ground us, make us think about what we are doing. I trust him, though, in this way at least.

“If you are.”

He trails his fingers up my arm. “Yeah. I am.”

He pulls off his boxers, then he kisses me again, letting his hands roam all over me. I’m on fire.

When I move to all fours he positions himself behind me. He nudges at my entrance and I guide him inside. The first sweep of sensation pulls at all my nerve endings, like all the perception in my body has narrowed to the place where we are joined.

“Oh, Jesus,” Grant says from behind me. He props his forearm on my back and leans over me. When I turn to look at him, it’s like he’s trying to get his composure. “I can’t handle this,” he pants.

“You can.” I shift back against him, and he groans again. “Can you move, though?”

With a soft whimper, he pulls out a little, then pushes back in, and I prop myself on my elbows. It’s good—amazing, even—but I need a little more.

“Can you touch my clit?”

He reaches around me and strokes, and *this*. This is better than anything.

“I’m serious, Kendall. I’m not sure I can stand it.” His breath is shaky, his words choked off on a strangled sound. “You feel . . . and you’re so fucking hot.”

“Don’t come yet,” I tell him.

He moves with a little more purpose. His fingers keep up their rhythm, and before long I’m starting to feel closer, like I can tip over that edge again. His breathing is labored, though, and the taut way his hips move tells me he’s also close.

“Stop,” I say.

“Goddamn it.” He drapes himself over me.

“Poor baby.” I move forward so he slides out. “Lay on your back.”

He follows my instructions. He looks absolutely wrecked, though, and I’m delighting in it.

“Will you ride me? Please?” He sounds like he’s going to cry.

I straddle him, then grasp his cock and rub it against my clit. I start to put him inside me again but only let the tip in before I pull him back out.

“Please don’t tease me, baby. I am hanging on by the barest fucking thread here.”

I finally sink down on him, and his relieved sound ramps on my own sensation. I like this position, too, and I grind on him, chasing the sparks of pleasure.

Up, over, and then I burst. I cry out, convulsing around him and chanting his name.

He surprises me by flipping us over.

“My turn,” he says, and I don’t challenge him. He doesn’t look like he can wait any longer.

He’s intent, focused, and he pounds into me until he cries out as well, his face twisted in bliss. I watch him come undone with no small amount of fascination.

I hook my legs around his waist, keeping him in place. He lifts his head to find my gaze.

“Thanks for not denying me that.” He trails soft kisses down the side of my neck.

I giggle. “I could tell that you were at your limit.” I keep my hand on his waist when he slides out of me.

We’re silent for a few moments. The ding of a notification on one of our phones sounds from the living room. My bedroom smells like sex, a musky scent that’s weirdly hot, like a reminder of this animal, feral thing we just did.

“I’m going to shower, then we can talk,” I say. “You want to join me?”

“I’ll have to put the same clothes on. But sure, that sounds nice.”

He pads after me to my bathroom. We’re both still naked, and I grab a couple towels, plus one to wipe myself off with.

He smirks. “That, uh, kinda does something to me,” he says.

“What’s that?”

He nods at my thighs. “Knowing that you have to, like, clean yourself up.” His face reddens.

“You like it dripping down my thighs? Is that what you’re trying to say?”

He laughs. “Well, when you put it that way. Yeah. It’s like . . . it makes me feel like a troglodyte. Like you’re mine in some way, even though intellectually I know that’s not a very evolved thing to feel.”

I shrug as I turn the shower on. His eyes scan me, like he’s still enjoying the view, like he could go again. “It’s okay. I know you aren’t some caveman.” I smile. “You’re an ortho doc, though. Is there a difference?”

“Ha. Haven’t heard that one before.”

He follows me into the shower. We stand under the spray, and I gesture for him to turn around. I pour some shampoo into my palm so I can soap up his hair.

“Is this okay?” I massage my fingers into his scalp.

“God, yes.” He dips his head.

With the warm water trailing down my back and the way Grant melts under my touch, in this intimate cocoon together, my reservations seem silly. I want him. I care about him. I’m sinking further into my feelings for him, and this steam is addling my brain, making me even foggier.

“I think hot water might be the best human achievement,” I say.

He turns his head to grin at me. Soapy lather snakes down his cheeks, and he closes one eye. “I’m sure I’m supposed to say that the greatest invention is antibiotics or something like that, since I’m physician.” He trades places with me so he can rinse his hair out. “But I think you might be right.”

“That’s an interesting discussion. There are lots of directions you could go with that.”

Grant takes the shampoo bottle from me. “Can I return the favor?”

I nod. He squeezes shampoo into his hand and starts to lather up my own hair. The pressure from his fingers and the hot mist is so relaxing I could melt into a puddle. I must make a noise, because Grant steps into me, and his movements become more vigorous.

“I think you gotta go with the wheel, right?” His breath skims my ear.

“Are we back on inventions again?”

“I feel like there should be a right answer,” he says.

I shrug. “There are too many candidates for that, depending on how far back you go. Writing. Electricity. Birth control. Toilet paper. Beer. The internet.”

He laughs. “That last one’s debatable.”

I step back so I can rinse off, and we trade places again. There’s a bit of awkward shuffling.

“Pardon me, ma’am,” Grant says.

“He has even more jokes.” I pull my favorite body wash from the shower caddy. “I always wondered where you’d buried your sense of humor. By the way, this stuff is pricey. I might have to let you use the cheap stuff.”

Grant swipes the bottle from me. "I have delicate skin, thanks." He soaps up a loofah for me and motions for me to spin around so he can wash my back.

"Do you?" The first brush of the loofah against my skin brings an actual moan to my lips.

"I use the cheapest bar of soap I can find, actually. I'm not fussy."

I hum a little as he works, a few bars of an Adele song.

He stops. "You want to sing a little louder for me?"

My sigh pulls a laugh from him.

"Please?"

So I really belt it, letting my voice ring out around us, like I might if I were alone.

He sighs. "Your voice is incredible. You could be famous."

"I wish." I sigh when he pushes into the muscles around my shoulder blade with his free hand. "Don't get used to it, though. I told you I don't like serenading people."

"I don't get it, though," he says. "You're not shy. If I had a voice like yours, I would never stop singing. I would order that way at restaurants. Sing at the top of my lungs in the grocery store."

"You think that." I laugh. "It's awkward. This lady I used to work with had a decent voice, and she used to sing on the labor and delivery unit all the time. To the babies, to the moms. The secondhand embarrassment was crushing."

He chuckles. We finish washing then I hand him one of my big, fluffy towels for drying. I wrap my hair in another.

"I think women have the right idea with their fancy bath products," he says. "This towel makes me feel like I'm floating on a cloud."

"Right? Totally worth it."

He trails after me into the bedroom. His gaze burns into me as we get dressed, me in my pajamas and him into the clothes he was already wearing.

"Sorry I don't have anything else for you to wear," I say. I recline on my bed, and he settles next to me.

"That's okay." He turns to me. "Kendall."

"Yeah?" My heart pounds.

"Can we talk now?"

I nod. My fingers grip the comforter under me.

“You disappeared,” he says softly. “This week. I feel like you were avoiding me.”

“I’m sorry. I’m terrible at this kind of stuff actually. I know I’m outgoing, but I have a hard time talking about, you know.”

“Feelings?”

I swallow. “Yeah.”

“I’ll go first, then.” Grant turns my head toward him, so he can look me in the eye. I squirm. “I want you to know exactly where I stand here.” He inhales. “I’m falling in love with you.”

That word, love, drops into my chest like a rock. My body grows heavy. I know, deep down, that I’ve sailed past infatuation into something more serious. I can’t get the words out, though.

“Grant,” I say instead. My voice cracks.

“I know. I shouldn’t say that. But I think about you constantly. I want you all the time, to the point I’m distracted from everything else. I love everything about you—your brain, your sense of humor. How good you are at so many things. You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.” His voice lowers. “I’ll never want another woman like this.”

My breath stalls. My God, I’ve never had anyone talk about me this way. It’s like he has a direct line to the most jagged parts of me and he’s soothing them with the sweetest things I’ve ever heard.

“Grant.” My eyes water. “I don’t know if this can work. No matter what we feel.”

“But why can’t it? If we both want it to, I mean?”

“What about the stuff at work? With Dr. Gambill?”

His face darkens, but he waves that off. “You already got into med school. And if it comes up, I’ll tell them I called without your permission. I can take the heat.”

That makes me feel slightly better, but not a lot.

“Your parents hate it,” I say. “And I don’t have the energy to perform for them, honestly.”

He’s quiet for a moment. “We don’t have to see them. Honest to God, I won’t let them around you unless they show they can change dramatically.”

I groan. “I’m not making you cut off your parents.” I stare at the ceiling, willing myself not to cry. “Besides that, if I do get into med school, there’s no guarantee you’ll find a job here. I’ll have to do my residency somewhere else, probably, because we aren’t all lucky enough to get one in our home

state. I'm sure I'll be stressed and studying all the time, trying not to freak out about the loans I'll be paying back later."

"I'll help you pay for it," Grant says. "I don't have enough saved for the whole thing, but I can help." He grasps my hand in his. "I will give you all my fucking money."

"I can't take that from you, either," I say. "And I'm used to doing things myself. I can do this too."

"But I *want* to be that person for you." Grant's voice takes on some urgency. "I want to be the one who helps you. So you don't have to take on all of it on your own."

Tears stream down my cheeks now, and those give way to sniffing, and then great, heaving sobs while Grant watches. I bend forward and curl over my feet. I cry so hard I worry I'm going to be sick, all while he strokes the back of my hand, watching me with concern and so much compassion I want to turn away from it. I haven't cried like this in years. I'm not sure I've ever cried like this, even as a child.

Years of hurt come crashing down on me. Not just Grant's treatment of me, or anyone else's, but the ways I've had to endure so much in order to live a normal life. I've been flippant about it with my friends, but I'm so exhausted my bones hurt. It's all too much. My upbringing, the way poverty leaves a mark on one's very DNA. Being bullied. Blaine's accident. The health problems I pretend are no big deal. My dad. The way I still fight to prove myself.

Grant snakes his arms around my shoulders and squeezes me. I sink into him, probably slobbering on his shoulder with my ugly, racking sobs.

"I'm sorry," I choke out. My throat stings from the crying. "I don't . . ."

Then I sob again, an awful wail I'll be embarrassed about later.

"It's okay, Kendall. You don't have anything to be sorry for."

That makes me cry harder, in more gulping sobs. I've never done something like this in front of someone else. It's like someone pulled a pin and now I'm detonating.

After a few minutes, my gasping settles into sniffles at random intervals. I sit up and wipe my eyes. I'm wrung out, and my clarity is no better than it was.

"Well," I say, "now you've finally seen me break down." I sniffle again. "Don't tell anyone I have feelings."

He laughs a little, but it's a sad chuckle, like his heart isn't really in it. He pets my hair. "You're breaking my heart here, babe." He offers me a subdued smile. "On the other hand, if you'd done this in high school, I might not have bothered you ever again."

"I don't think that's how it works. It probably would have gotten even worse. Showing weakness and all that."

He makes a noise, a plaintive whimper like a pained animal. "I don't know how I can ever make it up to you. I'll spend years trying if you'll let me."

"Grant." He stiffens next to me. "I'm so into you. I really, really am. You're brilliant and sexy and kind. I like spending time with you. I know you would treat me well."

He pulls his arm from my shoulders to look at me. "This feels like a prelude to letting me down."

"I'm sorry." My voice cracks again. "If we were different people, I would give it a chance. But there's too much baggage. And I can't spend my life feeling less-than, especially around your family. I think it's better if we do this now."

Grant hangs his head. My heart pinches, and I rub my chest.

He lifts his head. "Is there anything I can say? Or do?"

The pinch becomes a thread of agony wrapping around me, squeezing my chest. I can't get to the bottom of my breath.

"I'm sorry," I say again. "It's been . . . fun."

"Goddammit." Grant folds his arms over his chest, features hardening, and I flinch. "Don't give me that. Now you're diminishing it."

I throw my hands up. "Fine. I doubt I'll ever have a connection like this again. Is that what you want to hear?"

He rubs the back of his neck. "No. That's worse."

"Maybe we'll feel differently in a few months," I say. "That this was just lust, infatuation. A house of cards." I can't bring myself to talk about his admission, his use of the word "love." I won't allow myself to consider that I could feel the same way. I know I've left him hanging, that the word is now out there, untethered from his control like a lost kite. I wish I could give him what he wants—something I never thought I would say—but I can't.

He stretches his legs out in front of him and props himself on one elbow. He looks like a male model for a moment, posing on my bed in his

sweatshirt, and I want to touch him again. I squeeze my hands into fists.

“No, Kendall,” he says. “That’s not what’s this is.”

We stare at each other. I’m sure my eyes are red-rimmed, but I don’t care. He’s now seen me at my absolute worst.

“I’m glad I won’t hate you forever now,” I say. “This was healing for me.”

He drops his head down, burying it in his forearm, and when he picks it up again, there’s resignation written on his face.

“You’re scared,” he says, “and it’s hurting both of us.”

“You think I don’t know that?” My fists clench. “But in case you were wondering, you did this. It was years ago, but you set it in motion. So I don’t know what else to tell you.”

“Fine. I’ve done all I can.” He kisses my forehead, then shoves himself up to sitting. He’s at the edge of my bed for a moment before he stands and stretches.

“All right. Well, good luck with med school.” His voice is high and thin.

“Thanks.” I don’t move.

With one last glance back at me, he steps out of my bedroom. I hear his heavy footsteps through the living room, and the door shuts behind him.

I cry some more that night. I cry until I’m exhausted from it, until sleep claims me.

23

KENDALL

The bright lights in the grocery store almost burn my eyes. I stare at a carton of strawberries, inspecting them for a full minute, then pick up another carton. They look the same. Why is this decision so hard?

It's the day after my conversation with Grant. I'm raw, scraped out, tender.

I miss him already, somehow. I want to hear his voice. I want to bask in his attention, to give him my own. In the glare of the day, it's hard to feel like I made the right decision.

I startle when my phone chimes.

UNKNOWN NUMBER

this is Theresa. Your daddy's friend. He broke his phone in the wreck, but he was adamant I text you. Sorry to bother you

I stop just as I turn into the cereal aisle. What the hell? What wreck?

ME

He was in a wreck? Is he okay?

UNKNOWN NUMBER

Yes, day before yesterday. Busted up his femur and had to have surgery. He's at the hospital in Lexington.

Someone slips around me, and I mutter a dazed apology since I'm standing in the middle of the aisle without moving. The wreck must have happened on the day we were supposed to meet. For once in my life, my dad really didn't stand me up.

ME

How long's he supposed to be there?

UNKNOWN NUMBER

another day or so, then rehab most likely.

I clap a hand over my mouth. This is awful news, and he's going to have a long recovery ahead of him. He'll have to take time off from his job. Time he likely can't afford.

I also don't know how to deal with this sort of thing when it comes to him. If it were Mom, I would drop everything and go to her. My tenuous new relationship with Dad makes this whole thing feel awkward.

Then again, if the situation were reversed, he would come to me. I've been thinking back to my childhood lately. My parents divorced when I was in elementary school, and Dad was in and out of our lives after that like a traveler. He sent money sometimes. When Blaine had his accident in high school, though, Dad did come back to Kentucky right away. He spent a few weeks on Mom's couch, though he and Mom nearly bit each other's heads off. He left again when we were settled, claiming he would send money to help us, and though he didn't always keep that promise, he did seem heartbroken that Blaine was hurt.

Maybe that's why Blaine carries so much animosity toward him—all the sudden Dad tried to play the role of a caring parent, when he'd been absent so much.

I've come to think of him as a deeply flawed man with whom I can have some contact here and there in some limited form, especially since it seems to mean a lot to him now. I'm not sure what's changed, but him fretting over standing me up is new behavior for him.

I come to a decision, then make a couple of phone calls.



It's late in the afternoon by the time I make it to Lexington. I turn toward a voice calling my name in the hospital lobby.

"Blaine? I didn't think you'd come. I only thought you'd want to know about it."

He pushes over to where I'm standing. "I don't want much to do with him, but I did want to make sure he's not, like, at death's door or anything." He looks down at his feet.

"I understand. I'm glad you're here."

I'm shocked, is what I am. I don't say much more about it, though. We make our way to the unit where our father is admitted. He's alone when we get there.

He turns a groggy gaze on me when I enter, then smiles. His mouth drops when he sees Blaine behind me.

"Son," he says, swallowing.

Blaine nods at him. "Hello."

My dad's face pales under his graying beard as he stares at Blaine, who shifts uncomfortably in his chair. I feel like I'm intruding, like I'm witnessing a reunion I shouldn't be part of. I don't remember my own reconnection with our dad being this dramatic. It seems strange, given they've likely seen each other around town here and there, but this must be the first time Blaine has spent any voluntary time with the man in nearly a decade.

"How are you feeling?" I step toward the edge of his hospital bed. Dad's still staring at Blaine like he's a ghost, but he breaks away to look at me when I touch his arm.

"I'm hurting," he says with a shrug. "But they've taken real good care of me here. Real good."

"I'm glad to hear that."

I study him, cataloging his state. The space around his eye shows a faint bruise, like he hit it against something in the accident. His leg is under his blankets, but I see the bulk where he's got on some kind of immobilizing device. His hair is a little unkempt, but otherwise he looks like the same hale, imposing man I've always known.

"What happened?" I pull his attention back to me again. Blaine is still behind me, clearing his throat occasionally.

"Wasn't my fault," Dad starts.

Blaine snorts.

“It really wasn’t,” Dad says. “Somebody T-boned me at an intersection. Smashed up the driver’s side of my car like a tin can. Surprised it didn’t kill me.”

“You had your seatbelt on?” Blaine finally chimes in now.

“Yep. Probably saved me.” He smiles at Blaine. “It was a terrible fright, but I’m glad it brought you here. Maybe I ought to almost die more often.”

Blaine looks away.

“It’s okay, Son.” Dad sits up a little, wincing as he does so. “How have you been?”

Blaine sighs. “I’m okay.” He smiles. “Great, actually. Gloria, my wife, is pregnant. We’re having a baby.”

The air in the room stills. Even the noise out in the hallway seems to quiet.

“Oh?” Dad’s voice is small.

“Yep.”

“Oh. Well that’s wonderful news.” His eyes shine. “I’m real happy for you.”

He looks like he might be on the verge of tears, and he turns his head toward the window. What’s he thinking? Are his regrets weighing on him? Does he wish things were different?

We chat for longer. I offer to go get him food, and he declines. Before we leave, Blaine shakes Dad’s hand, and it looks like Dad might cry again.

Blaine and I are quiet in the elevator. We have some distance to go to get to the parking garage, crossing a pedway and taking an elevator to get to our vehicles.

“You want a push?” I start to move behind him.

He drops his hands. “Yeah, actually. That would be great.”

“Are you okay?” I touch his shoulder as we go.

“I want to hate him,” he says. He turns to look at me. “Do you really think he’s changed?”

“I think he’s trying now,” I say. “He knows he wasn’t around enough for us.”

“I’m not ready to forgive him,” Blaine says, his voice tight. “But maybe I can see him now and then, too.”

“Whatever you want to do is okay, Blaine. For me, I’ve been okay with small doses. But you aren’t obligated to make nice with someone who hurt you.”

We're walking through the pedway now. The windows reveal the busy streets below. Lexington is the other big city in Kentucky, located in between Louisville, where I live now, and my hometown. Rolling hills stretch out in the distance. Dusk is falling now, and the bridge we're on looks out over some twinkling lights. A car honks.

"I'm sorry I got mad at you," Blaine says quietly. "I just worry about someone hurting you again." He looks down at his lap as we reach an elevator. "Are you still talking to Grant?"

My breath hitches. I'm shocked at the pain the slices through me. "I broke things off with him," I say.

"You sound disappointed."

"I mean, yeah." My voice breaks.

He eyes me again. "Wait. Are you okay? Did you have something serious with him or something?"

I shrug. "It can't work out long term."

"Why the hell not?"

I almost trip over my own feet. What is he talking about? He acted like he would never get over it if I got together with Grant. Now he's behaving as though he's upset about it being over.

"Uh, need I remind you of why you yelled at me? You said you wouldn't have anything to do with him if I brought him around." I position him next to his vehicle in the parking garage.

He props his forearm against his car. "I was wrong to say that. Gloria clued me in, but I would have come to that conclusion myself." He swallows. "If you like him, then I trust your judgment."

He opens his door so he can transfer into the car.

"Well, this is a one-eighty," I say. A cold wind whips through the garage and I shiver. "But you weren't the only reason I can't stay with him."

My heart fractures even more. I tug on the ends of my sweatshirt just to have something to do with my hands.

Blaine grips my arm. "I'm serious," he says. "I'll support you."

My mouth stretches into a smile despite the ache in my chest. "Thanks, Blaine."

This conversation is happening too late, though, and I've already made my decision. It still feels like the right one even though it hurts like a first heartbreak. And maybe it is, honestly. I'm not sure I've ever felt this raw before, not even when a college boyfriend I really liked told me he couldn't

be “too tied down.” I’d been disappointed then. What I am now is utterly devastated.

I have to believe time will help. It’s been the cure for everything else.



Joan proposes a toast at our Saturday brunch. She sweeps a lock of blonde hair over her shoulder and raises her mimosa.

“To Kendall,” she says. “Our future physician, and one of the best damn women I know.”

I blink a few times. I raise my glass as my friends congratulate me.

I have a standing brunch date with my friends about once a month. It’s cold today so we’re dining indoors at a place in the city, though the sun shines and the air is dry. I can see the blue sky out the window next to us. My coffee drink is flavored with some kind of sweet caramel apple concoction. I’m wearing my favorite earrings and a new pair of tennis shoes, along with a new purple sweater I got yesterday, but none of it makes me feel any better.

My chest *aches*. I wake up in the middle of the night now with a pulsing sense of wrongness, only to remember what happened, and to chastise myself for being so pathetic.

Grant hasn’t called or texted either, not that I expected him to. He told me he was falling in love with me, and I made it clear I still can’t be with him, so who can blame him for staying away?

Or maybe he didn’t mean any of it. In my darkest moments, I wonder if any of it was real.

I fiddle with one of my earrings and return my focus to my friends. “Now I just need to find a couple hundred thousand dollars,” I say. “If anyone wants to help out with that.”

“How’s the scholarship hunt going?” Gwen dribbles a bit of syrup on her shirt as she takes a bite of her pancake.

“I think we need to get you a bib,” I tell her, and she grins at me. “But I’m getting there. I’ve found some specifically for students going back to school.”

Maria settles her napkin over her lap, as though seeing Gwen eat so messily makes her anxious. “I’m so happy for you,” she says. “I know

you'll figure it out."

To my great embarrassment, tears build in my eyes. Damn it. I'd thought my tear ducts were empty. I've never cried in front of my friends, either.

"Kendall?" Joan raises up out of her chair. Her eyes are wide.

"I'm sorry," I say, but tears stream down my cheeks. I cover my mouth to stifle my crying, but it only makes it worse.

Everyone is staring at me. Oh God.

"I think I need talk to you guys," I say.

"Of course." Joan lays a hand over mine, and I settle a bit. She's so soothing. No wonder she's a good nurse. I clutch at her.

I tell them the whole story. Everything about Grant, about Blaine, and my dad. About Grant's parents. The whole sorry affair spills out of me in bursts.

Joan gets up to hug me. I cling to her like I'm a little kid as she murmurs calming words. When she sits back down, she has transitioned from her active listening face to her guidance face. She's the group's best advice-giver, and I hold my breath while I wait for her to speak.

"You're stubborn sometimes, you know?" She smiles.

So we're going with tough love, I see. I laugh. "You have no idea," I say.

"I think I do," Joan says. "But none of us would have judged you for what you did. Or whatever you decide to do now. Your former self doesn't get to make all your decisions for you."

I wipe another tear away. "My former self is screaming at me continuously, yelling 'you're in danger' over and over."

Gwen wipes a biscuit crumb off her shirt. "I cannot *believe* you managed to keep all this secret. I mean this in the best way possible, but you are the least private person I've ever met."

I chew on my lip. I did keep this from everyone. My shame has been overwhelming. "I did tell one of you." I nod toward Maria, who gives me a little nod.

Gwen laughs and glances at Maria. "Apparently you're our group vault."

"I hated myself for getting involved with him," I say.

Maria's gaze softens on me.

"And now?" Joan folds her hands in her lap. "Does it still feel bad?"

I shake my head. “I made peace with it.” I toy with the hem of my sweater. “It hurts that it’s over, though. I can’t think about anything else. I can’t sleep. My body aches. It’s horrible.”

“For God’s sake,” Gwen says. “If you miss him that much, just go be with him.”

The clink of cutlery on plates echoes around us, and conversations carry on, but our table quiets as everyone looks at me.

“He hurt me so much,” I say softly, “when we were teenagers. I don’t know if I can get over it. It’s been such a struggle. Like, what if that part of him is still in there somewhere? If he could do that before, what’s stopping him from becoming that again?”

Joan runs her fingers through her blonde hair. She tilts her head. “That’s a valid concern. But I don’t think you would have fallen for him if he was a bad person. You don’t tolerate any bullshit.”

“What do you mean, I fell for him?”

“Kendall.” Gwen leans forward and almost knocks over her orange juice. Maria steadies her glass for her. “You love this man.”

Oh, God. I cover my face with my hands. Slivers of sunlight from the window shine through my fingers. Another tear slips out.

She’s right. Of course she is. I haven’t allowed myself the room to accept it, but I can’t deny it, and it’s obvious to everyone but me. I want him. I care about him.

I always go after what I want. Take no prisoners and all that. And now I’m being a coward, like Grant said. I just can’t let go of my hang ups. I hold them near me like little poisonous jewels.

“You should grab happiness when you can,” Maria says. “If he really has changed, I mean. If you still want to hate him, I support that too. But if he’s good to you, and you care about him, I think it’s okay to let it happen.”

“And if it’s a big mistake?” I lower my hands.

“Then we’ll go back to hating him with you.” Gwen shrugs. “I have absolutely no qualms about that.”

I laugh again. I still don’t know what I’m going to do, but my eyes feel drier now. “You ladies.” I shake my head. “You’re the fucking best.”

I blink against the fluorescent lights of the OR, feeling like I've got grains of sand underneath my eyelids.

I'm doing my spine rotation now. I've moved on with my third year of residency like my entire world hasn't been leeched of color. I'm not being dramatic, either. Or maybe I am, but I don't care.

I must have loved her. Current tense: love her. Food tastes bland now. My sleep quality is even worse than usual. My heart skips when my phone chimes, but it's never her. I've thought of calling her, texting her, but she made herself clear, and I should respect that. It's tempting, though. I've become someone I don't recognize, a foolish man who'll take any scrap he can get.

It will pass. I've never felt quite like this, but I'm certain I'll improve. In the meantime, I need to focus on getting through my residency.

"Ready, Dr. Wyndham?" The scrub tech—Finn? Flynn? Shit, I don't remember now—looks at me.

I nod. The attending is a real hard-ass, and he aims his stern countenance my way before we start the surgery. Lucky for me, I can compartmentalize, so once the procedure begins I'm dialed in. I won't allow this heartache to make me lose focus.

I make it through the day. Adam is at the apartment later that night when I stumble in. He's asleep at the kitchen counter next to a bowl of chicken noodle soup, his head resting on his forearm.

I nudge him awake. He startles, nearly breaking my nose as he whips his head up. Tiny red capillaries web out around his irises, and dark circles stand out like smudges under his eyes.

“You need me to help you to bed?”

He drags a sleeve across his face. “God. I don’t even know.” He comes to a shaky stand. “I guess I would have woken up eventually. But thanks.” He looks at me. “You look even worse than I feel.”

“Yeah. I’m not doing great.”

“You shouldn’t just wallow,” he says blearily as he walks to the bathroom.

“Pardon?”

He turns to me. “It’s about Kendall, right? If you like her that much, you should tell her.”

“I did. It’s not going to work.”

His smile drops. “Ah. Sorry, man.”

I wave that off. I don’t tell him I’ll be okay, because I’m not sure I will be. I’m not just wallowing, either. That would imply I’ve been listening to sad music and sitting in my dark bedroom, but I’m making efforts to move on, and I still can’t. I’m honestly not sure how to proceed.

I made myself better, and it still wasn’t good enough. I don’t even blame her. This is karma come full circle—I’ve done this to myself.



I overhear George with one of his patients. I’m not eavesdropping, but the door is open. “I don’t think the physical therapy is going to work,” he’s saying. “But you have to do it before we can get an MRI.”

I roll my eyes. I really hate this man.

I catch him later that day when he’s out in the hallway on his computer.

“Hey, man,” I say to him, and he looks at me. “I don’t think you should tell patients that PT ‘isn’t going to work’ before you send them. It’s possible it will, but they won’t buy in or do any of their exercises if you say that up front, you know?”

His face becomes a stiff mask. I’ve hit a nerve, apparently.

“I have some things I could say to you as well.” He folds his arms across his chest. “Starting with you fucking a nurse who works on the unit

where you're doing your rotation and then recommending she get admitted to medical school?"

My face heats. "There's a lot going on in those accusations you're slinging around. I've known Kendall for a long time. We went to high school together, and she's brilliant." I tick off items on my fingers. "I didn't write a letter or anything. I talked to Dr. Sanders, who I know very well, and told her what a good job Kendall does. Which is true. And lastly, I had barely had any interactions with her at that point."

I don't say the other part, that we've had lots of interactions since then. I don't need to.

He opens his mouth to speak, but I talk over him. "Besides that, there's talk about you fooling around with an intern last year. So do you really want to go there? Glass houses and all that."

George's mouth snaps shut. His face pales. He thinks he's so slick, but I've been holding onto that one. He all but confirmed it. Nurses and residents getting together is at worst ill-advised, but a younger resident in your own program? It's even more rife with potential problems.

"Fine," he says. "You made your point."

"She's going to be an excellent physician," I say. "If anything, I've only gotten in her way."

I turn around. With any luck, he'll leave Kendall alone for good now.



Two weeks after my last conversation with Kendall, I go home to Blacksburg. It's not what I want to do with a weekend off, but it's my paternal grandmother's eighty-fifth birthday, and since she's my only grandparent left, I feel like I should celebrate with her.

We're at my parents' house, and thankfully the party is winding down. My grandmother's friends have all gone home, and only family members are left milling about. I've got a few cousins who came in for the occasion.

I stand in my parents' cavernous kitchen, sipping on a sherbet punch boasting a level of cloying sweetness that might give me an instant cavity. I take a nibble of a chicken salad croissant, though it's been sitting out for a while and now it's gotten a little stale and dry. I glance around. Mom and Dad have decorated the kitchen in that country-rich-person kind of style—

not that it takes much to be rich around here—with a few rustic accents and kitschy little signs. There's a wooden one with white block lettering above the cabinets that says "welcome." It feels kind of bullshit, honestly. They definitely wouldn't welcome everyone here.

My grandmother ambles over to where I stand. She's thin, perhaps painfully so since the last time I saw her a few months ago. Her makeup has settled into the deep lines in her face, and her smile seems a little tired, but she's still well-dressed, and her posture is perfect.

She's my only grandparent who grew up poor. She's talked about it a little, the type of poverty that leaves a mark on one's psyche, though I never probed any further. I'm reminded of Kendall's grandmother, who apparently had to use dirty bath water from a well, and I wonder if my own mamaw had to do that. If she did, she hasn't ever talked about it. She and my grandpa started a furniture company together and never looked back.

She pats me on the back. "How's the doctoring going?"

I smile at her. "Terrible. But I think I'm stuck now."

"Ah." She waves that away. "If you want to quit and run off to Hollywood, I wouldn't blame ya. I always thought you'd make a good movie star."

I laugh. "I have no charm or acting ability, but sure." I take another sip of my drink and wrinkle my nose.

"I did wonder if you might know what to do about this hip that's been bothering me. Since I broke it last year, you remember." She gestures at her hip joint.

I nod. She had a hip replacement on the left side.

"It's still painin' me." She grimaces.

"Yeah." I wince. "I've seen that before. I can get you in to see one of my colleagues if you want."

She squeezes my arm. "Good to have a doctor in the family." She grins at me. "You got any lady friends nowadays?"

My parents have drifted closer. Mom is talking to my aunt about her new dryer, but she looks at me when she hears the question. My stomach flips.

"I had a girl." I swallow. "And I liked her a lot. She was from here actually. But I don't think it's going to work out."

"Oh, that's a shame. Is it someone I know?"

My mom's hand tightens around her glass. Everyone is listening now.

“Kendall Hodges,” I say. “She was an Amburgey, but she changed her name after high school.”

“Oh, I know that family. Her brother does my taxes.” She searches my face. “They seem like nice people. What happened?”

“Mom,” my dad chimes in from my grandmother’s other side. “I don’t think that was ever going to work.”

A fire starts in my chest and climbs up to my face, setting my cheeks to burning. I slam my drink on the counter. The ice rattles in the glass, and everyone around me startles.

“What does that mean?” I stare at my dad.

My mom giggles nervously. We still have some family members milling about, and she glances around at them. “You know,” she says. “We talked about this.”

“We did,” I say, gathering steam. “And I told you guys that you made her feel awful. That you made her feel like trash.”

“Grant!” My mom lays a hand to her chest.

“It’s the truth! And you haven’t learned a thing. You’re being snobs about it, and she can see as well as anyone how you view people who grew up like her.”

“We never said we look down on her,” my dad says.

“You didn’t have to. It’s clear. And honestly, the truth is she’s a better person than you guys.”

My mom squeaks. My grandmother surprises me by laughing. She covers her mouth like she’s trying not to let it escape, but it comes out anyway. My other family members are still watching us like we’re putting on a performance—mouths hang open, eyes dart around, and water is sipped nervously.

“That’s unfortunate,” my grandmother says. “All of it.” She turns to my dad. “You forgot how your mama grew up, I guess?”

“I didn’t,” my dad says. “I also know you and Dad worked hard to get ahead.”

I scoff. My anger is now driving the car, and I’ve completely lost control.

My grandmother plants a hand on her hip. She points a finger at my dad, and I inch closer to her, worried she might fall as she jabs at him. “Your father’s uncle gave him money to start our company. Did you know that? We eventually paid him back, but it was a big help. No one in my

family had any way of doing that. When I married your dad, I had no other way out.” She waves his protests away. “I thought you knew better than this.”

My mom’s eyes widen. She’s obviously thinking of ways to get us back on track after we’ve been derailed by this whole argument.

“I made cookies,” Mom says. “Lemon flavored.” She gestures to the counter.

“You guys can’t even confront anything real.” I plant my hands on the counter and lean forward. I take deep breaths to calm myself, then look at each of my parents in turn. “You just sweep all your ugly beliefs under the rug.”

My mom drops the cookie plate to the counter with a resounding clang. “All right.” She says. She uses her head to gesture to the dining room. “Let’s go have a talk, then.”

“Cindy.” Dad reaches for her, but she moves away.

“You too,” she says. “We need to have a conversation with him.”

I follow her into the dining room, wondering what this is about. Murmurs from the rest of my family start up as soon as we leave the room. After the spectacle we put on, people will be talking about this for several holidays to come. If this isn’t an apology, I’m done dealing with them. And if they don’t improve, I’m not sure I can spend much more time with them. They’ve insulted the woman I love too many times. And it is love—I’m not sure any amount of distance will dull those feelings.

We’re away from other ears now. Though people usually congregate in the kitchen and living area, my parents have one of those separate formal dining rooms with tall windows and upholstered chairs. Sunlight warms my face when I sit across from them.

“You cutting me out of the will or something?” I grip the side of my chair. “After I just embarrassed you?”

Mom folds her hands in her lap. “You should hear a story,” she says.

Dad throws a sharp glance at her. Conversation continues in the other room, and it sounds more normal now, like a party instead of the aftermath of an argument. Laughter rings out. I’m glad we didn’t ruin everyone else’s time.

“I was engaged before I met your dad,” she begins.

Shock washes over me. I’ve never even gotten a whiff of this history before—obviously, everyone’s parents have a past, but I should have heard

about a broken engagement, right? That seems like a big deal. Still, I listen without interrupting, though I'm sure the surprise shows on my face.

"I thought we loved each other. We had a little star-crossed thing going on ourselves. My dad was the only pharmacist in town, and the guy I was dating, Frank, didn't have much, but he charmed me. He wasn't making a lot of money when we met. Had one of those jobs at the auto parts factory, though, a union job, and it's the kind of place where you can work your way up. I was going to get a degree in business. I already had an idea for my baking gig."

I scoot forward in my chair. My dad watches my mom as she talks about this, but he's clearly heard this story before, and it's something they decided jointly not to tell me.

"He stole from me," Mom says. She sighs. "At first it was just little stuff, cash and jewelry, but he got bolder and more brazen over time. It ended up being thousands of dollars, in the end, and I was too blinded by him to even realize it. Long story short, I ended things with him. Your father and I always wanted to protect you from people who might try to take from you. I also wanted you to be the best you could be. I didn't know you would turn into a—well, a bully." She swallows. "That was a shock."

I sit back. I have so many things to say I'm not even sure where to start. "First off," I say, "I'm sorry that happened, but anyone could have stolen from you. He sounds like he just wasn't a good person." I hold up a second finger. "Like I said before, I'll own that I made my bad decisions, but you have yet to truly take responsibility for your part in it. For being, frankly, assholes."

Dad runs his fingers through his thinning hair. His slight frown reminds me of my own for a moment, a familiarity that somehow alarms and soothes me at the same time.

"Okay," he says. "We made mistakes. I was unfair to her, and ugly, and I know that. We've talked about it, and we are sorry for it." He inhales. "But that girl, Kenzie. You don't really know what she's after. Her family really struggles, you know."

I rub my fingers along the bridge of my nose. My anger rises again like a bubbling cauldron.

"Her name is Kendall now," I say. "And that woman is the love of my life. She's better than anyone I've ever met. She's worked tirelessly to get where she is, to get into med school. She shouldn't have had to work that

hard, not in a just world, but she didn't have any social support, so she did what she had to do. And I would marry her today if I could. She broke my heart, and part of it had to do with you, do you know that? She can't stand the way she feels around the two of you. The things you said the night you met her were the catalyst for her ending things. Your view of her, and other women who have to do what they can to survive, is disgusting. You made the woman I adore feel cheap and shallow."

My mom sucks in a breath. "Grant," she breathes.

Someone's put coffee on in the other room, its rich scent traveling to us, and the conversation there has quieted again. I can imagine what their guests are thinking, but I can't see past this moment. This reckoning with everything.

"You aren't listening to me. You never do, not about this, and not about what I want to do with my life, either." I let out a shuddering breath. "It's in part your fault I'm hurting so badly right now. So, forgive me if I'm having trouble with your lukewarm half apologies."

My mom wipes the corner of her eye with one of her fancy napkins. "You love her?"

"She's everything," I say. My voice cracks. "And if this is how you could treat someone I feel that way about, then I'm not sure what kind of relationship I can have with you. If any. And I'm serious about that."

Silence descends on the table. It's like I've dropped a bomb into the middle of our conversation.

Dad is the first to speak. "Your mother and I want you to be in our lives, Son." He peeks at my mom, whose face is ashen. "And I hate we hurt someone who means that much to you. It sounds like we have some more reflection to do."

"Yes. You do." I stand from the table. "And I'm going to go. I'll let you get back to the party."

I walk into the hallway again and wind over to where my grandmother sits on the living room couch. Her veined hand clutches a cup of coffee. I reach over to give her a hug, and she sits her cup down to grasp at me.

"Screw 'em," she says in my ear, and I almost gasp. I've never heard her say anything like that in my life. "I hope you get her back."

I smile. It's the most positive thing anyone has said to me about this whole situation, and I find myself nodding along, as though I might really be able to convince Kendall to give me an actual chance.

It's absurd, though, this thread of hope that winds around my skin and binds itself to me. We were never going to be anything other than temporary. I'll have to take my sad story and sit with it, to be taken out occasionally and examined like a wound, then covered again so it can heal in the dark.



I stop at a driving range on the way out of town. I have a long drive back to Louisville, but my clubs are with me, and it's unusually warm for November, almost seventy degrees today. I need a distraction in the form of hitting a little ball a couple hundred yards.

I pay for a bucket and make my way to a little patch in between the houses and some other golfers. The range here is kind of shit, with patchy grass and a setup better suited to a cow pasture, but it works. I hit a few balls, channeling my aggression into each swing. I twist my torso and the metal hits the ball with a satisfying thwack. Soon my muscles burn and sweat dots my hairline. The cool breeze follows, and I savor the sensation.

I look around. There are a few other people here. A couple at the end catches my eye. A man stands over his golf club, and a short dark-haired woman stands behind him, gripping his hips like she's steadying him. He swings and then wobbles a little. They double over laughing when she almost loses her balance too. Honestly, they're adorable. My heart issues a painful kick.

The man turns, and I catch his profile. And dammit—this is the problem with being at home. You can't go anywhere without seeing someone you know. Kendall's brother faces my direction and catches me staring at him.

I lift my hand in a wave, and he returns the gesture. He holds my gaze for a moment.

Now I have to walk over there, I think. Even though this man hates me. But he knows I've been in touch with his sister lately, and she told me she'd talked to him. I feel like I should clear the air or something.

His shoulders tense when he sees me walking in his direction. It's like a slow-motion murder, what's happening. We can both see the awfulness but can't do anything to stop it.

I lead with an apology when I get close to them. "Sorry to bother you," I say.

"No worries," Blaine says. He's not smiling, exactly, but he's not glaring at me either. He leans on his golf club like it's a cane. I want to tell him he can sit down in his chair if he wants, since this ground is uneven, but I don't want to insult him, and I'm sure he knows his own abilities better than me. "This is my wife, Gloria." He touches her arm. "Gloria, this is Grant. I think you've met his parents before. And his grandmother, I believe."

Ugh. Well that's great. She's not from here, and her only impression of me involves someone who probably looked down their nose at her. At least my grandmother would have been pleasant to her.

"Nice to meet you," I say, nodding. I look at Blaine again. "I just wanted to, uh, apologize to you. For how I treated your family and your sister in high school."

He stares at me for a moment, eyes narrowed.

"That's all. Good to see you," I say, then start to turn.

His voice stops me. "Thanks for saying that."

I pivot back again. "I mean it."

"Yeah. I can tell." He chews on his lip as though considering something. "Kendall must have liked you a lot, I think. Too bad it didn't work out."

My brain feels like it's lifting out of a fog, like there's a ray of light shining on me for a moment. Hope is an awful, tortuous thing. There's something buried under his words, something he's hiding out of loyalty to his sister. He wants me to know she's hurt by what happened, maybe as much as I am, but he doesn't want to tell me things she'd rather keep private.

"I still like her a lot," I say. I clear my throat. "And I miss her."

Gloria's eyes look a little shiny as she stares at me. "That's sweet," she says.

Blaine's head whips over like he has a comment on that, but he doesn't respond.

"Did she say anything else? I sound desperate, I know, but I can't help it.

"No," he says. "She's keeping this pretty close to her chest," Blaine says. "Uncharacteristically, I'd say."

My hope deflates a bit. Maybe she's not pining the way I am, after all.

“I’ll leave you guys to your afternoon,” I say. “But I just wanted you to know. How sorry I am, that is.”

Blaine nods at me, and I go back to my hitting. I put as much power as I can into smacking the ball. What do I do now? Would she still want to talk to me if I tried? Or do I leave this to fate?

It feels like I’m living with a chest wound without her. And if there’s some way, any way, for her to accept me, I’ll take it.

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Joan and I inspect each other before we step out of my apartment door. The temperature has started to dip into winter territory, so we're dressed in layers, but I've tried to jazz things up with a sparkly top. Joan's wearing a more practical sweater.

We're going to a party for some of the incoming med students—the ones who live near enough, that is. I wanted a friend with me for moral support, especially given my fragile emotional state. I don't want to drink too many Palomas and sob to one of my future classmates. Maria was free tonight, and she said she'd go if I really needed her to, but that in actuality she'd rather “carve out one of her kidneys” than go to a party where she didn't know anyone. Graphic, but effective. I won't subject my introverted friend to something that will make her uncomfortable, so luckily Joan ended up being free.

“Are you sure we won't know anyone there?” Joan tucks her hair behind her ear on our way to her car. The full moon highlights her blonde mane in the dark parking lot. “Is this just for other med students?”

“As far as I know, there won't be any faculty there. I do think some of the more senior med students will be around. One of them organized it, actually. Not sure who else they invited.” I open the passenger door to Joan's car. “I hope I'm not, like, the oldest person here.”

“You'll be the coolest person there. That's the important thing.”

I laugh. “Whatever you say.” I stare out my window, up at the night sky.

“I hope this cheers you up,” Joan says. “I’ve been worried about you.”

I turn back to her. We drive through a nice neighborhood with large homes and little lights framing walkways, and I think of Grant’s place back home. I think we gave him way too much power, honestly. Huge homes, wealthy zip codes, are common in the city. He would have been just another reasonably well-off kid here.

“You don’t have to worry about me,” I say. “I’ll be fine.”

I can pick up on her rolling her eyes even in the dark.

“Let me rephrase that,” I say. “I’m still working on accepting help. But I’m glad you care about me.”

She smiles.

We get to the event space, a large bar complex with games and various sections for activities, and walk up to the entrance. I read online that this place has a golf simulation (at which Joan will excel and I will be terrible) and karaoke (which I will enjoy and Joan won’t touch with a ten-foot pole).

Music drifts from speakers mounted in corners. No one’s on the stage yet, a wooden platform on one side of the room. Other rooms boast things like mini-bowling, the golf simulation I read about, and more traditional bar stuff like darts and pool tables. Old signs and Americana accents decorate the black walls, and pendant lights illuminate a long, wooden bar top.

We find the guy who contacted me, one of the older med students, and introduce ourselves. We mingle with some of the other incoming students—all a few years younger than me, as predicted—and I start to actually have fun, something I haven’t been capable of for weeks now. I drink some delicious cocktail made with gin and jalapeño. Once people start taking the stage, Joan urges me to sign up, and I oblige, of course.

Even with the excitement of meeting my new comrades, though, an ache still sits behind my breastbone. I miss Grant. God, I miss him. I want him here with me, at my elbow, whispering encouragement in my ear. I’ve come to a decision, and I’m going to call him as soon as I leave.

My name gets called after about an hour of socializing. Joan nudges me.

“Go get ’em,” she says.

I wind my way through some of the gathered crowd. Nerves flutter in my stomach, a phenomenon that’s never gone away before I get on stage, and I take another sip of my drink to settle myself.

I climb the steps to the little platform. When I turn back to look at Joan, a shocking scene greets me. Time crawls.

Grant. He's here. He speaks urgently with Joan, who listens with intermittent nods. I stare. Are they talking about me?

Of course they are, though. He must be asking for advice.

Something turns over in my brain. My legs freeze. A slice of pain knocks the breath out of me.

It's clear who Grant is now. That's been clear for *months*. It's me who can't let go of my past picture of him. I've been so stubborn I'm getting in the way of my own happiness.

The DJ clears his throat. "Come on up, Kendall."

I startle, then keep walking toward the stage and up the little steps to the platform. Grant locks eyes with me.

He drinks me in, scanning me up and down like he can't get enough of me. I'm doing the same thing. I want to smooth out the piece of blond hair that sticks up on one side. I want to kiss him. His tan coat falls over a pair of dark blue jeans, and I want to wrap myself up in it. He's beautiful, this man, and the few weeks away from him have heightened the impact of him, not just his hotness but also the energy around him. He's a force field drawing me in.

I bring the microphone to my lips. I've chosen a Cranberries song, and though my voice doesn't sound like the lead singer's, it's one of my favorites. I keep looking at Grant as the first notes play.

He doesn't look away, either. I'm serenading him, and despite my earlier assertion about how I don't do that, I can't help pouring my raw emotions into the melancholy lyrics, hoping my intent comes across. My heartache's on display.

My eyes start to well up toward the end, and Grant strides purposefully toward me. He meets me at the bottom of the platform.

"Can we talk?" He edges closer to me.

"I think that's a good idea." My throat stings. I look around. "What brought you here?"

"I knew you'd be here. One of the older med students mentioned it to some of the residents. And I figured this would be a neutral space, better than showing up at your apartment, in case you want to tell me to fuck off."

I laugh, but it's a sad sound. "Grant," I say, "I'm not going to do that. In fact, I was going to call you after this."

His eyes widen, and my heart punches against my ribs. I search for Joan and mouth "are you okay?" at her, but she shoos me away. She's talking to

one of the med students, presumably someone she knows if their gestures are any indication. The crowd swells around her, and with her height, her hair, and her general affability, she's like sunshine come to life. No wonder Lucas loves her.

"Can we go outside for a minute?" I touch the sleeve of Grant's coat. His head snaps down like he can't believe I'm actually touching him.

He follows me out one of the side doors. Given the temperature, no one's out here, so we've got a little alcove to ourselves.

"I want to go first," I tell him. I shiver, and he steps toward me, but thinks better of it and lets his hands hang at his sides. "I miss you." My voice cracks, and dammit, why does that keep happening?

This time he surges forward. My hands loop around him, inside his coat so that I'm enveloped in it like I imagined earlier. I lay my head against his chest.

"I want to try this again. For real," I say.

He leans back. He tips my chin up, but I don't have far to go to be eye level with him. "You sure?"

I nod. "Positive." I bite my lip. "I mean, if you are."

"Kendall," he moans. Our lips find each other. It's shock, comfort, and euphoria all rolled into one, the nerves in my lips singing like they've never been alive until now. Every cell in my body breathes a sigh of relief. He angles his head to deepen the kiss. He's shaking, frantic, trembling as his hands run up and down my arms, squeezing intermittently as though he's reassuring himself I'm real.

He breaks away. "I came to tell you I can't stand my life without you. That I'm yours. I don't know what else I was going to say other than that. I just hoped you'd be receptive." His face softens when he glimpses my pained expression. "I'm serious. I've been a goddamn mess."

"Well"—I touch his lips with my finger, which pinkened with our kissing, and let my hand trail down his collarbone—"I've been the same way." My breath puffs in the cold air. "Did you have a big speech?"

"Yes, but it all went out the window when I saw you. It's like you scramble my brain." He grins. "I thought about singing to you, but Joan confirmed you would hate that."

I shudder. "That was a good call. I don't need you to humiliate yourself for me."

"Who says my voice isn't good?"

My breath turns visible with my huff of laughter. “Even if it is, I have a feeling you would hate being on display like that.”

“True.” He tips forward and hugs me again. His strong arms band around me, and I feel like nothing could ever be wrong as long as we stay like this. “You want to go get something to eat? If you’re ready to leave, that is?”

I tilt back again. “Let me make sure Joan’s okay to drive home solo. I don’t want to just ditch her.” I have a feeling she’ll be enthusiastic about this, but I don’t say that. “And then we’ll get out of here.”



“I know this isn’t the fanciest place in the world,” he says.

“It’s too bad I’m used to such fine dining, then,” I tell him. I smile, but a flash of memory arises, one involving Blaine and I eating leftover hot dogs from a concession stand when he worked at a ballpark early in high school. I’ve never been snobby about food, and I won’t start now. I’m always just happy to have it.

“It’s delicious.” He walks with me to the counter of the late-night diner so we can order. It’s one of those places with the track menu boards and block lettering featuring various fried foods. “So it’s got that going for it.”

We chat about nothing while we wait for our food. Once we have plates in front of us, he gives me a direct stare.

“Are we actually doing this?” he asks.

I take a bite of a hush puppy and look out the window. When I return my gaze to him, he’s waiting for my answer. His fingers grip his fork.

“We are,” I say. “I was being so stubborn. I can’t believe I almost let you go.”

His shoulders drop. The harsh lights of the diner illuminate the dark circles under his eyes.

“You just needed time. And that’s okay.”

“I did,” I say quietly. “I missed you so much. You have no idea.”

It’s not a huge admission—I mean, he knew that, right?—but his face changes, his eyes widening, and he bites his lip like he’s trying to keep himself from smiling. He rubs a hand over his jaw and then he does smile, a broad, open beam that snaps any last piece of resistance I’m hanging onto.

“That’s . . . interesting,” he says mildly, though his eyes crinkle at the corners. I don’t think I’ve ever seen this expression on him—delighted, carefree, and smug all at once.

I’m thinking of throwing a french fry at him, but I smile back instead. “I want to get to know you again. We can reset.”

“All right.” He crunches on a piece of ice from his drink, and for some reason it strikes me as adorable. I’ve got it bad if even his chewing is somehow cute. “So let’s start.” He leans forward, and his eyes sparkle. “I’m going to pose a question you posed to me before. Tell me something I don’t know about you.”

“Hmm.” I tap my foot against the tile floor. “I sang at a friend’s wedding once,” I tell him. His gaze is riveted on me. “Well, more of an acquaintance, really. She was a friend of one of my coworkers at the time. Drove all the way to Pikeville for the wedding. She paid me thirty bucks for singing, which is fine. I don’t do that kind of thing for the money. But then she left her husband three months later, and I get a call from her, asking for her thirty dollars back. I guess she sold her wedding dress and all that, and she was trying to recoup some of her investment.”

“No way.” Grant’s laugh lights me up inside, like there’s actual voltage flowing from him to me. “So what did you do?”

“What else could I do? I gave her the money back. It’s not like I’ve never been in need of thirty bucks.” I spear a piece of his macaroni, and he makes a show of hoarding it for himself. “Your turn.”

“So, we’re going low stakes.” He rubs his chin. “When I was in med school, one of my classmates had an affair with one of our professors. The professor’s wife showed up in class one day and screamed at him. Apparently, my classmate felt guilty and told her. It was a shitshow.”

I nearly spit out my drink. “You call that low stakes? Jesus.”

He shrugs. “It was entertainment for most of us. I felt bad for the guy’s wife, though. Not to mention it was really unethical for him to sleep with a student.”

“He get fired?”

“Well, yeah.” He pushes food around on his plate. “Speaking of, I gave George some hell after he confronted me about us. I think he’ll be leaving it alone now.”

“Yeah?” I smile.

He nods. "Either way, we didn't really do anything wrong. I wasn't your boss. And we've known each other for a long time."

My brows pull together. "There's some power dynamics at play there, I guess."

"Well, as a resident, I feel pretty low in the hierarchy." He leans in toward me and lowers his voice. "I let you have power over me, anyway. If you recall."

My face warms. "You been thinking about that?"

He holds my gaze. "Always."

Wow. I sit back in my chair. The flush from my face has spread throughout my body. I inhale and catch a whiff of Grant's cologne, something kind of peppery.

His expression is so full of lust I can almost feel it on my skin.

"It's hard to have a conversation when you look at me like that."

He chuckles, then blows out a breath and sits back. "I want to do this right. I want to know everything about you." He plants his elbows on the table. The laminate is peeling on the top, and the condiment holder hasn't been changed since the '90s, but it's one of the best damn chicken sandwiches in town. "Tell me something more real then. Honest."

I'm going to let myself be vulnerable here. I owe him that. "I'm independent to the point of it being a character flaw," I say. "Though you already know that. I think part of what scares me with you is the idea of relying on someone else, because I've had so few people in my life I can really lean on. But I've realized I should hang on to any support I can get." I clutch a napkin in my fist, then let it go when I realize how tightly I'm gripping. "I mean, isn't that what got my family into our situation in the first place? This every man for himself attitude? The system failed me. Our community failed me at times."

Grant nods. "You learned not to count on others. I get that."

"I hated accepting help, but I think I'm looking at it all wrong. I think it's okay to need help. To need people." I prop my chin on my fist. "To need you."

Grant's jaw slackens. "I meant what I said. I would do anything for you," he says.

"I believe you." I reach across the table to squeeze his hand. "What about you? Do you have something real to tell me too? I feel like I just poured my heart out."

“You were talking about how people failed you,” he says. “I think my parents failed me in a lot of ways. I know now that our relationship might never be the same. Not to mention the rest of the town. They propped me up because I was good at football, and my parents are prominent members of the community, but no one held me accountable.”

“We’re pretty messed up, the two of us.” I sigh and push my plate away. “I wanted what you had in high school, but maybe I shouldn’t have.” I look out the window, where the cold wind has sent a sign swinging. “I always wanted to take you down a peg.”

“Well, mission accomplished there,” he says quietly.

“I’m sorry for how harsh I’ve been.” Somewhere along the way, I stopped trying to mess with him and started to just enjoy my time with him.

He waves a hand in the air. “Oh, I deserved it. I know that.”

“Not anymore you don’t. You’re a good person now, Grant.” His eyes shine a bit as I talk. “Plus, it’s hard to bring you down too much. You’re ridiculously hot. And good at everything. It’s fucking annoying.”

“I’m not good at everything.”

“Name one thing you’re bad at.” I aim a challenging stare in his direction.

“I’m not very creative. Anything involving arts, music, writing—I’m not good at that stuff.” He starts ticking off on his fingers. “Going with the flow. Change. Understanding why anyone wants to live in our hometown for the rest of their lives.”

I laugh.

“It’s you who is good at everything,” he says.

“You clearly haven’t seen me play basketball.” I gesture to my body, and he tracks it with his gaze. The heat in his eyes makes all my nerve endings sing. “I got the height without the basketball talent. It’s unfair.” I watch him as he looks down at the table, as though he has to pull his attention away from me with monumental effort. “And I’m compassionate, but sometimes I think I’m too direct to be nurturing. My mouth has gotten me in trouble a lot in my life.” My voice lowers in volume. “It’s part of why I’m undecided on kids.”

He crosses his ankle over his opposite knee and leans to the side. The movement pulls his sweater taut over the muscles in his chest, and I stare him. Everything he does, all his little mannerisms, even the sound of his voice, draws me in.

“There’s nothing wrong with being undecided,” he says.

“What about you?” I gulp. “You dead set on kids?”

He shakes his head. “Nah. I’m undecided too.” He smiles. “Something I’ll talk about with my future wife, I guess.”

My future wife. My heart thumps. The way we look at each other now is intense. I can tell we’re both thinking about it, about forever, and it doesn’t scare me at all.

I glance out the window. It’s fully dark, though the parking lot is illuminated by streetlights and the glow from other businesses around.

“Should we get going?”

“I like hearing you say ‘we.’” Grant’s ears turn a little pink. “Let’s go.”

We walk to his car together. Before I walk to the passenger side, he cages me against the side of the car and plants his arms on either side of me. He leans forward and captures my lips, pouring every emotion of the last few weeks into this connection between us, pressing against me like he can’t bear to let an inch of space between us.

“You promise this is real?” he murmurs against my lips.

“It’s real,” I tell him.



Over the next few weeks, we go on more dates, meeting for dinner, coffee, whatever we have time for. His schedule is absolutely ridiculous, but he seems to be making time for me. My schedule, for that matter, is busy with work and friends, but residents are on a whole other level when it comes to their time.

He sends me flowers, and texts me throughout the day. I call him on my way home sometimes. We share jokes and little stories about our lives. It’s real romance, in a way, and I feel wooed for the first time in my life.

I message him on Sunday afternoon. A barren tree limb taps against my bedroom window with the wind as I sit at my desk.

ME

I know you’re at the hospital. I’m just saying hi.

ME

If I texted you every minute today until you are able to respond, would that bother you?

ME

What if showed up there and followed behind you?

I giggle to myself, imagining the lazy smile that will spread on his face when he reads what I've sent him. I lay the phone facedown so I'm not tempted to stare at our message thread, but I'm surprised when it buzzes a few minutes later.

GRANT

Trust me, I would much, much rather be with you right now.

My cheeks ache with my grin. I suck in a deep breath.

ME

You want to get together later this week? When you have some time, I mean.

GRANT

Actually, I have plans for us Saturday. I have a whole day off work.

ME

It's a date.

He picks me up Saturday afternoon, but he hasn't told me where we're going. He said I should wear clothes I "don't mind getting messy." I'm nervous, but I follow his instructions. I'm wearing leggings and an old sweatshirt, plus a heavy coat I've thrown over it. The cold air still seeps in through my layers as I walk to his car. He's got his heat blasting when I settle into the passenger seat.

"I wasn't quite ready for this shift," I tell him. "It's frigid out there."

"We're going somewhere indoors," he says. "I planned ahead."

"Can I have a hint?"

“I’m pretty sure it will be right up your alley.” He glances at me. “I know you don’t like surprises, so I’ll tell you if you really want. I thought it might be fun if you didn’t know though.”

I wave a hand. “This sort of surprise is fun. I don’t like being caught off guard with important things is what I meant. Like if you tell me you’re secretly an assassin, I’m going to be upset.”

“If I were an assassin, I would have kept you in the loop. I promise.”

“Might be a bad idea to tell me, now I think about it,” I say. “I’m a gossipy harlot.”

“Noted. Though for the record, I’m not an assassin.”

“Well, damn.” I smile at him. “That could have been fun.”

Twenty minutes later we pull into a parking lot. The place has the word “clay” in the name, and my heart rate kicks up a notch.

“Ooh, pottery! I’ve never done this.” I beam at him, and he sits up straight at my attention. “You were right, though. I love this kind of stuff.”

Despite the cold, his hand burns at the small of my back. I can feel it through the layers of clothing. He shifts closer to me.

It’s a special date-night class and we’re with a few other couples. There’s a woman in a neon blue apron ready to lead us back. She’s got a shock of bright red hair and green-framed glasses, and the overall effect reminds me of a fun, quirky elementary school teacher.

We follow her into little room with metal shelving. There’s a faint earthy smell in the air, and a tarp covering the floor. Grant and I seat ourselves at pottery wheels next to each other. We each get aprons, and as he’s tying mine for me, his fingers brush along the nape of my neck. I shiver.

We each get mounds of clay, and she shows us how to use the wheel, which is operated by a pedal at the bottom, and how to move and shape it. We mix water with the clay to help mold it, and as it spins, I can see why we’re wearing shabby clothes. Mud squishes through my fingers as I round the clay. Droplets of water and specks of brown fly off. The instructor has her own wheel and she directs us.

“Good thing I didn’t wear my new dress,” I say in a low murmur.

“Yeah? You get something new this week?” He looks at me. The way he’s caressing his clay with his hands has me studying his fingers.

“A sweaterdress. Hot pink, my favorite.” I lift my eyebrows a few times. “I’ll try it on for you later.”

He falters a bit at that. The wheel he's working on stops and then starts again while his eyes are on me. "Yeah?"

I hold his stare. The other couples around us chat and laugh, but I can only see Grant now. When the instructor comes around, I can barely tear my eyes from him.

"You can shape the edges of the bowl by drawing it up between your fingers," she says. I follow her instructions, but my skin's hot and my breath uneven. "Great job!" She beams at me, and I finally rip my gaze from Grant.

"You should get behind me," I say to him as I shape the edges of my bowl. "We could have a Patrick Swayze and Demi Moore moment."

He laughs. His fingers glide over his own clay, fashioning a misshapen bowl while he tries to adjust it so that it's straight. "I'm sorry, what?"

My mouth drops open. "You've never seen Ghost?"

He shakes his head. "Sorry."

"God." I groan. "That's one of the best scenes in all of cinema."

"It was before my time."

"It doesn't matter," I say. "That's the fun thing about movies. They last forever. And we're watching it together."

"All right. I look forward to it." He chuckles. "You've got to let me pick a movie too, then. Something with monsters and smashing things."

"Deal. And you underestimate my propensity for monsters smashing things, I'm afraid. I love that shit."

We laugh together, and I laugh even harder when I smash one side of my bowl in. I'm having a great time with him. I can see us doing this for a long time, a series of little moments stitched together into something incredible, stolen laughter between our busy jobs.

We finish our projects, which still have to be fired or baked or whatever happens to harden them. We browse the store for a bit, and I end up with two painted coffee mugs and a heart-shaped bowl.

"I can't leave without buying something."

"Obviously." Grant's smile is indulgent.

He drives me home, and I'm fidgeting in the seat next to him. We chat, and I try to work up the courage to say what I need to say.

He walks me to my door.

"You want to come in?"

"Of course." He follows me into my living room.

“Have a seat.” I gesture to my couch.

He looks up at me. “Aren’t you going to sit, too? You look like you’re going to have a heart attack.” His brow furrows. “Are you okay?”

“Grant,” I say. I wring my hands together. “I need to say something.”

“Okay.” His lips compress. He looks like he’s waiting for terrible news.

“I’m in love with you,” I blurt out.

His face shifts to wide-eyed shock. He’s out of his seat before I’m finished talking. He grasps my hands.

“You’re kind,” I say. “Like really, truly kind now. It’s the best kind of change. And I want you all the time.” I let him put his arms around me, and my chin finds his shoulder. “I know I’ve yanked you around, but I need you to know how I feel now.” My heart gallops.

“Kendall.” He steps toward me and cups my cheek with his hand. “I’m so fucking happy to hear you say that.”

Then he leans toward me and kisses me. It’s achingly tender, like we might break this precious thing between us, and fierce at the same time. His kisses turn feverish.

“I’m so in love with you. In case that wasn’t clear.” His intense stare melts me from the inside out. “This is it for me. I swear. I love everything about you. I want to wake up next to you. To watch you study for your med school classes. To see you every day.”

I take a shaky breath. “And your family?”

“Fuck them.” He chuckles. “They can come to terms with it, or they can just not see us. It’s their choice.”

My shoulders drop. I hadn’t realized how nervous I’d been about that until he reassured me.

“And what about when I’m in med school? And residency? I won’t get an in-state one like you did. How are we going to navigate that?”

He shrugs. His hands are still tracing a path down my arms. “You’ll be in med school here for a while. And I’ll get a job wherever you land for residency. We’ll be fine. I’ll go where you are.”

“Just like that, huh? Like it’s that easy?”

“Most cities need orthopedic surgeons. We’ll make it work.”

“It’s going to be wild. With our schedules.”

“I will take every sliver of time I can get with you. You’ll be sick of me before too long.”

“Grant.” I bury my face in his chest. His arms come around me. “This is absurd, isn’t it? After our history?”

He presses his cheek to my hair. “Absurd and amazing.”

My voice comes out muffled. “Whoever thought you’d end up with a girl from home?”

“Not me.” He pulls back and tips my chin up to look at me. “But now it’s happened, I wouldn’t want it any other way. I’m out of my mind over you.”

“I can’t believe how I feel right now,” I say. “Like I’ve been hit by a truck.”

“In a good way?” He arches an eyebrow.

“The best way.”

Then I lean in to kiss him again. We don’t leave that spot for a long time.

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EPILOGUE

KENDALL: EIGHT YEARS LATER

“You ready for tomorrow?”

“Yes. But also, no,” I tell Grant. I smooth my hands over my pajama pants. I’m a real doctor now, no longer a resident, and I start my first day at my job tomorrow, as an OB-GYN.

We’ve moved back from Arizona, where I did my residency. And though we enjoyed our time there, I’m happy to be back home. We came back to Kentucky, and Grant got a job at the hospital where he did his own residency. We married before I started mine, a few years ago, in a quiet ceremony followed by a big celebration with our friends and family members. His parents have come around, though we’re still not super close with them. It’s the same for my dad, but I’m happy we get to choose who we want in our lives. Things do change, including my body—sometimes I’m bigger, sometimes I’m smaller—and Grant loves me through it.

We’re still undecided on the question of children, but I’m okay with that. I’m thirty-six, and I’ve got time. I have my nephew, Silas, to dote on. I’d like to focus on charitable opportunities. I’m hoping I can make that a big part of my career. I’d also like to dismantle all the problems with women’s health and maternal inequities, but hey, one thing at a time.

“You’re going to be great,” Grant says. I walk in front of him on the couch and he pulls me into his lap. I land with a grunt.

“I hope so.” I turn and frame his face with my hands. “Look at us. Kicking ass and doing surgeries. Being the coolest couple I know.”

He circles my wrist with his fingers. He’s got a few little lines fanning out around his eyes now and I love how he looks with them, like he’s had

years of smiling with me and it shows. "I have something for you." He shifts under me.

I glance down. "Is it your dick? Because I gotta be honest, I can get that any time."

He laughs. "Here. I'll show you."

I follow him into our bedroom, where he's got a little giftbag sitting there. I pull out the tissue paper and find a little gift card.

"A recording studio?" My eyes return to his face.

He's blushing a little. "A gift card for a recording studio. To do a song or two. In case you decide you hate being a doctor. But also, I just thought you might enjoy it." He fidgets with the hem of his shirt. "I wanted you to know that I'll love you no matter what you do."

"Grant." I step into him. "I love it."

His shoulders sag. "I thought you would, but I wasn't sure. There's more in there."

"Ooh. This is exciting." I dig around in the bag and pull out a little jewelry box. When I pull off the lid, a pair of diamond-studded earrings catches the light. I inspect them, smiling as I do so. I'm definitely a diamonds-are-a-girls-best-friend kind of gal. "These are gorgeous. Thank you." I hug him to me and we sway together.

"I love you, Dr. Hodges," he says.

"I love you too, Dr. Wyndham." I smile at him, and all is right in the world.

Want a bonus spicy scene featuring Kendall and Grant? Click [here](#)!

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Some books are easy to write, and some are like pushing a barrel full of lead up a steep hill while dodging violent attacks.

This book, thankfully, came easy. I don't know if it's because I have things in common with the heroine, or because this story has been simmering in my brain for so long, but I wrote it fast and I didn't deviate a whole lot from my original storyline.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Liliana Woodland writes sweet and steamy contemporary romance. She lives in Kentucky with her husband and children. She enjoys hanging with her friends and family, and secretly wishing she could be home with whatever book she's currently reading.

For updates, check out my newsletter!

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