







# Daddy's Double Surprise

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**Description:** "MEDICAL MOGUL'S DEADLY SCANDAL: Billionaire Doctor Accused in Patient Deaths!"

That headline exposed the man I love—and the father of my unborn child.

I didn't mean to be that woman.

Falling for my father's best friend.

Secretly pregnant by the billionaire doctor who swore he'd never have another child.

Dr. Carter Price.

Pharma heir. Medical rebel.

Seventeen years older and dangerously irresistible.

His touch should come with a hazard label.

Returning home was supposed to simplify my life.

Instead, my father's interference pushed me straight into Carter's forbidden arms.

One reckless confession destroyed every boundary between us.

Now, my best friend's death is tied to Carter's empire.

My father's desperate to match me with someone "suitable."

And those secrets I'm hiding?

They're multiplying faster than my morning sickness.

Everything is on the line.

My freedom.

My reputation.

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## SUNNY

It was sad the way the clouds poured out their tears over the cemetery as we listened to the priest recite his prayer. Rain pattered lightly on the tent erected over Kira's gravesite. Her parents, Jim and Shirley, sat in metal folding chairs with tissues in hand. He had his arm around her; her head was nuzzled into the crook of his neck as she sobbed.

The day was hard for everyone, including me, but not as devastating as it was for Kira's parents. My heart ached just thinking of all the things they would never get to experience with her. Things she would never experience for herself now. And it was sadly very fitting how even the sky wept today. Kira would have called it poetic. I called it grief. Like Mother Nature knew it wasn't supposed to be this way. A twenty-seven-year-old isn't supposed to precede her parents in death.

"And blessed be the Lord our God, who giveth and taketh away. Amen," the priest said, and I watched his head rise. He'd probably done a million of these things, maybe even buried young children, infants, or their mothers.

I couldn't look at him. My eyes traced up across the field full of headstones where the light rain seemed to kiss the earth gently. I wished it wouldn't. I wished it would rage and storm and pound the earth, demanding justice for my friend, for the life she'd never live now. She was here seven days ago, and then she was gone. Now I'm alone and lost.

“Honey, let’s go talk to the Bakers.” Mom nudged me. She didn’t have to come, neither did Dad, but they had.

When I found Kira lying on our bathroom floor cold and pale, I thought she’d just passed out. She wasn’t breathing well, had blue lips. We rushed her to the hospital and hours later she was gone, stolen from us all. And now, back home in LA, not our home—not Tampa where Kira and I started our life together with dreams of chasing the stars—I let my parents usher me around, herding me like a lost sheep.

Dad stood beside me, a stalwart of rigid strength. I leaned on him physically, but emotionally I was elsewhere, searching for the single thread of light in the clouds that might shine on my heart and make this all a bad dream. I wanted to wake up and make it vanish, the way a nightmare fades slowly as you rub your eyes and blink yourself awake.

“Jim, I’m here if you need me,” Dad said, thrusting out his hand. Kira’s father shook it but said nothing.

“Oh, Shirley,” Mom cooed, wrapping the older woman up in her arms. Kira’s parents were older than Mom and Dad, got a later start in life with their family. I guessed in their sixties at least, while Mom and Dad were just breaking fifty open. Lots of life ahead for us all, life that seemed to march forward without my consent. It should stop. It should pause and sigh, just like me, but it wouldn’t.

That was the hardest part of it all. That life would keep moving on for everyone here, while Kira lay cold in a box, every one of her dreams as silent as her.

I felt arms around me and leaned into them. Shirley smelled like the rain and a pungent perfume I knew I’d smelled before, maybe Kira borrowed it. I wasn’t close with her parents, though I did spend a lot of time at their house growing up. I always said that Kira and I were like sisters, and I meant it. My real sister, Luna, always got

angry, but she knew it was true too. Luna was my polar opposite, while Kira and I might as well have been fraternal twins, separated at birth.

“Oh, Sunny, you come by anytime. Please...We miss you so much. We can talk about her...help you too.” Shirley’s offer was sweet, but I doubted I’d swing by. My heart was so broken over this, and I’d only drag them down. They were the ones who should have been hurting this badly, not me. I was just the best friend.

I nodded and swiped at my eyes. “I will,” I promised, but it was empty.

After a few minutes of attempting to comfort the Bakers, Dad and Mom dragged me away. I didn’t use the umbrella I brought. It felt good to let the stinging rain prick my cheeks and arms. At least I was alive, feeling this. Kira would tell me to dance, to unleash myself and twirl and be free. She’d say something like, “Race you to the car,” and bolt off in her Keds and skinny jeans, and I’d be laughing and winded as I chased after her.

Today I felt like slogging through the puddles, letting the wind whip across my skin and toss my hair. I wanted the storm to pound into me, wake me up, drown me, or let me die. So many emotions drenched me like the rain. I didn’t know how or when it would pass, or what I’d do when it did.

I climbed into the back seat of my father’s black sedan. He had a driver to chauffeur him around most days, but today he decided to drive us. There’s just something about death that makes a person feel out of control and helpless. I was certain that was the reason Dad wanted to drive—to feel in control. He didn’t lose a child, but it hit close to home. I was the same age. I lived with her. It could’ve been me.

“Dear,” Mom said as she folded the visor in front of her down. Her eyes met mine in the reflection of the lit mirror there.

“Hm,” I grunted, then turned away. My eyes studied each headstone as Dad drove us out of the cemetery, then I fell into a daze of blurred cars and buildings when we exited.

“Honey, I wish you would move home now. You’ll be so lonely there.” Mom’s pleading hadn’t sunken in yet. I’d been in a daze since finding Kira. They gave me sleeping pills and anxiety medicine, but I was still having a hard time sleeping. Nightmares kept me up. I didn’t want to live in that place alone, but how could I leave the memories we had there?

“I don’t know,” I mumbled. I had moved to Tampa with Kira right after high school to get away from Dad and how controlling he was back then, which I was sure hadn’t changed. I felt his presence more than saw him, and I knew he was going to weigh in. For the most part, Mom had kept this particular request between us, but I knew Dad thought it too. He never wanted me to leave to begin with.

“Soleil, your mother is right. Listen, I’ll pay your rent in Tampa, let you decide. You stay with us for a few weeks or even months. You’re too upset to try to take on all that responsibility on your own.” His words sounded kind, but I wasn’t new to it. Dad loved to corner me and force me to do things his way. He was good at it too, trying to make me conform to his desires by manipulating me into thinking it was the best thing for me.

Tampa had been the opposite of what he wanted, but I believed it was the best thing to ever happen to me. I got my own feet, learned my own voice. Now I was strong and independent, but maybe he was right. Maybe I needed my mom around me for a while.

“Yeah, okay,” I mumbled, not even trying to resist him. The way I felt right now, it was pointless. I didn’t want to travel. Sitting on a plane that long and finding a cab back to the apartment sounded worse than that marathon I ran last summer.

“And I’ll talk to a friend of mine. He’s a good man. He can get you a job while you’re here. You’ll feel better if you just jump into a routine.” Dad’s eyes flicked to meet mine in the rearview mirror, and I averted my gaze. The thought of working right now made me want to jump out of this moving vehicle, but maybe he was right.

What else would I do all day, every day? If I just sat around stewing on my feelings I would end up more miserable and probably very depressed. I nodded at him and hugged my wet arms over my middle, letting my eyes unfocus as I stared out the window again.

I would take a few weeks to reset, and then I’d decide if I wanted to go back to Tampa. After what happened with Chad, I had nothing else tying me there. That relationship was gone. Kira was gone, and more than anything I just wanted to be at peace. I craved it more than anything.

“You’ll see, dear, it will be good for you.” Mom tried to smile at me, but it was a sad smile, smudged mascara, damp hair.

I let my head loll to the side and rest on the window. I had a lot of hard decisions to make now and no energy to make a single one of them. I was grateful for my father’s offer to pay the rent in Tampa. If I did end up going back, which was more likely than not, I would need it. And since I wasn’t bringing in any money as long as I was away from work there, I appreciated his offer of talking to his friend too. Maybe Dad was human after all, and maybe being home would be different. I wasn’t holding my breath, but a girl could dream.



### CARTER

I parked a block away after circling a few times, realizing Rick's party had drawn quite the crowd. When we talked last week, he told me his daughter was home from Tampa and needed a job here in town, that he'd be hosting a welcome home party for her to help shake some blues she'd been feeling. I didn't ask many questions. I was grateful to have another competent adult helping out around the clinic, and I owed Rick a few favors anyway.

This afternoon was about meeting her and hearing her qualifications, perhaps getting to know her a bit. I had no idea what to expect, but if she was like her father, I knew my clinic would be in good hands, even if she turned out to be nothing more than a receptionist or nurse's aide.

I walked across the carefully manicured lawn, past the topiary and birdbath. The home had fantastic curb appeal, but most homes in Malibu did. The monolithic design was interesting. The entire house appeared to be carved from one single stone, and if the winding sidewalk that tucked behind a green wall wasn't so obvious, I'd have been lost at finding the front door.

Just the land had to cost more than my entire property and home, but I wasn't intimidated by it. On the contrary, it felt a bit off-putting, reminding me of my childhood and growing up with so much money around me, it had replaced affection and intimacy as the primary way my father interacted with me.

I rounded the corner, tucking my keys into the pocket of my tan slacks, and saw the ivory-colored door. Music vibrated the walls, floating out to give me a hint of what lay on the other side of the door, and I reached to press the bell. The door burst open in a blast of energy, and two young boys dressed for the pool, wearing snorkels and laughing loudly, raced past me. They left dark splotches on the cement as they went, and I chuckled.

“Carter, so good to have you,” Rick said. I turned back to the door to see his broad shoulders fill the doorway. His hand stretched out toward me and I took it, gripping it firmly in a warm handshake.

“Wouldn’t miss it, Rick.” I followed him into the foyer of the home which was no less stunning on the inside. Marble floors, large chandeliers with ultra-modern aesthetics. The home was a masterpiece.

“Soleil is around somewhere, but let me get you a drink first.” Rick gestured past the modern living room with rigid, brightly colored furniture to the far side of the room, divided from the clunky sofa and end tables by an island. The top made of jade, it anchored both spaces, creating a place to gather and talk—which was exactly what people were doing. A lot of them.

I recognized a few faces from previous events Rick and Melanie had hosted, while some of them still remained a mystery. Now approaching retirement, Rick held more gatherings, dinners, backyard barbeques, and even charity events than any person I knew. I always assumed it was to help Melanie deal with her loneliness as they aged and friends moved in and out of their lives. I was too focused on helping people to live the socialite life, but I didn’t mind a good party now and then.

While Rick found a bottle of rum and whipped up a piña colada for me, I let my eyes scan the crowd gathered in his open-concept home. Every time I was around Rick, he tried to set me up. He told me a man my age should have a woman to soften his

edges, but I never did much more than go on a single date with the ones he pushed my way. After the things I'd been through, I wasn't ready for anything serious. I wondered which one of the bronzed beauties sipping alcohol, dressed in a sundress or a bikini, was the one he invited for me. It was sort of a ritual at this point.

"Here ya go," he said cheerfully, handing me the large, broad-rimmed glass with creamy yellow froth. I accepted it and sipped it immediately.

"Soleil—" I said, nearly choking on my drink. The bits of pineapple pulp stuck in my throat. I chuckled, and Rick picked up where I left off.

"She's around here. I saw her with a daiquiri somewhere." He shook his head and sighed as he sipped from a beer bottle. "Came home a bit upset by a few things—I'll let her explain if she wants to share. I'm worried about her, Carter. She needs to be grounded right now and here in LA is the best place. I'm really grateful for you agreeing to take her in. She needs a firm hand."

My mind pictured a wild child, hell-bent on rebelling and making her father's life miserable, but I knew Soleil was no child. Based on things Rick had told me in the past, she was probably around twenty-seven or twenty-eight years old. More than old enough for Rick to stop worrying about her like this, but it was the way he handled things.

"Don't worry, buddy. I'll have your back. I'm sure she's the poster child for hard work ethic and punctuality if she's anything like you." Stroking Rick's ego was also another way to help him. I'd learned a few years back when we met at that charity golf event that he was a prideful man. But he was also a good man, and a good friend.

"It's just that?—"

"Rick!" I heard, and I recognized the voice as Melanie instantly. His head jerked to

the side and we both turned to see her walking down the hallway from the back door. Even in the dim light with the sun creating a silhouette of her aging form, Melanie was gorgeous. Rick was a lucky man.

“Yeah?” he called, scowling.

“Jeb is having a hard time with the grill. Can you come help?” She steeped her fingers under her chin and tilted her head slightly as she smiled at him. Then she winked at me as he ran a hand across his comb-over and balding head.

“Yeah, I’ll come.” Rick glanced at me and said, “Just hang out a bit. When I see Soleil, I’ll find you and introduce the two of you.”

I laughed as Melanie dragged her husband away, then meandered with my drink in hand through the lower level of the house. Two living rooms, a formal dining area with a breakfast nook, two powder rooms, a laundry area, and finally a game room—all decorated in very modern lines and colors.

The noise level in the game room was off the charts. I discovered it was the source of the thumping music, which barely overpowered the shouts of several younger adults engaged in a drinking game. Their volume was what drew me in, but what kept me there hovering at the door was the curvy, shapely form of a buxom beauty who wore a skimpy, bright-red, string bikini—over which she had a white crocheted cover-up.

She tossed her curly hair over her shoulder and looked back at me as a few other women around the table fixed their eyes on me. She was gorgeous—full ruby lips, dark hazel eyes. If I didn’t know Rick so well, I’d have sworn he’d been hiding her from me all this time. Surely this was the woman he’d arranged to introduce me to once our business of meeting with Soleil was finished and the real party set in.

She made my dick twitch just thinking of how incredible her lips would feel wrapped

around it. But I knew as well as anyone else, beauty was only skin-deep, that the real treasure was always found in a woman's soul. While Rick was excellent at picking good-looking women, he failed to find ones who stimulated me intellectually most times, and after the loss I'd suffered, any woman I plowed forward with would have to be incredibly special. I wouldn't pass judgment on this particular beauty, but it would take a miracle to find someone to break the curse over my heart.

"Hey," she said, wiggling her fingers. She batted her thick, dark eyelashes at me and bobbed a shoulder. "Wanna play?"

"Nah," I shouted over the din of music and laughter. I held up my glass that was now half empty and grinned at her. "Gotta pace myself."

The way she strolled toward me, abdicating her apparent role at the head of the table, looked more like a serpent closing in on prey. Her curves swayed and caught my eye—a little on the thick side, but just the way I liked my women. I liked something to get my hands on, and this woman had that *je ne sais quoi*. Her eyes devoured me as her lips clung to the hurricane glass in her hand.

"I'm Sunny," she said loudly, thrusting her hand out.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:40 am*

“Carter...” I shook her hand while I studied her curves. Sunny, you’re a bombshell, I wanted to say, and while I was usually very articulate and able to be bold, the way she approached me had me taking a back seat this time. Her body language wasn’t overly aggressive, but it was suggestive. She found me attractive, and she was letting me know it by the way she moved.

“I’m glad to meet you, Carter.” She nodded her head at the door and passed me, and I followed into the hallway. It wasn’t that much quieter in the hall, but the twelve eyes staring at us lost their power the instant we were tucked into the darker space. “So loud in there,” she breathed, then she sipped her drink again.

She smelled like coconut and butter rum. The way her sun-kissed skin glistened, I assumed she’d been sunbathing, coated in oil and dripping with sweat earlier today. I couldn’t take my eyes off of her. It wasn’t like me to be so attracted to someone so instantly that I’d consider devouring them on the spot, but Sunny had my attention.

My eyes trailed over her curves, only barely masked by the cover-up. I wanted to put my hands on them, taste every inch of her. She had my heart racing. “So, Sunny, are you enjoying the party?” I leaned closer as I spoke so I didn’t have to shout. A cluster of twenty-somethings passed by us, nudging me even closer to her. She didn’t seem to mind, and she didn’t back away.

“Well, I was sort of bored...until I saw you.” Sunny reached up and twirled a curl around her finger, and I smelled her breath—heavy with alcohol. I noticed her dilated pupils, the way her eyes looked glassy. Sunny was moderately drunk, maybe not enough to be considered illegal, but definitely enough that she shouldn’t be driving.

“Yeah? You like something you’ve seen about me?” I grinned at her as I took the final sip of my drink, and she snickered and smirked. As far as setups went, Rick had done his homework this time. I knew this was the woman he invited just for me, and based on how she was coming on to me so strongly, I figured he might have clued her in on the fact that it’d been a while since I was with a woman.

“I mean, have you seen the other guys here?” Again with the batting eyelashes. Rick really knew how to pick them. Sunny was hot and flirty, and not a bit shy about any of it.

“I haven’t looked at any of the men, no. I noticed a few pretty girls, but...” I left my words hanging in the air and she sighed, still twirling her finger in her hair.

“But?” Her eyebrows rose slowly; she took her last sip.

“But when the prettiest girl in the room looks at you, you sort of take notice.” My body was hot; I loosened my collar, grateful I hadn’t worn a tie today. Rick was off somewhere helping his buddy on the grill. Soleil, wherever she was, could wait. If the woman in front of me was this bold, I could afford to let myself indulge in the attention.

“You think I’m pretty?” she asked, and the smile on her lips made my pulse jump.

“Pretty doesn’t begin to describe it.” I lifted my arm and leaned on the wall over her while her head tilted farther to the side. This had all the makings of a great little fling, something to help me cut loose a little, maybe something more. I’d never just use her—women deserved to be cherished—but everyone needed a little nonsense in their life now and then.

She took another sip from her drink, her eyes never leaving mine, a sly grin tugging at her lips. She was clearly enjoying this, and I couldn’t blame her—there was

something magnetic about the way she carried herself, even if she was a little drunk.

“So, Carter,” she said, her voice a little quieter now, but still playful, “what brings you to a party like this? You look like someone who doesn’t exactly need to be here.”

I smiled, leaning back against the wall casually. “I guess you could say I’m here for the...ambiance.” I shrugged, then gestured vaguely around the room. “The music. The drinks. The people.”

She raised an eyebrow, clearly intrigued. “Uh-huh. So you’re just here for thevibe, huh? Seems like a pretty convenient way to avoid any awkward conversations.”

I chuckled, enjoying the playful push-and-pull between us. “Something like that. But hey, I’m not opposed to a little conversation...especially when it’s good company.”

She smiled wide, her eyes lighting up as she took another sip. “Good company, huh? And what makes for good company in your book?”

I let my gaze linger on her a little longer than necessary, feeling the chemistry between us. “Someone who knows how to have fun without taking themselves too seriously. Someone who can enjoy the moment.” I paused, my tone teasing. “And someone who’s not afraid to let loose a little.”

Sunny’s eyes twinkled. She set her drink down on the counter beside us and took a small step closer. “Well, I’m definitely not someone who takes things too seriously. In fact,” she leaned in just a bit more, “I think I’m ready to...let loose.”

I smiled, intrigued. “Oh yeah? How do you plan on doing that?”

She grinned, a little mischievous now. “Ever done something completely spontaneous just to break free of all the tension? Something totally wild?”



I raised an eyebrow, the corner of my mouth twitching upward. “Like what? What are we talking about here?” I started to get a hesitant feeling in my gut, but I didn’t draw back.

Her fingers brushed against my arm as she took another step closer, her voice dropping to a low whisper. “Something...uncharacteristic. Something a little reckless. Just to feel alive. Have you ever done anything like that?”

I took a breath, caught off guard by how the words she was saying made my pulse quicken. There was a challenge in her eyes, but also something else—something raw and hungry.

I leaned in slightly, meeting her gaze with a grin. “I’ve been known to have my wild moments.”

Sunny’s lips curved into a sly smile as she bit her lower lip. “Maybe I’m craving it. Maybe I’m looking for someone who can show me what it feels like to do something I’ve never done before.”

The air between us felt charged, like everything around us had faded into the background. She was leaning into me now, her body just inches away from mine, and I could tell she was on the edge of making a decision. A decision I wasn’t about to stop her from making, though my better judgment was telling me to put the brakes on.

“What do you have in mind?” Of all the times Rick set me up to go out with a woman, he had never once found one this daring or impulsive; not once was there a woman who seduced me within moments of meeting.

“Ever had sex with a complete stranger?” she asked, trailing her fingers down my chest. I gritted my teeth and held back a grunt of arousal as those same fingers slid

down over my crotch and cupped my hard dick. This woman was serious, and it didn't appear she'd be happy taking no for an answer.

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I stood there, my mind a mess of conflicting thoughts. She was right there, so close, the way she looked at me, so eager, so sure of what she wanted. God, I wanted her too—there was no denying that. But something in the back of my head kept warning me. She was drunk, and I wasn't some guy who just took advantage of a situation like this.

I wasn't a predator. I'd known her for all of ten minutes, and here I was, already on the edge, torn between what felt like a perfect, dangerous opportunity and what I knew was the smarter, more respectful choice. I was at a friend's house, a little too far from the line I should've been walking. But I couldn't seem to push her away—not when she was looking at me like that, her breath warm and tempting.

Without saying another word, she took my hand in hers, the warmth of her skin sending a sizzle of arousal through me. Her fingers were soft, but firm in their grip, guiding me down the hall toward a quieter part of the house.

3

SUNNY

My head spun and twirled as I walked. The dangerously hot man whose hand I held firmly in mine followed along behind me. I stole quick glances at his face every few strides. My cheeks were flaming hot, my core pulsing with arousal. I got horny every time I drank, so that part wasn't new, but throwing myself at a perfectly respectable man seemed extreme, but I was ready to feel alive again.

For a week, I'd done nothing but lie in bed and stare at a wall. Without Kira, I had no

life, no friends around here to hang out with, no job to keep me preoccupied and distracted. And so when Dad said “party” I knew immediately I would get wasted and have fun. I just didn’t assume there would be a chance for this.

“Sunny, do you think this is a good idea?” Carter asked, and I stole another quick glance. He was cute, acting hesitant and shy. But I felt his dick. It was rock-hard. He wanted me, or maybe he was just that turned on by my mostly naked body in this bikini, which boosted my ego a bit.

“Oh, I think this is the best idea.” I turned and started walking backward, inching down the hallway away from the bustle of activity. When Dad threw parties like this, no place was sacred except the bedrooms, and once I even walked in on a couple making out in my bed.

Today was no different. Carter apologized to a few people standing at the foot of the stairs when I bumped into them and giggled. Then I let go of his hand and started up the steps, making sure to sway my hips in an exaggerated fashion so he’d have no choice but to notice the thong riding up my crack. I knew my butt looked amazing in this suit; it was why I picked it.

“Sunny,” he said again, and when I turned to look at him, I noticed he had a lost puppy-dog look on his face as he watched the crowd of folks downstairs growing smaller with every step we ascended.

“Live a little...” I winked and took his hand again, well aware of how drunk I was. It was a wonder he could even understand me. I never even tried to pace myself. Dad lectured me earlier, told me I was spiraling, that I needed to get a grip. Maybe I was spiraling. Maybe I liked it.

When we were safely tucked away in my room, door locked behind us, I pulled the cover-up off and tossed it to the floor. Carter’s eyes were wide with lust, hungrily

raking over my curves. But he stood a few strides away, keeping his hands to himself like a perfect gentleman.

“You can touch if you want,” I told him as I reached behind myself and pulled the tie for my bikini top. He watched me with caution while licking his lower lip.

“You’re really drunk. You’re not really in any shape to consent to this, and I don’t want to be that guy...You know?” His forehead furrowed and his eyes narrowed. But I saw that tent in his pants.

I let the bikini top drop to the floor and imagined how amazing his stubble would feel on the inside of my thighs. How incredible his dick might feel sliding into me.

“Look, Carter, I’ve had men try to tell me who to be and what to do my whole life. For once, I am making a choice I want. Is it reckless?” I asked, stepping closer to him. My finger wound around in my hair, tangling it, and his eyes locked on my pebbled nipples. “Of course it’s reckless. But I don’t care. I need to feel alive.”

He didn’t back away as I approached, so I took his hand and rested it on my left breast. His palm was warm cupping me, squeezing gently. I watched his chest puff out as he tensed.

“You’re not going to hate me when this is over? Or regret doing this?” He glanced nervously around the room.

“Don’t worry. I locked the door,” I told him, then I gripped his dick through his pants and squeezed. He shuddered and I smirked. “Would you feel better if I get my phone out and record myself saying I want this sex? That way you could really just let loose and bang me hard, and neither one of us will have regrets tomorrow.”

He swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “It’s just not right...”

“Take. A. Risk,” I said, punctuating each word as I slid my hand into his pants to find his fleshy girth pulsing. “I promise not to tell a soul.” The alcohol was so heavy I found it hard to stand up, but this was just what I needed. A distraction, something to snap me out of the doldrums. Something wild—like Kira would’ve done. So uncharacteristic of me but completely logical considering what I’d been going through.

“I don’t have a condom,” he said.

“I’m wearing a female condom.” Carter’s hand continued to knead my tit, so I took his other one and brought it to my core, slipping my bikini bottoms to the side for his fingers to search me out, and my God did they ever. “See?” I grinned and smirked at him as his fingers pushed into me and he growled.

“You just planned for something like this?” When his lips brushed over my exposed hard nipple, I knew I had him.

“I hoped maybe I’d meet someone worth the risk.” In honesty, I just wanted to get laid, and Carter was the one who piqued my interest the most. Now, with his fingers pushing into my slit, all I wanted was release.

“God woman,” he grumbled and sucked on my nipple so hard he had me hissing. “You’re asking for trouble.”

“I’ve never been one to play by the rules...” I purred and unbuckled his belt, pushing his pants down his hips. His cock sprang free, hard and eager and I couldn’t wait to feel it inside of me.

Carter’s lips trailed up my chest to my neck. He sucked my pulse point as I stroked him and backed toward my bed.

“Tell me you want this,” I said, yanking my thong down and kicking it away from my ankle. Carter’s breathing was ragged as he looked down at my soaked slit. His dick bobbed between us, hard and ready for action.

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“I want this, Sunny,” he growled, voice husky with lust. “God help me, I do. I just need to ask you again if you really want this.” His hands rode my hips, my hands tore his polo off over his head. For a brief second, I thought about how crazy this was, but the thought was quickly lost to the sensation of his tongue circling my nipple again.

“Gosh, don’t make me beg.” I flopped to the bed behind me, and Carter shoved his pants the rest of the way down before kicking off his shoes and stepping out of his slacks.

Then he was on me, spreading my thighs, groping my tits. His lips crushed mine as his pelvis ground against my core. The moisture my body made had him sliding through the mess, grinding against me. I arched upward into him and grabbed a handful of his butt and pulled him down harder as he continued to grind and hump me. The way he kissed me was intoxicating, long drawn-out swirls of his tongue over mine.

When he finally tore his lips from mine, I said, “I want you inside me now.”

“Oh, but I want to taste you first,” he growled against my mouth before kissing me deeply again. Then he backed slowly down my body, placing kisses every few inches until his head bobbed between my thighs and his tongue slid into my slit.

Oh God, did he know what he was doing. I arched my hips upward as he lapped me up like he was starving and I was the last meal on earth. My hands fisted into the comforter as his tongue danced over my clit, sucking the nub between his teeth before releasing it with a pop. “Oh God!” I moaned through gritted teeth.



He chuckled against my core, sending vibrations through my swollen folds. “You like that?”

“God yeah,” I moaned as he slid his finger inside of me, curling it upward and hitting that sweet spot deep inside. My toes curled, and I bit my lip to keep from screaming as pleasure coursed through me.

He continued to pleasure me, using both his fingers and tongue until the room spun. My orgasm was building, like a storm brewing deep in my core. So close...so close...

“Carter!” I whined, grabbing at his hair, desperate for more. He growled and added a third finger, stretching me wider as he sucked my clit between his teeth.

“Oh Christ!” The orgasm exploded like fireworks on the Fourth of July. I grunted as my body arched, the waves of pleasure coursing through me. Carter didn’t stop there. No, he continued to suckle and nibble until I was a quivering mess. I jolted and twitched, clawed at his scalp and hissed through my teeth to make sure I was quiet, and finally it started to break.

When my breathing returned to normal, he crawled up the length of my body and looked down at me with lust-filled eyes. “You taste incredible,” he said huskily before taking my mouth once more. My musky, salty-sweet taste on his lips made me grin. I grabbed his sides and tilted my head into the kiss.

Carter was very good at doing that, and now with the waves of my orgasm subsiding, I wanted more. I wanted him inside of me, to feel him thrusting into me. Hard and fast until we both exploded together.

“I need you now,” I whined against his mouth. My core still throbbed, wet with arousal and anticipation. Carter pulled back, a grin on his face that made me shudder and lock my ankles behind his back.

He gripped his length and positioned it at my entrance, then he pressed just the tip inside me. My pussy clenched around nothing and I mewled, my hips arching upward in invitation.

“Yes,” I panted, arching my hips upward in invitation. He slid inside inch by excruciating inch, stretching me to my limits until he was deep and completely sheathed inside of me.

His soft groan vibrated through me as he filled me completely, so deep he struck my back wall with each strong thrust. I moaned as we both rocked, our hips testing the limits of each other. His hands gripped my hips, knees digging into the mattress as he started a fast grinding motion that had my toes curling. Faster and faster he pounded into me, his cock hitting that sweet spot each time.

“Right there, don’t stop,” I moaned.

“Oh, I won’t,” Carter grunted, his eyes on mine as he continued to pound into me.

My second orgasm was building, low in my belly, and I could tell by the way his brows furrowed he was close too. His thrusts became harder, more intense, and his breathing more labored.

“God, you feel so good,” he growled between pants as he slammed into me.

My second orgasm was like a freight train barreling into me. It hit hard and fast, taking my breath away. My eyes rolled back in my head as I breathed out Carter’s name in a moan. I clenched around him and writhed; his thrusts were jerky and erratic. And then I felt his heat seeping into me, his jaw dropped in pleasure.

“God yeah,” he grunted, dropping his head to my shoulder as his hips continued to pump into me. I was soaked in sweat, still twitching from my release, and he was

breathing hard from exertion.

Carter grunted, “Oh God, wow,” as he rolled to the side and lay on his back next to me. My core throbbed still, endorphins added to the alcohol making me even more dizzy and limp. But I pushed myself off the bed and grabbed my bikini.

“Here,” I said with a grin as I tossed a tissue at him from the box on my nightstand and shuffled into my private bathroom to clean up.

The toilet caught me as I slumped downward hard, and I grabbed the counter to brace myself. The rush of adrenaline and oxytocin from orgasm made me giddy, but it was the swirl of drunkenness that made my vision blur. I saw double as I tried to clean up, but I quickly realized nothing was draining out of me like normal.

I pressed my eyes closed, touching myself lightly. I was soaked from sex, still tender and swollen, and I pushed my fingers deep into myself to find the rim of my female condom, only to realize it was pushed to the side.

“Christ,” I grumbled, hooking my finger around it. I felt the hot moisture of Carter’s semen behind the condom. He was so long, he pushed it aside, and now it was trapped behind the cup instead of being blocked.

For a moment, I sat there staring at my knees, fingers lodged into myself. My eyes were so heavy I thought I might pass out, but a knock on the door startled me.

“You okay?” I heard.

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“Yeah, fine,” I snipped, leaving the condom to clean up later. I stood up and flushed, washed my hands, then took my time dressing in my bikini. The strings tangled and confused me, but I fumbled my way out into the bedroom where Carter was fully dressed with my cover-up in hand.

“You ready?” he asked. He was such a gentleman, offering me his arm. He could’ve just ditched me and went back to the party, but he waited. It made me smile.

“Yesss,” I slurred with a grin, and he walked me out the door and down the hallway. We had to smell like sex, but no one paid much attention. “I need another drink.”

“I think you’ve had way too much, and maybe you should sober up a bit first,” he commented, just as we bottomed out on the steps near the kitchen.

I was about to offer a reply when I saw Dad with a beer in hand and a brooding expression. His eyes rose when he saw me with Carter and then he smiled.

“I see you’ve met,” he said, and Carter grinned impishly.

“You could say that,” Carter hummed. I pulled away from him and walked toward the fridge.

“Met?” I asked absently, pulling the fridge door open. I knew there were a few seltzer drinks in here somewhere.

“Yes, and I’m glad. You two should take some time to get to know each other if you’ll be working together.” Dad’s words flew by me in a swirl of energy that went

straight over my head as I reached for the seltzer and opened it. I let the fridge shut and slurped the first drink as I looked at Carter, who was now white as a sheet.

“Rick, I...” Carter looked peckish. He shook his head and Dad looked at me.

“Wait...Work together?” I asked, Dad’s words finally catching up to my drunken brain.

“Yes, Soleil. This is Dr. Carter Price, your new boss.”

I dropped the can, and it sloshed its contents all over my legs and Dad’s shoes. What had I done? I just slept with my dad’s best friend—and my new boss?

4

## CARTER

Isat in the clinic break room nursing my cup of morning caffeine, letting the sunlight that snuck in through the blinds on the window warm me. I should’ve been paying closer attention to Jackson as he spoke about the rise in concerning patient behavior, but I couldn’t get my mind off of what happened at Rick’s party only two days ago.

I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to be feeling right now. Part of me wanted to pretend it hadn’t happened, to bury it all under layers of professionalism. But the other part of me—the part that had a pulse—couldn’t stop thinking about it. She had an effect on me, like a spark just waiting to light up everything around her, and set it on fire, and I had been in the blast zone when she detonated. Just thinking of it brought a grin to my lips that I hid behind the plain white ceramic mug.

“I just had another patient on Saturday ask me about joining a trial again.” Jackson shook his head and ran a hand through his floppy brown hair. We’d been working at

this low-cost clinic together for the past few years after I hired him to help lead. Not only was he a great doctor but he was a good friend, and a very ethical man. I was proud to have him by my side, especially with strange things like this happening.

“It’s so strange that suddenly we have people who sometimes barely speak English walk in here and ask for that. It’s like someone somewhere is telling them it’s a good idea.” My mouth moves on autopilot as I talk; my mind is elsewhere, replaying the conversation with Sunny over in my head. When Rick caught us together, she covered like a pro, telling him I was lost and she showed me to the bathroom. I saw suspicion in his eyes, but he didn’t question her.

“I wonder if a different clinic is pulling a fast one, and these people heard about it and came to us?” Jackson shook his head again and leaned back in his chair so that only two legs were on the ground. “It’s sort of a crappy thing to do to people, if you ask me. They’re already poor and sick, and then people prey on them.”

“Yeah,” I muttered absentmindedly. I heard the chime of the front door opening and sucked in a deep breath, holding it inside my lungs to expand them and relieve some tension.

Soleil Douglas, whom I quickly found out was actually Sunny—the woman I slept with impulsively—walked through the door. I could see her on the security feed, the monitor mounted on the break room wall. She looked around our empty reception area, and then her eyes locked on the camera mounted conspicuously above the front desk in the corner of the room. Those same illustrious hazel eyes that seduced me so easily made my body warm to a balmy temperature even through closed-circuit TV.

“In here!” Jackson shouted, letting his chair slam to the ground hard. The noise was startling, forcing my tension to creep back up. Sleeping with my best friend’s daughter had been a huge blunder, but even now, with a clear mind and in a professional setting, I found her just as attractive as I had at the party. She was

stunning.

We both stared up at the monitor as Soleil made her way around reception and through the door. I heard the door latch down the hall and braced myself for seeing her in person again. Jackson was ignorant of the whole thing. To him, Sunny was just another person coming to help out around the clinic—a CNP with a bit of experience even, another fact I had no knowledge of before my romp with her.

“New girl is hot,” he said under his breath and fanned himself while letting his mouth hang open like a dog panting.

“Behave,” I grumbled as I stood, already feeling a pinch of jealousy in my chest. Jackson was allowed to find her attractive; she was a free woman. I had no claim or right to stake it. So why did I feel possessive, as if he was moving in on my personal property?

She breezed into the room and set her satchel down on the table in front of us. Her long dark hair was tied up in a loose ponytail, makeup neatly applied to her face, and she smelled like raspberries in summer, lips shimmering with freshly applied gloss I instantly wanted to taste.

“Welcome, Soleil, this is Jackson,” I said, gesturing. She glanced at him, but the bubbly, happy girl I expected was more stoic, bordering on melancholy as she reached out her hand. He didn’t even have the decency to stand in the lady’s presence, and I shot him a glower as he reached for her hand in return.

“Welcome to the team, Sunshine,” Jackson said, gripping her hand hard. “Doc tells me you’re ready for action.” He wagged his eyebrows, playfully jesting at her, and I swore the color drained from her face.

“Thank you. I’m here to work, yes.” Sunny’s eyes shifted to meet my gaze, and

chemistry sizzled between us before she turned away to glance around the room. There was nothing fancy about it—plain white walls, Formica-topped table, metal chairs, a small kitchenette with a fridge and a sink, microwaveto the side, and a bookshelf where magazines sat haphazardly, some of them dangling off the edge of the shelves.



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“We’re glad to have you.” My stiff smile was the most I could offer professionally. Meanwhile, my body felt the pull of her gravity. Her crisp green scrubs complimented her warm complexion and dark hair, hugging her thick curves like a glove. I had a hard time getting control of my physical reaction to her.

“Well, I’ll show you around,” I said when she didn’t respond, and she nodded curtly. Rick had told me she was struggling with something, but not any of the details. Her slumped posture and lack of smile communicated just that. It made me wonder what she was thinking or what it was she was struggling with, and it made me want to help. Of course, it was my natural inclination to always want to help, which was the reason I became a doctor in the first place, but this felt more personal, maybe because she was Rick’s daughter.

Jackson stayed planted in his seat, waiting for the clock to come around to the top of the hour when our first patients would begin arriving, and I ushered Sunny into the hallway. She followed me as I gave her a tour of the office and exam rooms.

“Of course you’ve seen reception. We have a retired schoolteacher who comes in to help with that four days a week.” I gestured at the door to reception and kept going. Sunny tipped her eyebrows up in acknowledgment but said nothing. “Here is my office. Kinda cramped, but I never use it anyway.” I pressed my palm to my office door and nodded at the open doorway. Sunny glanced in and sighed hard. It felt to me like she’d rather be anywhere else but here, but I tried not to let it get me discouraged.

Rick told me she needed this, and I was doing him a favor by hiring her. She was welcome as long as she did her job well and ethically, even if she was a bit sullen.

Maybe all the alcohol in her system on Saturday had made her the happy, bubbly woman I met.

“These are the exam rooms, three of them, but we can open up the storage closet at the end of the hallway and clean it out to make a fourth if we need to.” I smiled and pressed the door open into an exam room. Sunny ducked into it and I flicked a glance at the camera before following her in. Inside an exam room was the only place the cameras couldn’t reach, and with as tense and awkward as things were between us right now, I felt we could use a moment of privacy.

After that quickie on what I later learned was her bed, we barely spoke. Rick introduced us properly and I was a bumbling idiot, which I blamed on the drinking. Sunny covered for me beautifully by refilling my glass a few times and allowing me to drown my nerves in sweet tangy alcohol, and when Rick brought the real woman he invited to set me up with, Sunny vanished. I spotted her a few times watching, looking a bit miffed. Maybe that was what this was about?

That woman and I had nothing in common, and even she told me Rick was meddling. We laughed it off though, and I tried as hard as I could to get his daughter out of my head.

“This is nice...Kinda simple, but it looks like it’ll do the trick. So, do I get one exam room as my own? Are there nurses to help?” Sunny spun around to face me as I stepped farther into the room away from the door, closer to her. She had the whole professional act down; meanwhile I was throbbing, unable to keep my eyes from ogling her curves.

“No nurses—Look, Sunny, we should talk.” I gulped in a breath and scratched my chin, then shoved the cuffs of my button-down shirt up. Then realizing I was going to wrinkle my shirt if I kept doing that, I tugged them back into place.

“About?” she said, and her hand rose to find her ponytail. Just like the other day, she twirled her finger in her dark strands of hair and leaned her head to the side.

“You know what about...” A grin tugged at the corner of my mouth and I let it blossom into a full smile. “God you’re beautiful.”

Sunny chuckled and batted her eyelashes at me and her hand dropped. Then she crossed her arms under her breasts and pushed them up a little as she said, “Is that what you want to talk about?”

“Uh, God, no.” I crammed a hand through my hair and huffed a breath out my nostrils. “Are we going to have a problem? I mean...Is it going to cause a problem that we...”

“You want to know if we can work together? If I can be professional after the way you drank from my core like you were a dying man in a desert and I was the oasis?” Her tone shifted to sultry and playful and made my dick throb even harder. I’d have to hide in this room until it went down.

“I mean...Well, yes.” Blinking hard, I had to look away from her. She was intoxicating, and it was dangerous for me to feel this attracted to her. Not only was she fifteen years younger than me, but she was Rick’s daughter, and from what he said, she was vulnerable right now. If throwing herself at me while being drunk didn’t prove that to my moral compass, nothing would.

Sunny walked over to me and splayed her hand on my chest, standing a little too close for comfort, but not touching me anywhere else. “I can be very professional at work, Dr. Price. But what happens after hours—well, that stays between us, right?” She winked at me and walked toward the door, letting her manicured fingers trail across my white shirt until they dropped off.

The door out front chimed again, announcing our first patient of the day, and I stood there like a buffoon willing my cock to deflate. She swore she could do this professionally, but if she had that effect on me in such a short interchange without any flirting at all, how could I do this professionally?

The last thing I wanted to do was to tell Rick it wouldn't work. That would bring up too many questions.

5

SUNNY

Luna added another stack of cute shirts to the pile in my arms, weighing me down, making me snicker. We were out on an impromptu shopping trip after I finally caved in and decided I was definitely staying in LA with Mom and Dad for a while. I'd left almost all of my things in Tampa, and I wasn't going to fly back to pack them up and bring them here. I couldn't very well survive with the few outfits I brought along with me.

"I can't believe Dad gave you his credit card and told you to buy what you want." Luna's eyes were bigger than my arms. She hefted a few more shirts onto the pile for me to try on and I stepped away.

"Hold on. I'm not buying the whole store," I snickered. Then I tossed my hair over my shoulder and hugged the shirts to my chest. "I think Dad's just trying to get on my good side again. He knows I'm only here because of Mom and after things with Kira." I swallowed the bitter taste in my mouth at the mention of my late best friend. I still wasn't used to her being gone. But having my little sister back in my life was pleasant.

"Say what you will, but as much money as we both know Mom and Dad have, he's

never spoiled me like this.” She plucked another shirt off the rack and held it up, shaking it. “Just one for me. He’ll never know.” She winked and I snickered again, turning toward the dressing rooms.

Luna followed on my heels like a puppy dog, carrying her one shirt to the at least twenty in my arms. The hangers clanked together as I moved.

“So what’s it like working for Dr. Price? My God, isn’t he dreamy?” Luna’s singsong tone made me smile. She wasn’t at my party last Saturday, too busy with finals at UCLA to pry herself away from things and show up for me, but I didn’t blame her. I knew her class load was intense, and she was working hard toward her degree.

If she’d have been around, she’d know what happened. Luna and I gabbed like best friends most of the time, but I hadn’t spoken with her about Carter or what happened that day. My cheeks burned as I thought about it, his hands on me, the way his tongue worked my core to a frenzy and had my toes curling.

“What?” she asked, pushing me.

I grinned and shrugged one shoulder, stopping just inside the dressing room and leaning on the wall. “Nothing,” I said giddily, trying hard to suppress the blush warming my cheeks. I knew I was going to tell her everything, and she knew it too.

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“Dish,” she hissed, leaning closer. She glanced around to make sure no one was around then asked, “Did something happen? You’re blushing.”

Warmth rushed up my chest into my face, making it burn hotter, and I bit my lip and nodded. “So on Saturday at the party...” I let my words drift off for a second feeling a bit ashamed by what I was going to tell my younger sister. I didn’t want to be a bad influence, but I was absolutely bursting to tell someone about it. “I sort of...I mean, we kind of...”

“What? No way!” Luna looked around and grabbed me by the arm, tugging me into one of the changing stalls and shutting the door. “You and Dr. Price?” Her eyes were wide, eyebrows high. The way her dark hair framed her face, she looked a lot like Dad, though his expression would have been disapproving, while hers was almost giddy.

“In my defense, I was really drunk and sort of emotional. He is really hot,” I whimpered and grinned, shaking my entire upper body. “He checked me out. I had no clue who he was, but I wasn’t about to let the moment pass me by. I sort of threw myself at him.”

“Oh my God,” Luna squealed and grabbed my arm, shaking it. “You had sex with Dad’s best friend.” She bobbed on her tiptoes, bouncing her frame up and down while giggling.

“Shh, someone will hear you.” Both of us were snickering, and it would definitely draw some attention.

“So tell me everything,” she hissed, then hung the shirt she brought into the changing stall on one of the pegs mounted on the wall. I set my stack of shirts down and proceeded to tell her every single detail I could remember, since my brain was cloudy from alcohol.

One by one, I tried on the shirts while we gabbed. Luna didn’t judge me at all for being sort of wild that day, but she did caution me not to let Dad know and told me it might be a good idea to avoid taking big risks like that.

By the time I was through the pile of shirts, I had a stack to buy, and a stack to put back on the racks. Luna loved the shirt she tried on, so we headed toward the registers to pay. The line snaked away from the checkout counter, weaving through the aisle. There were at least five people ahead of us when my stomach started to rumble.

“We should get a pretzel when we’re done here before we look for pants,” I told her. Luna agreed with a nod of her head, engrossed in something on her phone, and I heard a woman’s voice behind me, also talking on the phone.

Before I made any snap judgments about the use of technology when in public spaces, I glanced over my shoulder. I was shocked to see a face I hadn’t seen in years. Freya Morgan stood behind me with her cell pinned between her ear and shoulder. Her purse dangled from the opposite arm while she juggled a few garments and her wallet in her hands. Her eyebrows went up when she saw my face and she smiled.

“Hey, I gotta go,” she said into her phone. “Call you back later...Sunny?” she said, letting the phone drop to her hand when she ended the call. “Oh my God, I haven’t seen you in ages. Where have you been?”

Freya threw her arms around me and a million old emotions flooded me. She and I were best friends right up to college, where I headed off to Tampa with Kira in tow, and she made her own life in some unsavory places. I worried about her, but she

edged me out of her life slowly until we stopped speaking to each other at all. The guy she was dating was a real tool too, not good for her in any way.

I hugged her back, feeling a little nostalgic. “I’m so good. How are you doing?” Backing away, I held her at arm’s length for a moment as I let my eyes take her in. She was much thinner now, lost probably half her body weight. She used to be a curvy girl like me, but time changed that I guess. She’d cut her hair short, in a dark pixie cut, and a few tattoos peeked out from under the sleeves and neckline of her bright red tee.

“You know, same old same old.” She shrugged one shoulder and hugged her arms—purse, wallet, and merchandise too—to her chest. She was a shred of who she once was now, curling inward into herself, but still smiling like always. She had a way of doing that, pretending life was just a grand adventure to be lived while carelessly throwing caution to the wind. She also had bruises—lots of them, all at various stages of healing.

That made my hand flutter to my arm where only a few weeks ago I had my own bruises, thanks to my ex, whom I dropped like a hot potato the very instant his anger became physical. But my bruises healed, and I moved on with a bit of a broken heart but the better for it. It appeared that whatever happened to Freya wasn’t over, that it was something ongoing.

I couldn’t help myself from asking because if my old friend was in trouble I wanted to help her. I felt the same familiar pang of guilt in my gut that sprang up when everything happened with Kira. It haunted me. I’d never forgive myself for not seeing the signs sooner and making her go to a doctor. If there was some way I could help Freya, I needed to.

“Did something happen?” I pointed at the darkest bruise on her forearm in a very obvious shape of a handprint, and she covered it quickly, shaking her head.



“Oh, no nothing. I was in a car accident.” She shifted and glanced away nervously, then tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and batted her eyelashes at me. “It’s nothing to worry about.”

Her behavior and the way she was redirecting me with her eyes were all telltale signs of abuse. I saw it in some women I worked with in Tampa. They always protected the abuser, told me they could get away if it was really that bad.

“It doesn’t look like nothing,” I said, and Luna perked her head up, pulling me by the arm as the line moved forward. I kept my eyes fixed on Freya’s plastic smile aimed at me.

“It’s really nothing. But hey, how long are you in town? We should have lunch. I’ll give you my number.” She held out her hand as if waiting for my phone, so I reached into my purse and pulled it out for her. The nagging feeling of guilt rode in waves across my skin, needling at my conscience.

Freya typed her number into my phone and sent a text to herself, then grinned as she handed the phone back. “There,” she said as her phone chimed a few more times with incoming texts.

“Freya, did someone hurt you?” I really couldn’t let this go. I had been where she was. My intuition told me her partner was hurting her. She needed my help.

She looked down at her phone, and my eyes followed her line of sight. Her hand trembled slightly as she read the screen. When she looked back up at me, she was pale. “I have to go.” Another plastic smile, another dismissal of my question. “Lunch sometime?” she said, so I nodded at her.

She set the merchandise down and slung her purse strap higher on her shoulder then dashed off. I watched her walk to the store exit as Luna pulled me closer to the

register. It broke my heart to see her denying the truth, but while I didn't have proof that she was being knocked around, I had my gut feeling, which was almost never wrong. Freya's boyfriend or partner was hitting her.

"She looked rough," Luna said.

"Yeah...and I think we need to help her." I stared down at my phone where the open text message thread showed her number. Maybe I had a purpose here in LA after all, and sticking around was going to be worth it. If nothing else, it had already made me feel grateful that I dumped that loser before I turned into Freya. If I could help her out, I knew everything I'd been through would be worth it.

6

CARTER

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*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:40 am*

When my phone vibrated, dancing around my desktop, and I saw it was Rick, I knew what he wanted. He had called me a few times over the past two weeks to ask how Sunny was doing on the job, and I gave him nothing but raving reviews. However, he was a concerned dad who had a bit too much time on his hands with retirement looming in his near future.

I swiped right to answer and turned speaker phone mode on as I said, “Hey, Rick, what’s up?” Leaning back to recline in my chair and relax a little, I let out a long yawn silently.

“Carter, how are things? How’s Soleil doing?” Rick sounded a little more chipper than our last call, where he complained about his golf average and the skyrocketing price of his golf membership at the country club. I found it comical considering he had more money than he knew what to do with.

“Things are good, man. Sunny is doing really great around here. She’s settled in and taken to seeing patients. They like her.” Locking my fingers together on top of my head and shutting my eyes, I pictured Sunny with that young boy earlier who came in with an earache. Technically, she wasn’t a doctor and thus had to have oversight by a licensed physician, but she was smart as a whip and had a great bedside manner too.

“Hmm, well, I just wanted to know. She’s been brooding and moody all the time. She’s not like that at work, is she?” Rick’s concern came out as criticism, but I knew deep down he was just worried about his little girl. She was far from little anymore, but I assumed that to a father, his little kids never quite grow up.

I thought about his question for a second and remembered the stiff way she’d walked

in this morning. Now closing in on the end of the day, I wondered if she was still sullen like that. She was always professional, but at times the melancholy expression on her face or the downtrodden way she said something slipped through.

“She’s doing just fine. You worry too much, Rick. I told you I’d let you know if there was any issue with her.” I paused for a moment, wanting to ask Rick what happened and why Sunny was struggling, but I decided against it. It wasn’t really my place to pry for personal information, and since neither of them had offered it, I assumed they weren’t comfortable with me knowing about it.

“Yes, well, you do that. And are we on for golf this weekend? I pay for the darn membership. I may as well use it.” His grumbling made me chuckle.

“Sure thing. You pick me up at eight and we’ll tee off by nine.” Reaching for my phone, I listened as he said his goodbyes. Then I ended the call and stared at the door of my office.

It was past four now. Jackson had gone home early today, and last I saw, Sunny had taken the last patient into her exam room over twenty minutes ago.

Curiosity got the better of me. I forced myself up out of my chair where I should’ve been filing medical transcripts and walked to the door. The exam room doors were open and Sunny sat at the reception desk alone, sorting through her own stack of papers. I could see her chocolate brown ponytail swaying as she moved.

Wondering why she was still here when she had no more patients to see today, I strolled out to the reception area and peeked my head around the corner. She continued working as if she hadn’t seen or heard me until I cleared my throat. When she looked up, she appeared tired or sad. There was no sparkle in her eyes.

“Staying late?” I asked, leaning on the door jamb.

“Uh, just doing some filing. The system needs a massive update. No one does paper files anymore, Doc.” Sunny flashed a stiff smile, and her head dropped back to her work. I walked over to her and sat on the corner of the desk, resting my forearm across my thigh. She looked up at me in curiosity.

“Is everything okay?” I asked, genuinely concerned that she wasn’t doing well. If her father was worried, then maybe she was really struggling. Maybe she needed a friend to talk to about it. I could be that friend because she clearly wasn’t talking to Rick, or he’d know how she was doing and not have to ask me a couple times a week.

Sunny sighed as she reached up to pull the black rubber band out of her hair. Her ponytail splayed out as she shook her head and tossed her hair. Then she rubbed her face with both hands before one finger started twirling in the dark locks draped over her shoulder.

“Honestly, not really.” Her pinched expression made my chest feel a pang of compassion. “My best friend died about a month ago now...It’s been...difficult.”

No wonder the spark in her expression seemed restrained, the life in her eyes fizzling out most times. Things started to click in my head—the drinking, throwing herself at me, Rick constantly asking if she was okay. Sunny was grieving something horrible, and no one was taking the time to ensure she was okay.

“Wow, that’s awful. Do you want to talk about it?” My heart went out to her on such a deep level she’d never understand. I hadn’t lost a close friend, but I had lost a child, and it was soul crushing, especially when months later my marriage dissolved and I found myself alone.

Sunny shrugged one shoulder and tugged on her hair nervously. Her lip wriggled between her teeth and she sighed. “We’re not exactly sure what happened. Kira was in this drug trial for some new drug, and they think maybe it was a drug interaction.

We won't know until the autopsy report comes in. They said that can take weeks or months sometimes, especially if the coroner finds anything suspicious."

Her confession made my stomach churn. Here I was sitting on top of my own personal investigation, looking into my own pharmaceutical company because of what I believed to be predatory practices, and Sunny's friend had died in a drug trial. The coincidence struck too close to home. She didn't know I owned the company; few people did. I kept it that way on purpose. I hated my father's legacy. I only wanted to help people, so I stuck to the clinics.

But I was still responsible for what went on within the company, and learning that doctors in low-cost clinics owned by the company were luring people into the trials shocked me. I had to end it, but I had to do it at the source, so it was taking time.

All of that flashed through my head in an instant as I reached out and touched Sunny's shoulder. "That has to be excruciating. Were you two really close?" My guilty conscience eased as she smiled warmly, tears coming to her eyes.

"We were so close that people sometimes thought we were a couple." She chuckled and then continued. "But we were really just good friends. Kira was amazing, so warm and funny, impulsive but safe." She wiped the tears from her cheeks and shook her head. "I don't want to bore you with this."

"I'm not bored," I promised. "So, you stayed at work to bury your emotions in productivity?" I grinned at her, but she sighed hard.

"No, I stayed at work because right now I'm forced to be at my parents' house, and Mom won't be home tonight. I don't like being there when it's just Dad." Judging by the grimace on her face, I could tell she didn't get along with Rick well, which explained why he was asking me how she was doing instead of her.

“Ah, I see.” I wasn’t sure what else to say. Getting mixed up in Rick’s relationship with his daughter was not my idea of fun, but I could see that Sunny needed a friend. “Well, you’re welcome to hang out and work as late as you want. God knows we need the help.” I felt bad shifting the subject, so I asked again, “If you need to talk more, I’m a good listener.”

Her tears had stopped, but the sadness in her eyes tugged at my heart strings. Her voice faltered as she spoke about Kira, and I could see the weight of the loss in her eyes. I knew that kind of pain all too well, the kind that lingers even when you don’t want it to. My own grief, the loss of my daughter, still clung to me like a shadow, creeping into the quiet moments when I thought I could finally breathe.

I took a step closer, instinctively drawn to offer her comfort, but unsure if she wanted it. She’d already shown so much strength, but I could feel her exhaustion, her vulnerability.

“You don’t have to go through this alone, Sunny,” I said softly. “I know it might feel like no one can understand, but sometimes, just talking...it helps, even a little.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:40 am*

She met my gaze, her eyes heavy with unspoken emotions. I didn't push her to talk more. Instead, I placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. The connection between us was raw, unspoken, but deeply felt. I could see her wall coming down just slightly, enough for me to know that this moment, this shared sadness, was more than we could brush off.

Without thinking, I leaned in and kissed her forehead—light, comforting. It was the kind of gesture I knew I needed to offer, a way to say, I'm here. For a second, the world felt quieter, and the grief that weighed on both of us seemed a little more bearable.

That kiss lingered as I breathed in the scent of her shampoo. When I pulled back and looked in her eyes, there was desire. Not the hungry sort of raw animalistic lust she'd displayed at Rick's party, but a deep longing that reached out and curled around my soul, pulling me in. I stayed close to her, nearly sliding off the edge of the desk. When her hand reached up to touch my face, I leaned back in, this time kissing her on the lips.

The world seemed to melt away as our lips met, the tension and grief between us transforming into a different kind of need. Her hands tangled in my hair, pulling me closer as I responded with equal fervor. This wasn't like before, driven by lust and alcohol. This was a slow burn, a mutual desire to feel something other than pain for just a moment. I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt so connected to someone, and for a fleeting moment, I let myself forget everything else.

As we kissed, my hand drifted down her back, feeling the curves of her body through her scrubs. Sunny's hands roamed my body as well, exploring with a desperation that



matched my own. She rose, positioning herself between my knees and pressing her chest to mine. Our tongues danced together as the world around us faded away, leaving only the two of us.

With a moan, I broke the kiss and looked into her eyes. “I want this,” I whispered, my voice husky with desire. “But I don’t want it to be because we’re both desperate. And I know it’s wildly inappropriate, but I can’t stop thinking of you like this.”

Sunny’s cheeks flushed, but she met my gaze with determination. “It’s not so bad, is it? We’re both consenting adults, and yeah, I’m sort of young...But it feels good. And we deserve to feel good.”

I had my reservations. Sunny was vulnerable, and I shouldn’t be taking advantage of her in any way. I’d never forgive myself for doing anything that might end up causing her emotional pain, especially if Rick found out.

But when her hand rubbed my dick through my slacks, I shuddered. It sent a jolt of pleasure into my groin, up my belly. Warmth flooded me. I cupped her cheek and kissed her hard again.

“Help me just forget the depressing feelings for a while,” she breathed against my mouth. It went against my better judgement. Sex wasn’t a way to heal grief. But I was a weak man, a very, very weak man, who had an amazing woman in his arms, desperate to feel my comfort. I pulled away and she whimpered, but I strolled to the clinic door and locked it, and her eyes flashed with excitement.

She tore her scrub top off and tossed it, then kicked off her Crocs and shucked her pants. I was already tearing my tie off as I walked toward her.

She was beautiful, her body the epitome of perfection, both soft and hard in all the right places. Slowly, I unbuttoned my shirt, letting it fall to the floor, and Sunny’s

eyes trailed down to my hard cock.

“Oh,” she breathed, her cheeks flushing a deep red. I couldn’t help but chuckle.

“What? Haven’t you seen one of these before?” I teased, trying to ease the tension.

She arched an eyebrow and circled around me, her hands trailing over my chest and abs. “Doctor,” she purred, “I’ve seen hundreds of them. But yours...yours is quite impressive.”

I couldn’t help but smirk as she unbuttoned my pants, her actions slow and deliberate. “Flattery will get you everywhere,” I teased, but the truth was, her words sent a familiar heat pooling in my groin.

Sunny’s hands found my cock, stroking it through my boxers. “I’m sure I can think of other ways to thank you for your...hard work.” Her eyes sparkled with mischief as she bit her bottom lip, and any remaining reservations I had vanished.

I groaned as she freed my cock, her fingers dancing along its length. “God, Sunny,” I moaned, my voice low and guttural. “You’re going to make me lose it before we even start.” I jolted and shuddered with each stroke of her hand along my length.

Her lips found mine again, and I couldn’t take it anymore. I swept her up in my arms, her legs wrapping around my waist as I placed her nude body on the cool, clean edge of the desk. I positioned myself at her entrance, our eyes locked together as we both teetered on the edge of sanity.

“Are you sure you really want this?” I rasped out, my voice barely above a whisper.

Sunny’s response was to arch her hips against mine, her warmth pressing against me. “Yes,” she breathed, her voice hoarse with desire.

I entered her slowly, our eyes locked together as we both moaned in unison. Her heat enveloped me. She was hotter than sunshine on a summer day, wetter than a waterfall cascading over mossy rocks. I pushed in as deep as I could, and she started rocking her hips as I slowly pumped in.

“God, Carter, you have the body of a twenty-something.” She smirked at me and arched her head back. I took the opportunity to sink my teeth into her neck and suck her pulse point. My thumb pressed her clit and I rubbed in a circular motion gently as I thrust into her.

Sunny’s grip on my shoulders tightened as her moans grew louder. “Faster, Carter, please,” she begged, her hips meeting mine with a fervor I hadn’t expected. I obliged, my thrusts becoming more forceful, more urgent.

Her nails dug into my back, her body tensing beneath mine as her orgasm crashed over her. “Carter!” she cried out, her back arching off the desk. Her walls clenched around me in a pulsing rhythm and guttural gasps emanated from her open mouth. I slowed, pacing myself while keep her stimulated. I hadn’t put a condom on, and she never said if she had her own inserted.

When her eyes fluttered open again, hands still clinging to me, she grinned, looking half drunk on pleasure. “Amazing,” she whispered. I kissed those lust-swollen lips and grinned with her while I continued pumping slowly in and out of her.

“Yes, you are. So beautiful when you come.” She was beautiful all the time, but I didn’t say that. “I don’t have a condom,” I told her, and she pouted for a second. Then she offered a cheeky smirk.

“Well, I do have other holes.” Sunny’s playful tone made my cock jump inside her.

“You’re up for that?” I asked her, not sure what she was thinking.

Sunny pushed me back and slid off the desk, turning to bend over it and present herself for me. “Just make me come again, Doc.”

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I obliged her, sliding my cock into her tight, hot hole, her sphincter clenching around me as if she'd been made for me alone. The moisture from her pussy slicked me enough to make it pleasurable. Sunny moaned and rocked back into me as I thrust hard and deep into her tightness. Her hands gripped the edge of the desk and her breasts bounced under her. I grabbed them both and squeezed hard as I slammed into her.

Her head was thrown back, a stream of profanities and moans escaping her lips. She was so hot, so tight, and so verywet. I reached around her body and found her clit, rubbing it in time to my thrusts.

Sunny came again with a scream, her whole body tensing. She gripped me like a vise and I couldn't hold back any longer. I came deep inside her, filling her with the evidence of our tryst. My dick pulsed and throbbed. She writhed and whimpered, and when her convulsing and jerking stopped, she lay bent over the desk as I pulled out.

It took me a moment to catch my breath. I picked up her panties and bra and handed them to her, along with her scrubs. She grinned at me and blinked her hooded eyes slowly. Then she rose up on her tiptoes and kissed me softly. I held her against my body for a second, enjoying her nearness, knowing Rick would have my head if he knew about this. She was way too young for me, but so tempting.

“Would it be insane for us to keep doing this? See where it went?” As the words marched off my tongue, I somehow knew that was what I really wanted. For the first time in years, I found someone I might actually want to date longer than once or twice.

Sunny pulled away and set the pile of clothing on the desk, then started to dress one piece at a time as she spoke. “Honestly, Carter, I think you’re an amazing man.” I could sense thebutcoming. “I’m just not planning to be around here for a long time. I’m only here until I feel up to moving back to Tampa. Dad insisted after Kira’s funeral I hang around a while.”

The rush of endorphins was already fading, but that statement sucked the wind out of my sails, and I felt the need to protest. “You might find a reason to stay, and if you did, maybe we could find out if we have something real here.” I bent and picked up my boxers, stepping into them and pulling them up. I hated to think this was just a fling and nothing more, that the deep connection I felt was only one-sided.

“Maybe,” she said, reaching around to snap her bra shut. She tugged on her scrub bottoms, then her top, slid her feet into her Crocs, and stared at her pile of files.

“Maybe? Is that you saying you’d actually date me?” I chuckled to keep it light, but I was feeling a smidgen discouraged.

“Oh, no. That’s a definite yes, I’d date you. I’m just not sold on staying here in LA. We’ll just have to see what happens, I guess.” She glanced at the papers again. “Mind if I clean this up in the morning? I think I’m feeling up to facing Dad now.”

“Yeah, go on...” I slipped into my slacks and watched her walk toward the back to get her things. When she came out, I was fully dressed, ready to return to my office. She pressed a kiss to my cheek and hovered close to me for a second. I said, “You never know. You might find a reason to stay here that’s so compelling you can’t go back.” I hoped she picked up on the fact that I was talking about myself.

“You’re right. Anything could happen...Goodnight, Doc.” Sunny kissed me one last time and walked out the door, taking my very fragile heart with her.

My God, what was I doing?

7

SUNNY

My hands shook as I positioned the X-ray machine. They shook harder as I reviewed the films. The woman waiting in exam room one came in with a possible broken wrist, bruising all over her body. With Jackson out for the day and Carter slammed with his own patients, I tackled this case, but it challenged my ability to focus and remain detached personally.

That was one thing they taught you in nursing school—to feel compassion without allowing your emotions to affect your decision-making ability. Seeing those bruises on her arms, hip, and the side of her face, however, pulled at something deep inside my chest, gnawing at it.

I carried the old-school films back to the exam room, passing Carter and a teenage male patient in the hallway. He smiled, but the best I could do was offer a curt professional nod. So many strong feelings swarmed me as I walked back to show the patient her X-rays and let her know that luckily this time there was only bruising.

I knocked before I stepped into the room, and she looked up at me with a drooping, crooked smile. Her little girl sat on the chair next to her rather than on her knee at the exam table as before. Those bright blue curious eyes were the reason I never brought up my suspicion about this woman potentially being in a bad situation at home. It wasn't the sort of topic you should bring up around children, but after living through my own personal hell, it also wasn't something I could overlook.

“Well, Mrs. Shroyer, I've had a look at the X-rays, and I don't see any breaks. It appears to be all soft tissue damage.” Sliding the films into clips on the X-ray

viewing box, I pointed to the areas we were concerned about. “I’m not seeing any breaks or cracks, not even a shadow. I think,” I said, turning to face her, “with time and rest, you will heal right up.”

Mrs. Shroyer nodded gratefully and sighed. “Thank you, Sunny,” she breathed, and she hugged her little girl to her side.

“I just wanted to confirm that these bruises came from a tumble down the stairs...” The positioning of each bruise, the way she said she fell, even her little girl telling me it did, in fact, happen, hadn’t settled my heart. I met her gaze and offered a compassionate look, a knowing look, and she smiled warmly.

“Yes,” she said firmly. “I promise you. I just slipped on Nisha’s Barbie car at the top of the stairs and fell.” Then she turned to her daughter whose shoulders sagged.

“I’m sorry, Mommy,” the little one said, and Mrs. Shroyer gave her a big squeeze.

“No harm done. We just have to pick up toys around the house, so accidents don’t happen, okay?”

Relief started to seep in as they stood and Mrs. Shroyer took her daughter’s hand. I reached into my pocket and pulled out a sucker I’d stashed there at reception when I saw the child come in, handing it to Nisha.

“Thank you for being such a good helper and being patient,” I said, and Nisha’s eyes lit up.

She glanced at her mom, who nodded and grinned, then Mrs. Shroyer thanked me again before they walked out.

I had to stand there a few minutes and compose myself before I could do anything.



When I bumped into Freya a few weeks ago, I'd been riddled with guilt over never checking in on her. Kira and I moved to Tampa, and I went on my merry way, building a new life far away from here. It was Chad who brought it crashing back down to earth. Freya's bruises reminded me of my own very painful incident with him. He only hit me once, but after months of watching his anger issue get worse and ignoring the red flags, I knew it wouldn't be the last time.

After seeing Mrs. Shroyer's purpled tissue, the same guilt welled up in my chest. I fingered my cell phone in the right front pocket of my scrubs and thought of Freya. She seemed so happy to see me, then so frightened when I asked her if she was okay. I'd let my own grief over losing Kira and my frustration with my father distract me from following up, and it was time I did something about it.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:40 am*

It was a horrible day to step away from the clinic. Carter was busy as it was, and without Jackson, I knew he'd have to take on more. The roiling uneasiness in my gut wouldn't let me procrastinate any longer. Freya deserved to have someone fight for her, the way Kira had deserved it too, and I failed her. As a medical professional, I'd seen warning signs, but I said nothing. I had to do the right thing this time, so I marched down to the exam room where Carter had taken the last patient and waited.

The minute the door sprang open and he walked out carrying a blood sample in a vial, I pulled him aside.

"Uh, Doc, I think I have to run." I chewed my lower lip. I didn't want him to think I was slacking or just trying to dump my work on him. "I really have to check on a friend." My eyes pleaded with him to understand and not question me or my motives. It wasn't something I felt like I should talk about; Freya could get embarrassed or upset with me.

Carter studied my face for a moment with a solemn and concerned expression, and then he nodded. "If it's important, then go. Is there anything I can do?"

Just that offer was enough to make my heart swell with gratitude, but in honesty, I didn't think there was anything he could do. I shrugged and said, "I'm not sure, but if there is, I'll tell you." Turning to go, I paused and looked over my shoulder. "Thanks, Carter." I already had my phone in hand, typing a text to Freya that my schedule had cleared up and I'd like to meet for lunch. I only prayed she was free, otherwise I'd look like a fool.

"Hey, Sunny?" Carter called, and I looked up after hitting send. "Dinner tonight?"

Wincing, I had to shake my head no. “Dad insisted we do a family dinner tonight. Mom and Luna will be grumpy if I bail. But maybe another time? Soon...” A warm smile spread across my face and he returned it.

“Sure ... Be safe ...”

With Carter’s well-wishes and approval, I collected my things and stepped outside into the warm LA sun. It was a hot three-block walk to the C line. On the way, I got a reassuring text from Freya. She was free and would meet me at a coffee shop only a few blocks from our former favorite shopping center. I tucked my phone away and boarded the metro, determined to coax Freya out of her shell and help her.

At the coffee shop, I arrived first and found a place to sit down. I ordered both of us our favorite Frappuccinos and a scone for each of us, and when Freya walked in, she found me quickly. I rose from my seat to hug her, noticing her wince as she put her arms around me. But she hid it with an air kiss to each cheek, and we sat down on opposite sides of the table.

“Oh my gosh, I was so happy to bump into you when shopping. I can’t believe my luck.” Picking up my plastic cup coated in a thick layer of condensation, I sucked the icy caffeinated beverage and examined every inch of the skin she had exposed as discretely as I could. The poor thing had more bruises, darker ones, which meant they were very fresh. Maybe even last night.

“Heavens, I know, right?” Freya slurped her own drink, the one I remembered from years ago was her favorite. “God, this is so good. Do you even know how long it’s been since I’ve had one of these? Age isn’t being kind to my figure.” She chuckled but I didn’t understand that joke. We weren’t even thirty yet, and she’d lost tons of weight since I last saw her.

“Yeah, life is like that, huh?” I didn’t want to jump right to my suspicions and scare

her away, so I chose a safe topic. “So you were dating that Trevor guy, right? How’d that go? Are you two still together?” More slurping of our drinks, a bit of awkward conversation, and we finally started to loosen up.

“Oh, no, I broke it off with him. He ended up being a user. But I met Brad and fell for him. I’ve been dating him about six years now.” She spoke about him so kindly, and no doubt she loved him. I could see the sentiment in her eyes and pressed her a little.

“You really like him? How’d you meet?” Freya seemed enough at ease. She answered my questions with a smile.

“Oh, you know. I think I bumped into him on the rail line at one point. We found our schedules matched up and started sitting together every day. Shared stories, swapped snacks. Eventually, he asked me out and the rest is history.”

When she reached up to push some hair off her face, I noticed a huge gash on her hip that hadn’t been treated. I winced, probably grimacing madly, and sucked in a breath, though I attempted to stifle the reaction by sucking on my straw. My heart ached for her so badly.

“What about you? Are you dating someone?” Freya’s question opened up a perfect opportunity for me, but I was a bit nervous to bring it up. I shook my head, and decided not to chicken out. If she really needed my help, and I let her walk out of this coffee shop without even trying, what sort of friend was I?

“Actually, no,” I told her. “I broke it off.” My head hung as I remembered the night I threw Chad out of my apartment. He apologized, swore he’d never do it again, but once was enough for me. “He hit me, had anger issues. I knew I deserved better.” My eyes slowly rose to meet hers. Even without directly asking her, I could see in her gaze the truth. “I had to choose myself over him. It wasn’t safe to be with someone like that, never knowing when he’d snap and do it again...”

Freya's eyes misted; she nodded and sucked her straw. I reached up and twirled a strand of hair from my ponytail, feeling the urge to shake her, make her confess, but my story was working on her heart. I had to let it work.

"Yeah, that sounds awful," she admitted. "You deserve so much better than that."

"You do too," I said compassionately. I reached out and touched her hand. There were even defensive bruises there, on the sides of her wrist like she'd struck him back. "You really do, Freya. And if you're in trouble, I can help you." I would march her right up to my dad's Malibu home and get her set up in luxury while she got back on her feet if need be. I'd fight my dad to make sure it happened.

"It's really fine, Sunny," she said, shaking her head. "Brad, he just...He drank too much, and you know how guys are when they drink. So, it's not like it's a regular thing. He's a good man. I'm really okay."

Every word from her mouth oozed with pain and fatigue. I squeezed her hand and said, "Freya, I'm worried about you. I really am."

"Sunny, I'm fine." Her tone turned a bit tense and cold, and she sucked in a breath and breathed it out. "You know, the night we met, Brad..." She rambled on, telling me about the magical night on the rail line where she met him, how incredibly romantic he was, how he swept her off her feet.

I could see the way she thought of him in the past, before something shifted and turned him into something I was sure neither one of them wanted him to be. I couldn't ask her about it though. All I could do was sit there and keep reminding her I was here to help if she wanted it.

When our chat was over and I was walking toward the C line again, my phone chimed with a text from Dad telling me to wear something nice for dinner—he

invited someone. I rolled my eyes and slumped into a seat at the back of the train, wondering what he was up to. After the day I'd had, I didn't want to go to dinner anymore. I wanted to curl up in a ball and sleep.

8

## CARTER

When I called Rick earlier to ask him to bring Melanie and the girls to dinner tonight, I already knew he had plans. Sunny's rejection stung a little, but she was right to prioritize her family over me, especially since we weren't an item—yet. I had her offer of a raincheck, but I also had a craving to spend more time with her. My plan worked perfectly.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:40 am*

Rick mentioned already having plans for a family dinner, and told me to stop by any time. It was his generous nature that had me standing on his front stoop now, pressing the doorbell, hoping Sunny was the one who answered. When Rick's towering form appeared, I didn't shy away from the handshake and offered the bottle of wine I brought.

"Come on in, Carter. We haven't started eating yet. I'll have Melanie set a plate for you. She and Luna are in the kitchen doing some last-minute prep." Rick gestured to enter as he stepped backward, and the sight of his living room—and devastatingly gorgeous daughter—came into view.

I strolled in, focusing on Sunny's expressive hazel eyes as she looked up, seeming shocked. She rose from her place on the sofa and smoothed her hands down the front of her cream-colored slacks. The red sweater she wore hugged her curves beautifully, conforming to the roundness of her tits. It was hard not to notice.

"Dr. Price," she said professionally, "I didn't realize you were coming." The smile on her face lit up the room. I walked over to her as Rick passed by behind me.

"Soleil, do you mind keeping Carter company while I take this to your mother?" Rick's tone was less of a question and more of an order, but Sunny didn't seem to mind. She patted the sofa cushion next to her as she sat back down, and I joined her, though we kept a bit of space between us until Rick was out of the room.

"Your dad invited me," I told her, pulling her close for a brief second. I pressed my lips to hers and grinned against her mouth as she licked my lip then bit it.

“I had no clue you were the ‘company’ he was planning.” She sounded giddy, acted like she’d been loathing this meal all day until I arrived. “I thought he was trying to set me up or something. But I’ll take this view all evening.” Her fingers scratched my stubble as she kissed me again.

I pulled away, not wanting Rick to catch us in the act. Lord only knows what he’d think if he saw us necking. If we were going to do anything, we had to do it the right way. But before we even crossed the line into the territory of making our intentions known to her father, we had to make sure it was what we both wanted. No sense setting that fire without a cause.

“I do want to have dinner. I wasn’t just pushing you off.” Sunny relaxed back on the sofa, even farther from my grasp, so I followed her lead. “I’m looking forward to it.”

The comment made my heart soar despite the edge of fear it brought on. I was smart enough to know I wouldn’t live the rest of my life as a single man, but wading into relationship territory with a new woman when I had baggage would be daunting. She had to know I had my limits, and certain things would be off the table—like kids. I couldn’t do that again, not after losing Hope.

“I’m looking forward to that too. I really like you.” My fingers itched to touch her again, hold her hand, play with her hair. Being professional in front of Rick would be torture, but it was better than not seeing her at all.

When the doorbell rang again, Rick called, “Coming!” and the expression on Sunny’s face soured. She sat up straighter, hawk eyes staring at the front door. Rick scurried through the living room again and smoothed his tie across his chest before pulling the door open.

I watched Sunny’s mood shift from elated to disgusted in a split second. Rick boisterously welcomed his new guest and backed into the room to invite him in. Liam



Holmes, whom I only knew due to his massive social following and several huge movie deals, stood next to Rick in the doorway. I had no clue Rick knew any celebrities, let alone personally enough to bring them to his home with the intent of setting his daughter up on a date.

My chest constricted as nausea turned my stomach. And when I glanced at Sunny's scowl, it was evident she knew what her father was up to. We both stood, her a little closer to me than was appropriate, and we moved toward the entryway as Rick shut the door behind the new guest.

"Soleil, Carter, this is Liam. I'm sure you've seen his movies, *Fade to Black* and *Paranoia*." Rick had the largest grin on his face, as did Liam, whose smug grin appeared a little on the cocky side.

The twenty-something actor was a playboy, and entirely the wrong type for Sunny to date. I didn't know what the heck Rick was doing. Maybe he thought bringing in a celebrity would make Sunny snap out of the doldrums and get back to her normal life, but if so, he had no idea what grieving was really like. Sunny needed time and space to process not having her best friend in her life anymore, not an expensive, public distraction.

"Nice to meet you, Liam." I was the first to offer my hand to shake. His grip was weak. I squeezed a bit harder than maybe I should have.

When he took Sunny's hand and brought it to his lips I almost gagged. He was trying too hard, and I hated it for her.

"Let's sit down, shall we?" Rick winked at me, some conspiratorial action I was supposed to infer things from, but all I could do was grit my teeth and follow the crowd.

Sunny was stiff as she sat down next to Luna. Melanie sat at the foot of the table, Rick at the head. Liam and I sat across from the girls. Sunny's head hung as Melanie began passing the dishes around. The conversation around me was a blur, mostly Luna gushing over the hot actor seated at her table and Rick talking Sunny up like she was a slab of beef on the chopping block. She sat silent, shoulders sagging.

"So Liam, you love making movies and Soleil loves watching them. Don't you, dear?" Rick was pushing too much. Even I could see that. Melanie looked uncomfortable with it all too.

"Yes," she said, nodding. "I do."

"OMG, I love your movies." Luna's hand fluttered to her chest and her eyelashes batted. Liam seemed to make eyes at her. It was obvious she was loving the attention, which Sunny disdained.

"I'm working on something new too," Liam said, popping a bite of roast into his mouth. "Mmm, Mrs. Douglas, this is amazing. Almost as good as my momma makes." He spoke with his mouth full, chewed loudly, grinned like a fool, and otherwise used poor manners. He wasn't at all good enough for either of Rick's daughters.

Rick eyed me as I ate in silence, watching the back and forth. I definitely hadn't come here to see this. I didn't know it was Rick's plan to force a man on his brokenhearted daughter. I thought it would be me and his family, and I'd be able to stare into Sunny's beautiful hazel eyes all evening. This was miserable for everyone.

"Why thank you, Liam. Wise of you to say your mother is a better cook than me." Melanie chuckled as she continued eating.

"Soleil is an amazing cook too, Liam. She once baked fourteen hundred heart-shaped

cookies for a school Valentine's fundraiser," Rick boasted proudly, chest puffed out like the good father he was, and Sunny sank into her seat a little farther. She'd barely eaten a bite, hand pressed to her belly as if she were feeling sick.

It was so uncomfortable, I almost got up to excuse myself. I couldn't watch the train wreck about to happen. Everything in me wanted to jump up and scream at him to stop what he was doing and let his kid have space. Still, I sat there taking small bites, wondering what was going through her mind. She was so happy only moments before that twerp showed up.

"Uh, fifteen hundred," Sunny mumbled, and then she covered her mouth. "I'm not feeling well. May I be excused."

Twenty-eight years old and still polite enough with her family to ask to be excused. I loved that. It made me smile and my heart grow warm. Sunny was a true hidden gem, a woman with so much honor and respect in the core of her being. Even when her father was being an outright jerk, she still respected him.

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Rick's forehead wrinkled and he opened his mouth to speak, but before he could, Melanie chimed in. "Oh dear, yes. If you're ill, you should lie down." Rick never got a chance to say another word.

Sunny shot up from her spot, dropped her cloth napkin on the table, and dashed off down the hallway. It felt like a part of my heart was being torn out of my chest. She had to be soupset, so mortified by Rick's actions. Everyone watched her go, but only I stood and stared after her, not realizing I was doing it.

Melanie looked up at me and patted my hand then stood. "I'll check on her. You enjoy dinner." Her knowing gaze made me shrink back in embarrassment. To these people I was just her boss, a friend maybe, but not the one who should chase after her. To me—it sent a very loud signal. Sunny was claiming a place in my heart that I couldn't deny, and it was happening lightning fast.

Rick scowled at his plate, then turned to Liam and said, "I apologize for that interruption, Liam." He nodded at the table. "I do hope you're enjoying dinner anyway. That was rude of Soleil. I'll have a talk with her later."

I shrank back to my seat as Rick scolded Sunny's behavior in front of company, and I felt ashamed to even call the man my friend.

Luna, however, reveled in the fact that she had 100 percent of Liam's attention now.

I plunged my fork into the roast for another bite, but my mind was on Sunny. No wonder she didn't like living here or being around Rick alone. He was more than just obtuse; he was bordering on controlling or abusive. A talk with him wouldn't fix it

either. All I could do was be there for Sunny when we were alone and pray that our time would help her heart feel safe enough to unravel and heal.

And maybe more someday...if Rick didn't hate me for loving her.

9

SUNNY

Ididn't even make it to my bedroom. I went straight to the powder room down the hall before the vomit rose high enough to come out. Kneeling over the toilet, I sobbed and let my dinner go down it. My father was a piece of work sometimes, but this time took the cake.

When he told me he had invited someone for dinner, I knew what he meant. He was going to try to fix me up with a guy around here to make it more appealing for me to stick around. He wanted me under his thumb, and I wanted freedom. But a celebrity? Dad crossed the line this time. I didn't even know he had connections in Hollywood.

"Baby?" Mom said. I could hear her on the other side of the door as I pushed myself to my feet and flushed the toilet.

"One sec," I told her, reaching for the faucet to at least rinse my mouth. I blew my nose and took a few gulps of water, then opened the door to see her concerned face.

"Oh dear, I thought you were just trying to get away from that nightmare." Mom reached up and pressed the back of her hand to my forehead then pulled me in for a hug. "I didn't realize youare really sick." Her strong arms guided me out of the bathroom and down the hall farther to my bedroom door.

"I don't know what came over me. It wasn't your cooking. I promise. I just didn't

have an appetite, I got upset, and then I had to throw up.” I felt a bit weak from the exertion of tossing my cookies, so I let her push me toward bed, climbing in, letting her cover me with the comforter.

“It’s okay, sweetheart. You probably just picked something up at the clinic.” Mom fussed with the blanket and said, “I’m really sorry Dad is being a bit overbearing right now. I think he just really misses you and wants you to be closer to home.”

“Dad wants to ruin my life. He can’t let me just be myself.” I sniffled, tasted the bile still draining from my sinuses, and cringed. I had to brush my teeth and use mouthwash.

“He loves you and means well. He’s just concerned.” Mom pushed some hair off my face and asked, “Would you like me to get Dr. Price to check on you? He’s a trained physician. If you’re sick he could help.”

“God, no,” I groaned. I was mortified by rushing out like that. He didn’t need to know I’d gotten so emotional I threw up. How humiliating.

“Alright...” Mom sighed and paused as she stroked my hair. I curled into a ball, fighting the urge to hate my father. I was so angry, so embarrassed by how he tried to manhandle me into a future he imagined would be perfect. Couldn’t he see I was hurting? “He just thinks you’re lonely.”

“Well, he’s right,” I snapped, then felt bad for taking it out on her. “I mean, I am lonely after losing my best friend. Luna isn’t the same; we don’t have the same relationship. But dating a man isn’t going to replace what I lost. I’m missing someone who knew me inside out like a sister.” I huffed and forced myself to an upright position. “Besides, if I wanted to date someone I could. I already like a guy.”

I picked at my fingernails and then pinched a strand of hair, twirling it around my

finger mindlessly. If Mom asked Carter to come back and check on me, I'd break down crying. He felt safe. After talking with him about Kira, we bonded a little. I knew he understood me deep down, and I knew if all of this emotion about my dad trying to set me up came out, I would ugly cry. We'd bond more. Mom would see right through it all and figure out I liked him.

"Oh?" she asked, her eyebrows perked. "Who is he? Anyone we know?" A half smile warmed her face, and I shook my head. No way I was opening that door right now. Dad would never approve; he'd hate Carter for even looking at me. And in the end, I'd be heartbroken when I moved to Tampa anyway, because with the way Dad was acting, there was no way I was staying here.

"Uh, it's no one." Sucking in a deep breath, I tried to think of a way to take back what I blurted out, but someone knocked on the door and I stiffened.

"Soleil?"

"Oh dear." Mom patted my arm as she stood up. "I'll take care of this. You rest. I'll have Luna make you some bland soup; that will help with your belly. But if you're not better in the morning, I'm calling Dr. Price."

She placed a kiss on my forehead before she strolled to the door. I heard her talking quietly with Dad, assuring him I was fine. She told him I threw up and I wasn't faking it, and he started to insist Carter come back to check on me, but she ushered him away.

I shoved a pillow behind my back and let my head drop to the carved wooden headboard behind me. I knew when I came home for the funeral with the intention to stay a few weeks that this would be torture. Now, more than six weeks later I was regretting that decision so much. I should've just jumped rightback into my high-paying job in Tampa and started searching for a roommate.

After a few minutes, the soft knock on my door was followed by Luna waltzing in with a tray. I looked up to see her grinning like a mad idiot as she set the tray on my nightstand. It had a bowl of soup and some crackers and a glass of water.



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“Hey, sicko, you’re seriously missing out. It’s freakin’ Liam Holmes.” Her snickering like a school girl matched the crimson blush on her cheeks. She was giddy with the attention of a celebrity way too old for her, but I figured every girl deserved to have a crush.

“Yeah, I’ll pass. I’m not interested in that.” I rubbed my face and breathed in a deep gulp of air.

“Yeah, I know what you’re interested in.” She smirked and wagged her eyebrows. “By the looks of it, he’s interested too. Dang, girl. He did nothing but check you out all night so far, and when you ran off like a dummy, he looked like he was gonna chase after you. A bit obvious, don’t you think?” Luna rolled her eyes at me as I cringed in more embarrassment.

“He really did that?” I asked. I felt like throwing up again already.

“He really did. Is this just a fling or what?” Luna hovered by my door, which stood open. We weren’t talking very loudly, but I couldn’t risk that Dad might hear so I whispered my reply.

“He asked me to dinner. And I told him yes...” Even though I was still feeling emotionally raw, my lips curled into a smile. I bit the bottom one to temper the reaction. I felt giddy.

“Oh God,” she hissed, snickering. “This is so bad.”

“I know, right?”

The flush of warmth I felt every time I thought of Carter was consuming me. After Chad, I was ready to just place a pause on my love life and let my heart do its thing for a while. But Carter had gotten to me so quickly, I never saw it coming. He was sweet and funny and kind, and I'd never once seen him lose his temper about anything. Total green-flag energy.

"So, what if you don't stay?" Luna asked, but in the background we heard Mom calling for her. "Crap," she hissed. "Later, you tell me everything." She darted out of my bedroom and shut the door behind her while I sat there feeling so mixed up emotionally.

If I stuck around for any length of time, I was going to get too hung up on a man I could never have. I had already told him I'd have dinner with him, but at that dinner I had to make it clear to him—and myself—that a relationship probably wasn't a good idea. I didn't want to date someone in LA when my desire was to live as far away from my father as possible.

And I hoped when I told my heart that, it obeyed me.

10

## CARTER

Joseph Pratt, the CEO of the pharmaceutical company that was woefully handed down to me by my father, stared at me in horror as I recounted how patients had been coming into the clinic asking about drug trials. The genuine reaction wasn't something anyone could fake. His eyebrows were high, mouth agape for most of this discussion.

"It appears some of our clinics are worse than others, but all of them were affected in the past sixty days." I ran a hand through my hair and tugged the cuffs of my shirt

sleeves down onto my arms. It perturbed me that people were going behind my back and thinking they'd get away with it. If I wasn't so determined to do the right thing, I'd have sold the company and washed my hands of the whole thing.

But hearing about Sunny's friend made me feel obligated to stick around and clean up this mess. I knew that if people in positions of power did nothing or turned a blind eye to the corruption they saw, it made them just as bad as the people who were actively involved in the deceit.

"You're telling me," Joseph started, "that we have doctors encouraging sick, elderly, and financially unstable people to join drug trials just to make money?" The flash of anger I saw in his eyes again confirmed to me that he knew nothing about this before today's meeting.

"Yes. Somewhere, somehow, our recruitment team has gone off the rails. Now, I can't just go there and burst in with accusations. If we're going to do this right and shut it down, we need to stop this at the source. Pinning this on the doctors at the clinics won't work." I'd already thought this through. I knew the doctors I had working for me, and many of them were doing their clinic hours as volunteers because they cared about people. Whoever orchestrated this likely played to that weakness, offering them money in exchange for this service, which they likely painted as something super helpful.

"This is awful, Carter. I won't stand for it." Joseph rose and tucked his tie into his suit coat, and I rose too. I had plans with Sunny this evening that I didn't want to be late for, but I appreciated him taking the time to talk this out with me. It was a serious matter we really needed to address soon.

"We can't let it keep happening. Baiting at-risk patients into these trials is risky. Not only could the ethics board remove every license of every doctor; they could shut down these clinics, and the community needs them."

“I agree, it has to stop. I’m standing with you. We’ll get to the bottom of it.” Joseph stretched out his hand to shake mine and I took it, offering a firm grip. It was good to know I had him on my side.

As I strolled out of the sleek modern offices, I pulled my phone from my pocket and dialed Jackson at the clinic. I’d taken the afternoon off to deal with this situation, and he was covering for me. His voice was stern when he answered.

“South Town Clinic, how can I help you?”

“Jacks, it’s me. How’d the day wind up?” I blinked into the bright sun and fished in my pocket for my key fob.

“Oh hey, Doc. Day went great. Just sent the last patient home. Oh, and Ms. Sunny Douglas waltzed out of here saying she has a hot date.” I heard the jest in his tone before he even said, “Not sure who that could be, could we?”

The grin spread on my face without my permission, but I let it. I was falling so hard for this girl, and we made dinner plans for this evening. Sure, she was still hesitant, and she spoke plainly when she said she wasn’t interested in a relationship in case she moved back to Tampa, but if all I could get was more time with her, I was going to cash in on that. It might just change her mind and coax her into staying.

“I don’t know who that could be.” I was, of course, lying. Jackson knew I had it bad for her. We talked about it this morning, how Liam Holmes couldn’t even steal her attention from me, how we had sex right there in the reception area of the clinic. He would keep my confidence, but he’d razz me about it the rest of my life.

“I hope you have a great time, Doc. You deserve this. You’ve been through so much.” The way the conversation shifted from happy to a tone of somberness stole my words. I didn’t know how to respond, but he continued when I didn’t. “No

worries about the office. I've got it on lock. Have a good evening."

"Thanks, Jackson. I'll see you tomorrow." I hung up and strolled to my car with a skip in my step. So far the day had proven productive and positive. With Joseph on my side in this, the investigation would go further. I knew we had to get down to the facts and let the board know what was happening before one of these people baited into joining our drug trials ended up like Sunny's friend Kira. That would be devastating and lead to lawsuits and scandals.

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I drove to Rick's house, singing to songs on my satellite radio as I fought traffic. When I pulled up in front, I expected to walk to the door and collect Sunny, but she was perched on the frontstep waiting. She wore a short jean skirt and a bright yellow summery top. Her hair was tied up into a ponytail, but as usual she had a finger tangled in it, twirled along her slender digit.

I got out of the car and walked around the front, meeting her halfway up the drive.

She grinned at me, but I saw how nervous she was in her expression as I gently touched both of her elbows and kissed her cheek. "Don't," she hissed. "Not here."

She continued walking hastily to the car so I scurried to keep up and open the door for her. Only when she was seated and the door closed behind her did I see her relax a bit. I climbed back in and started the engine, and she burst into a flurry of explanation.

"Sorry, but Dad's home and he's not happy with me going out for dinner. I think he had some scheme to have someone else over to the house tonight to set me up again, and I'm just tired of it. I don't want him knowing we're seeing each other right now because I don't know how he'll react."

In all fairness Sunny had every right to feel that way. I nodded my acknowledgment as I pulled the car into traffic and rested one hand on her thigh.

"I wish it wasn't that way for you, but I completely understand. Rick has a bit of a temper at times, and I'd hate to upset him." As I drove, I pictured his angry face, red with fury and disappointment at the sight of me with Sunny. For her, it would feel

even worse. I was just his friend. She was his blood.

“I’m sorry if that upsets you. It’s just that...”

“Not at all,” I told her, squeezing her thigh. “I think it’s wise to keep things on the down low for a while. Until we figure out what this is.” She shifted her gaze out the window and sighed. Her finger remained firmly lodged in her hair.

“I’m not sure what this is, Carter. I’m just having fun right now.” When she turned to me, I saw the melancholy way her eyes looked, though she had a smile on her face. “A lot of fun.”

“More fun than the far flung reaches of Tampa, Florida?” I chuckled. I wasn’t sure how to bring up the topic of the entire life she’d built across the country. If it weren’t for my clinics, I’d just follow her there where we could explore this without Rick’s hovering eyes. But I had a responsibility here, something I couldn’t turn my back on.

“Tampa is okay; it just won’t be the same without her.” There was a hint of sadness in that statement, but she continued as if it didn’t bother her. “I just have to figure it out. And right now I’m enjoying work at the clinics. And hooking up with an old friend from high school has been okay too.”

I remembered the other day when she insisted she had to check on a friend. I wondered if it was the same friend, if somehow Sunny was starting to reach out to her old life and find connections other than me that might help encourage her to stay here. It made me smile, but I didn’t pry.

“I’m glad you like working at the clinics. I love helping people so much. It’s the whole reason I got into medicine. I want to make a difference and ease suffering.” Traffic wasn’t quite as bad on this side of town, so it was easy to carry on a good conversation with her while I weaved in and out of the cars passing by. At one point,

however, I did have to put both hands on the wheel which felt like severing a lifeline for some reason.

“Helping people is a life calling.” She rested her head on the head rest and said, “I think we’re all given a gift to help others in this life, but not everyone uses it. I’m glad you do. I like that about you. It’s noble or something.”

I chuckled and said, “Just call me Sir Carter Price, physician extraordinaire.”

“God, you make it sound cheesy but seriously, you’re a good man, Carter. I love that about you.”

Hearing those words felt like high praise coming from Sunny. We bantered about destiny and gifts. Before we parked at the restaurant, Sunny waxed spiritual, talking about how she was finding a deeper purpose in Kira’s death, which she didn’t go into detail about, but I admired how open she was with me.

After we were seated and had our orders placed, I scooted my chair closer to hers and brought her hand to my lips to press a kiss to her knuckles.

“Thank you for accepting my invitation to dinner. I can’t seem to get my mind off of you.”

Sunny batted her eyelashes and tried to hide behind a smile, but I was charming her out of her shell. “Dr. Price, you’re making me blush.”

“I know and I like it.” Kissing her knuckles again, I said, “I know whatever is going on right now wasn’t exactly on your schedule of life plans, but I do hope you’ll take your time deciding about me. I never expected you to come into my life either, but I feel like it was meant to happen.”



She brought her hand up to clasp around mine and we sat staring at each other for a moment. “Carter, there are so many things going on right now. I don’t know what the right choice is. It’s complicated. I don’t want to jump into something with you and you’d get your heart involved only to find out I can’t stay here for other reasons. I hope that doesn’t mean we can’t keep doing whatever this is, though.”

Her honesty was refreshing but a bit painful. “Of course we don’t have to stop.” When I lost my daughter, I lost all hope of life being good to me again. It made things in my life spiral out of control. I was desperate for anything good to come my way back then. Then my wife left me, and it only confirmed that life wasn’t going to be good to me. Sunny was changing that for me, but she didn’t seem to be on the same page as the universe that aligned our paths.

“You are an amazing, sweet man, Dr. Price.” Her radiant smile melted my heart.

“So when we’re all done eating, do you think you’d like to join me at my house for a few drinks? Or will Rick be waiting for you?” I was going to soak up every single second of time I could with her for as long as she was in town. As much as she’d give me. But I didn’t know if I was pushing her boundaries because the look on her face told me she wasn’t sure.

She was a ray of sunshine, but it appeared storm clouds were set to block out the light, at least judging by the look on her face.

11

SUNNY

Carter’s home wasn’t nearly the mansion I figured it would be. I sat on his plaid sofa waiting for him to come in with some drinks. I sipped on a glass of wine at dinner, but it made me feel a little sleepy, so when he suggested more here at his house, I had

to pass. I'd been so exhausted lately from working and life, I didn't want to end up falling asleep on his couch.

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I'd grown up in such luxury, with two very wealthy parents who did anything and everything they could to make life easier for my sister and me. When I learned Carter was a doctor, I assumed he had some ritzy home in Bel-Air or something, not this understated craftsman tucked away in Eagle Rock. Much more modest than I imagined.

"Alright, two seltzer waters with a squeeze of lemon and some crackers for milady." Carter bowed at the shoulders playfully as he set the tray on his wooden coffee table. He joined me on the couch, pulling me closer to his body.

I knew the reason he invited me wasn't to watch me fall asleep, but I yawned and covered my mouth. He pushed some hair off my forehead and pressed a kiss there.

"Long day?" he asked, but I had to shrug.

"I'm not even sure. I've just been super exhausted the past few weeks. I'm sorry. You probably wanted to come get me liquored up and bang me over the kitchen table or something." My grin showed him I was joking, but I splayed a hand on his chest so he would know I wasn't joking about wanting him.

"God, you ruined it all, didn't you? And just when I was going to get lucky." He kissed me and tickled my side as I giggled and arched into him, which reminded me of the other things I'd been feeling. My tits crushed against his chest and ached, another reason to complain, but I held that one back.

"Mmm, I'm so achy." I pulled away from his kiss and he relaxed back onto the couch. "Like my whole body. I think it's that flu I had. I've had no appetite and I've

been tired and achy. Mom said you should check me out, but I was super embarrassed.” I reached for the seltzer water and sipped it. They’d been my salvation for the past week now. If I drank anything it was slightly carbonated, and crackers helped, but too many of them and they’d come right up. I couldn’t wait for the tummy bug to go away.

“Let me rub your shoulders then,” he said, nudging me away.

“You sure?” I didn’t come here to be pampered, but I wouldn’t mind the attention.

“Yes, I’m positive. Doctor’s orders.” Carter took me by the hips and angled my body so I was facing away from him. As he worked to loosen the tension in my shoulders, I finally started to feel relaxed. “Grieving is heavy emotional work, Sunny. It can take a toll on the body as much as the mind.”

“Oh wow,” I muttered as he hit a supersensitive spot on my neck. His fingers worked miracles on my core; I knew that much, but this was every bit as pleasurable.

“Your boss is working you too hard. You should say something.”

I heard the humor in his tone and said, “I know. What a jerk. Long hours on my feet, no sex breaks or anything.” We both snickered and he kissed the crown of my head.

“I’m so glad fate aligned our paths, Sunny. Life hasn’t always been good for me, and you brought something back to me I thought I’d never find.” Carter’s hands continued to work on my stiff muscles, but his words started to work on my heart too. I knew so little about him, and I’d poured out my heart to him about things that made me very self-aware and insecure. It wasn’t easy, but he was there for me.

“I’m glad too, Carter.” I touched his hand as he continued.

“You know you should talk to someone about Kira. It really helps.” That statement piqued my curiosity.

“It does? How do you know?”

For a moment he continued rubbing, but it was quiet. I felt like I asked a bad question or something, like it touched on a topic he didn’t want to talk about. In that long silence, I pictured Kira smiling at me, telling me the only way to get to know someone was to ask the hard questions. It was what she’d said when Chad had a temper tantrum one night and she called it a red flag. How many red flags had I ignored with him, and why hadn’t I seen them?

It made me wonder if Carter had red flags too, and I just wasn’t seeing them either.

“This isn’t something I want to talk about openly, but I feel like you should know, because maybe it will help you feel more comfortable talking with me.” Carter stopped rubbing my shoulders and walked around to sit on the other side of me, facing me.

His playful smile had been replaced by a somber expression, eyes drawn, lips pursed. He took both of my hands in his like he did at the restaurant and sucked in a breath. His chest heaved upward and then down as he blew it out. When our eyes met, I could’ve sworn I saw tears brimming in them.

“I was married once, years ago. We were happy and in love. Blissfully ignorant of the pain life can give a human heart. My wife, uh...” He cleared his throat and looked away, blinking rapidly, then he continued. “Misty gave birth to a beautiful baby girl. We named her Hope. She was so perfect and amazing. And well...It’s hard to talk about.” His head hung and I squeezed his hand.

It was obvious what happened without him saying a thing. I could see it in his eyes. I

knew that's how this house was empty, how he knew grieving was hard on the body and that talking to someone could help.

"It's okay, Carter. You don't have to tell me." I waited a beat then asked, "How did it happen?"

He turned back to me with the full weight of his sadness showing on his face. "Sudden infant death. Nothing anyone could have predicted or done. But it destroyed my heart and eventually the marriage too. Misty moved on, but I never did."

The strings of grief wound their way around my heart and mind, binding us together in the shared valley of mourning. I wrapped my arms around him and pulled him into me, and he gripped my hips and tugged me onto his lap. We sat there holding each other for a long while in silence as our inner wounds cemented the bond. I heard him sniffle and said nothing. My own eyes welled up and I swiped tears away.

"I just hid from anything that looked like a relationship until you. You changed that, brought me out of my shell. I mean...I still think there is healing to do. I don't know if I'll ever want kids again. That pain was so paralyzing there are no words to describe it, and I don't ever want to feel that way. But when we met and you took my breath away, I knew I could at least love again."

There was something so bittersweet about him opening up to me. I'd always wanted to be a mother, but the pull I felt toward him in this moment told me if he and I were together, I knew I could live without that desire just to make his heart feel safe and whole. It was how I knew I was falling in love, and when I saw that same affection mirrored in his eyes I kissed him.

The kiss slow and passionate. Emotions fueled it, mixing together and wrapping around us in a warm envelope. My tongue languidly searched his mouth, his arms tightened around my body. Never in my life had I felt so seen or wanted. This man

had walked through the fires of hell and confessed that I was his savior. How could I begrudge him the chance to show me his heart like this?

We kept kissing and it turned hungrier. I felt like I didn't just want to feel his heart, I wanted to be inside it. I wanted to be so close that nothing could separate me from that nearness I was experiencing, not time or space, or even clothing. I tugged at his shirt, pulling it out of the waistband of his slacks, then I started unbuttoning it.

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Carter seemed to pick up on things and got more aggressive. His teeth raked down my neck to the plunging neckline of my blouse. He buried his face in my cleavage and cupped both of my breasts, really sinking his stubble into my tender flesh. I almost yelped at the crushing sensation, but I managed to wriggle out of his grasp as I rose up to undo his pants.

“I just need to feel you against me,” I rushed out and he let his hands fall to my skirt, which he unbuttoned hastily. We tore each other’s clothes off like ravenous wolves, and they puddled on the ground by the couch.

His erection tented his boxers and I straddled him, my core slick with arousal. He groaned when we connected, our hips grinding together in perfect sync.

“God, Sunny,” he groaned out my name like a prayer. He cupped my breasts again, this time more gently, and kissed me passionately as we rocked together. My moisture coated his length as I slid myself across it. I couldn’t wait for him to be in me, but this was glorious too.

I reached down and gripped his length, squeezing him as he groaned louder. “Inside me, Carter!” I demanded and he didn’t disappoint. He entered me with a heated groan, the head of his shaft swollen and deliciously hard against my inner walls. A low moan escaped him as he bottomed out, and I bit my lip to stifle a cry of my own.

The sensation was everything I imagined it would be and more. He filled me in every sense of the word, body, heart, and soul. It’s like we were two halves of a whole finally finding each other after years apart. With each thrust into my wet depths, I felt the connection solidify between us.



We continued like that for a while, lost in the heady throes of passion, until the tension between my thighs coiled and tightened. “I’m close,” I panted. Carter groaned, his hips bucking into mine. His thumb pressed into my center, finding my clit to rub it.

“Yeah, well I want to feel you pulsing around me.” The fury of his thrusts was unrivaled.

“Say something bad to me,” I whimpered. My fingernails dug into his shoulders and he kissed my pulse point, sucking it lightly.

“I want to fuck you so hard, nothing but my cock will ever feel good again.” Carter growled and that was all it took for me to fall over the precipice, body convulsing around him, spasming as I came.

Carter’s face was twisted in a primal, almost feral expression as he growled, his piercing blue eyes darkened with desire as he watched me shudder and convulse around him. His body pressed against mine, and I could feel every inch of his hard, lean frame. His hands gripped my hips, digging into my skin as he thrust into me, igniting sparks of pleasure and pain.

With controlled movements he slowed his thrusts until the pleasure waves subsided. I didn’t know how he hadn’t lost control, but I was glad. I hadn’t thought of protection. I slowly pushed my hands on his shoulders and rose up, pulling off his girth, then reached for my skirt where I pulled a condom out of the pocket.

“Can I?” I asked with a smirk.

“Go for it.” He said with a lazy grin.

I sheathed him quickly, my heart pounding in my ears as I lowered myself back onto

him. This time I took control, setting the pace and the angle, controlling how deep he went inside me. My hands braced on his chest as I rode him, watching Carter's face contort with pleasure.

It was empowering to know I could bring him so much pleasure, and it fueled me to ride him even harder. He thrust up into me, meeting my every move. His hands gripped my hips as we moved together in perfect sync, our bodies speaking a language all their own.

I felt the tension in my core building again, and I knew I was close. Carter must have sensed it too because he reached between us, his thumb circling my clit.

"That's it, Sunny, come for me," he growled.

Heat coiled low in my belly, and I arched my back as the orgasm washed over me like a tidal wave. I cried out his name as pleasure coursed through every inch of my body, leaving me shaking and panting. Carter's grip on my hips tightened as he groaned out his own release. His body stuttered beneath mine as he filled the condom.

I lay draped across his chest, panting, sweating. He was still buried inside me, arms still pinning me down to his body, and he kissed the top of my shoulder. Everything in me was telling me to let go and give in, to let myself love this man. But I was still at war with my selfish desire to live life on my own terms, which I didn't feel like I could do with my dad breathing down my neck.

And if I did, if I let go and gave Carter my heart, could I really live with the idea that he didn't want to have kids? Lots of guys felt that way and they all had their reasons, but his was the most heart-wrenching reason of all. If I really loved him—and I was fighting myself from admitting I might already—could I support that about him?

I just didn't know.

## CARTER

I held Sunny's hand, pleading with her to let me drive her home, but she insisted that an Uber would be fine. Her bag hung over her shoulder, soft brown waves cascading down her back. After crazy sex last night, she woke me up to a blowjob which I returned with my own enjoyment of her body. I couldn't get enough of her.

"Are you sure?" I kissed her one more time as the Uber driver pulled his black sedan into my driveway.

"I swear, it's fine. Besides if Dad saw me getting out of your car he'd flip, and you know it. You have a tee time, so he'll be leaving the house about the time I get there." She backed away, but I pulled her into my arms again.

"We could go another round. I'll send the guys a message saying I'm late, and he won't be there when I drop you off." I wagged my eyebrows at her. "It's on my way." Saying goodbye to her got harder every time I had to do it. I hated that feeling. Being around her made me feel whole again. I wanted to stay that way forever.

"I'm gonna go, okay. But let's do dinner again soon." She kissed me tenderly, and I let her go.

"So we're not telling Rick..." It would be a shift in the dynamic, and I knew it would mean labeling what was going on as something serious.

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“No, not telling Dad. But I’m not going to lie and say what’s going on is nothing.” Sunny rose up on her tiptoes and pressed another kiss to my lips, this one chaste. “Because I might yet be tempted to drop anchor here.”

The grin as she walked away mesmerized me. Her comment caused an explosion of emotions and thoughts as I backed into the house to finish getting ready for golf this morning. I closed the door behind me, leaning on it as I thought about what had just happened. I had feelings and responsibilities I hadn’t had in a long time. And it terrified me...and thrilled me at the same time.

If I kept walking around with this cloud-nine giddiness, however, Rick would ask questions. I warned Jackson off already, so he knew better than to say a word about me seeing Sunny. I just had to fight my own instincts and I’d be good.

The sun was hot when I pulled up to the country club. Rick was already at the first tee, tossing a ball in the air and catching it with one hand. Jackson and Joseph were standing a little behind him, talking shop, but the moment they saw me, their voices dropped.

“Don’t think I didn’t hear that last bet, Price,” Rick called, a grin tugging at his lips as I approached. “You trying to take us for a ride today?”

I smirked and shook my head. “I’ve got a bad feeling about today. I might just give you guys a head start.”

Jackson chuckled, raising an eyebrow. “Please, Carter. We all know you can’t let anyone beat you. Not even on a bad day.”

Joseph's smile was quieter, more knowing, but I could tell he was already sizing up the course, mentally plotting his strategy. The guy was sharp—he had a way of looking at a green and immediately figuring out how to work it.

Rick slapped me on the back. “Grab your club. Let's see if you're as good as your reputation.”

I picked up my driver, setting it in the ground with an easy swing. The sun was still low, casting long shadows across the fairway. Rick went first, his swing smooth, the ball flying high, cutting through the air with the usual precision. Jackson followed, a little wilder, but still on the mark. Then it was my turn.

I focused, lining up the shot. The moment the club made contact, I felt it—solid, satisfying. The ball shot forward, landing just shy of Rick's.

“That's the way to do it,” Rick called, his voice full of mock approval.

As we walked down the fairway, the conversation shifted. We were all easing into it, letting the game do its work. But then Rick, always the one to throw in a curveball, asked casually, “So how's Soleil? She doing alright?”

I could tell by the way he phrased it—so offhand—that he wasn't just asking out of concern. There was something else there. I shrugged, trying to keep it light. “She's fine. Adjusting.”

Rick didn't let it go. “I know it's tough for her, but...How's she really doing, Carter? She's had a hell of a few months.”

I took a breath, watching as Jackson took his next shot, a little wayward but not too bad. I didn't want to make a big deal of it. But something about Rick's tone made me pause.

“She’s tough, Rick,” I said, my voice a little tighter than I wanted. “She’ll be alright.”

Jackson was the first to tee off, slicing it badly to the right. The wind kicked up, pushing it back into the fairway, but he lost a lot of distance. Joseph teed off next with a beautiful shot, and I could read Rick’s body language as he prepared his clubs to take his shot. Something was bothering him, and I had a feeling I was going to hear about it.

After a few holes, Rick cleared his throat and stood a bit closer to me than was necessary. He often did that when he felt upset by something, and I knew it was coming before he said it.

“I’m worried about her, Carter. I could’ve asked a dozen different men to help me out by giving her a job. You know her best friend died. They were practically sisters. So tell me, how she’s really doing.” His fatherly concern etched deep crevices into his forehead.

“She’s really okay, Rick. What’s actually going on here?” Jackson glanced at me as I spoke. He was fidgety, like he knew something too, but he said nothing even when I narrowed my eyes at him.

“I swear I just found this out from Kira’s parents, but it turns out the drug trial she was involved in was connected to your company.” Rick spoke in hushed tones like it was a secret, and when I looked at Jackson, he gave me a sheepish expression. The two of them spoke about this before he came to me. It irritated me, but maybe he was trying to leave me out of it as much as possible. I was her employer, not her best friend—at least to his knowledge.

“Yeah, wow,” I said, genuinely feeling shocked. I didn’t know if Sunny knew what drug trial Kira was taking part in, let alone which company manufactured it. But I did know she had no clue who I really was, what part I played in the pharmaceutical

industry as a whole. It wasn't something I was proud of, but for now it was a saving grace. I still had a chance to turn the sinking ship around and right the wrongs before she found out.

"So, I'm just concerned. When I bring up her job, she gets all clammed up. Refuses to talk to me. I just wanted to make sure she hadn't connected the dots." Joseph took his shot while Jackson listened to our conversation and managed to keep a straight face. He and I both knew why Sunny was uncomfortable around Rick's discussion of her work life.

"I'm sure she's fine, but if you'd like me to, I'll ask her again." I patted him on the shoulder when Joseph's ball launched into the air, then I pulled out my five iron and walked to my ball to take my stroke.

I had a lot on my mind, and the distraction had me playing an awful game. I was already plus three with a ball in the rough and the wind in my face. The entire afternoon went about like that too, until finally we were loading our clubs into our trunks and Rick came over to shake my hand.

"Thanks for being my ears to the ground," he said, and his grip of steel felt crushing. Or maybe that was the weight of the guilt I was carrying from the secret I was keeping.

"No problem, Rick."

"You know, has Soleil said anything to you about me? I just feel like we're not connecting well." He eyed me, making me nervous.

"Rick, you lean on her too much. She's twenty-eight, a grown woman. Give her some space." The minute the words were out of my mouth, I realized they'd upset him. I shut my trunk and gritted my teeth, waiting for his reaction, but his phone rang and he

pulled it out.



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“It’s Mel. I should go.” He walked away and answered the phone, and I was saved by the bell—this time. I wasn’t so sure the universe was going to let me slide much farther. I had to figure out who was behind this drug trial garbage, because while I was almost certain Kira’s death had nothing to do with what was going on in my clinics, it still didn’t look good. And I hated the idea of Sunny finding out and being hurt by it.

13

SUNNY

Isat in the small, chilly break room alone with my phone pressed to my ear listening to yet another reason why Freya would not be able to meet me later today for coffee like we planned. Jackson had just left to go back to patients. Carter would come in any minute to send me back to mine. After the last chat Freya and I had at that coffee shop, she’d been avoiding me. I pushed too hard, and she was edging me out when I knew she needed help.

“Oh, you know how things are. I’m sorry, Sunny. They just need me to stay late.” Freya sounded distracted, avoidant. A lot of time had passed, and she had changed in so many ways, but back in the day when I knew her, this was her way of getting out of things she wasn’t interested in.

I frowned as I said, “I’m worried about you, babe. I know it’s been a long time, but I’m still your friend and you can count on me. Please open up. I’m here, and I want to help because I care.”

Having seen those bruises and now the way she was avoiding me, I knew without a doubt that man was hitting her. My gut screamed at all the signs. It felt like that stretch of Interstate 5 between Santa Clarita and Castaic, with the billboards telling passersby to exit and enjoy all the boating and recreation activities. Anyone could see how plainly things were spelled out.

“Sunny, I know you care.” Freya’s voice took on a reserved tone, almost like she was giving up, but she wasn’t relenting to my pleas to help her. She had already resigned herself to the life she lived and settled there in misery. I hated that for her. “I don’t want you to bring this up again. I’m happy with Brad. I love him, and I don’t want you to get involved. It’ll make things worse, okay?”

A protest perched on the edge of my lip, ready to explode from my mouth, but I bit it back. Pressing my eyes closed against the emotional outburst I felt welling up, I said, “Yes, I understand. I’ll just say one more time that I still want to be your friend. So, if you ever want to do something, I’m here.” I couldn’t help myself. I had to add, “And if that man so much as looks at you cross again, you know I am the one who can help. You come find me.”

There was a short silence followed by some background noise. Freya rushed out, “I have to go, Sunny. I’ll talk to you later.” Then she hung up, and I let the phone and my hand drop to my lap.

It shouldn’t have been this hard to help a friend in need. Freya was an intelligent woman who knew situations like this could change in an instant. Sudden positive shifts—that’s what Mom called them. They didn’t happen as often as bad things, but the hope of being able to cast a lifeline and pull Freya out of the floodwaters wouldn’t die. I couldn’t even carve it out of my heart if I tried.

“You okay?” I heard, and I turned over my shoulder to see Carter there with an empty coffee cup in hand. He walked over to the coffee machine and opened the lid to begin

prepping the machine to make more brew.

“Not really,” I sighed. The more I pushed, the more discouraged I got. It felt very daunting fighting someone’s sense of moral obligation, or perhaps even some heartbreaking notion of connection. Every time I talked to her, I physically felt how much she cared for Brad. I couldn’t imagine how difficult it was for her to endure loving someone so broken and continuously believing the best about them, hoping they’d change.

The thought brought tears to my eyes which I blinked away. I’d been doing more of that lately, breaking down crying. Kira would’ve told me to have one good crying session and move on, but this was different. And it wasn’t grief either. The heaviness I carried lately didn’t just make me sad. I was irrationally irritable at times, then bursting with explosive joyful energy at other times. Like a yo-yo I couldn’t stop.

“Talk to me,” Carter told me as he filled the water reservoir on the coffee machine with water from the tap. He put a K-Cup in, set his mug under the spout, and pressed the brew button. Then he shut the door and sat next to me, taking my hand in his. His fingers weaved together with mine and I stared at the union, almost feeling weepy again in such a short time. “You’re worried about someone?” he asked, prompting me when I said nothing.

“Yeah, my friend. You know the one I told you I had to check on.” My hand itched to twirl my hair, but Carter held it firmly in his.

“What’s going on?” His calm, reassuring tone drew the whole truth out of me, from running into Freya again at the department store to coffee, the bruises, and now this avoidance. He listened with patience, kissing my knuckles a few times, but his eyes never left my face. “And you really think this guy is hurting her, but she doesn’t want help?”

I bobbed a shoulder and pulled my hand away, finally able to tug my ponytail and relieve the anxious energy. “I think she doesn’t want what’s happening to happen anymore. I think she loves him a lot and just wants him to realize his actions hurt her so they can move on and find their happiness again.”

Carter grimaced when I pulled away, but he scooted closer and rested a hand on my knee. “And you also think he’s not going to change?” He phrased it like a question, but it was more of a statement. An indictment against Brad’s character, likely based subconsciously on my ex-boyfriend’s behavior and the way he struck me. I was jaded, believing men couldn’t change.

But as I met Carter’s sincere gaze, I knew that change was possible. He’d sworn off love, avoided serious relationships, and intended to remain single—he told me himself. Until he met me, he’d have been happier alone. He changed...So maybe change was possible for Brad too, but I didn’t see how. Not without intervention.

“Sunny, you can only do so much. If your friend wants help, she will come to you. Don’t put too much pressure on yourself to save someone who doesn’t want to be saved. But—” He squeezed my knee as I blinked back tears to look into his eyes. “We could try helping together. Let’s invite them for a double date, get to know both of them. And see where it takes us.”

He smiled softly, and it made my eyes well up faster than Old Faithful, blowing my top, the dam of my emotions bursting finally. I threw my arms around his shoulders and crushed myself to his chest, squeezing my already-tender tits between our bodies. Something was seriously wrong with me. I wasn’t the crying type, but I couldn’t stop getting emotionally worked up lately. And the achy chest was annoying. My hormones were all out of whack, and I blamed the grieving process.

“You’re amazing, do you know that?” I pulled back far enough to kiss him, and he returned it gently.

“Nah, I think you’re looking in a mirror.” His nose pressed against mine, rubbing in a tiny circle, then he grinned. “But we have patients waiting for us. We’ll have to save this amazingness for dinner later this week. Then you can tell me how amazing I am when you’re sweaty and in a sex haze on my bed.”

I chuckled and kissed him again, then pulled away. He was right; I might not be able to save Freya, but there were sick people in that waiting room who did need my skills. I could at least do something to help someone else today.

“Deal,” I told him, pocketing my phone and standing up. “I’m gonna hold you to that.” With a wink, I turned and strolled out the door, using a tissue from my pocket to clean up my face.

Passing by exam room one I tossed my used tissue into a trash can and felt my phone buzz. My heart jolted a little thinking it was Freya, but it wasn’t. Chad sent me a message which I glowered at.

Chad 1:15 PM: Hey, I left my charger wire at your place and my black hoodie is missing. I need to stop by and get it. When you get this, answer it, and stop ignoring my calls. I want my stuff back.

The lump forming in my throat was an immediate reaction. Every time he called or messaged, I felt the same dread I’d felt for weeks before that night he hit me. He would get so angry, scare me at times, but I found ways to calm him. In some aspects, I was like Freya at that time, hoping it was a phase Chad would go through and move out of at some point. But I wasn’t so smitten with him to overlook the fact that he acted on that anger. Even his apology wasn’t good enough. I knew he’d do it again.

I ignored the message, putting my phone away again, and looked at the door to reception where my next patient was waiting.

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I didn't want to go back to Tampa where I'd have to deal with Chad in person. The idea of it frightened me. I liked the emotional comfort Carter offered and the feeling of being safe to be myself, even if I was just a wreck. Maybe staying in LA wouldn't be that bad after all. Maybe I was ready to admit to myself that I liked Carter enough to move back home permanently.

14

### CARTER

After seeing the interchange between Joseph and Rick on the golf course last week, I had a conversation about this with my CEO. Joseph, now seated on the opposite side of the conference table at the main headquarters, apologized for not informing me of Rick's announcement before golf. Rick had asked him not to say a thing, to let him deliver the news to me himself. It was understandable given that Sunny worked for me at the clinic. It was a touchy topic, even with the way I distanced myself from my father's legacy.

"How are we doing on following the trail upward then?" I asked him. Today's meeting was about the four doctors from two different clinics, owned and operated by me, who had taken bribes from someone within the pharmaceutical company. We had isolated it to these two clinics, though doctors at other clinics nearby, even those not connected to my company, had also mentioned at-risk patients coming to them for access to paid trials too.

"The honest truth is we're stuck right now. The recruitment team is comprised of eleven reps who work with doctors globally. Those eleven reps have teams of five or

six each, all working on diversifying our sample populations and recruiting more individuals to take part in the trial.” Joseph pulled out a stack of papers from the manilla envelope on the table between us and slid it across the shiny surface to me.

I looked down at it and saw the names of some sixty or seventy people involved in our recruitment process, far too many to question individually, besides the fact that they could easily lie or cover things up. And if word got out what we were doing, the real culprits would cut and run, making it even harder to pin them down.

“Yeah, so this is frustrating,” I sighed and tossed the papers back onto the table. The only way to do this was to get our doctor friends to turn on the guilty parties. Even still, those guilty parties might not be at the top of this either. Getting money together to pay doctors incentives for prescribing medications or helping us as boots on the ground had always been a thing, kickbacks for prescription boosts.

Still, while there was a process to accessing those funds, documents could be fudged, numbers faked. I’d had our accountant go through everything, and nothing seemed amiss on the backside. It meant we had to get the doctors from the clinics to turn and possibly push some of our own recruitment reps to turn on higher-ups too. It would go against the grain for everyone because they’d all lose out in this little scheme. My gut told me every one of them was benefitting financially.

With nothing left to do here, I stood and buttoned my suit coat. Until we got more information—which reps were speaking to which clinic doctors, where money was being dispersed—we had little to go on.

“Keep working. And in the meantime, find out what you can about Kira Baker. She entered a trial in the Tampa area within the last six months.”

Joseph’s forehead furrowed. “The woman Rick was speaking about at golf?” His body language was stiff, which told me he already knew about this too. Wisely.

“Yeah, I heard. The research division is already poised for a lawsuit from the woman’s family. The board is looking into what happened; ethics is involved.”

“I’m not interested in whether there’s a lawsuit. We’ll do the right thing for the family and even double what they ask if they sue. I’m more interested in what went wrong. Find out what the drug was and why she wasn’t properly vetted. Something like this should never happen. We’re cutting corners or something.” And my mind continued internally, though I didn’t say to Joseph, that if Sunny found out I was connected to the company that manufactured the drug that killed her best friend, I’d lose her.

“Understood, Carter.” Joseph reached a hand to shake, but I was too upset. I walked out without another word and drove straight downtown with so much on my mind, I almost got lost.

The parking garages were almost full. I found a spot on the top floor of one three blocks away from my destination—a tiny art gallery hosting a wine and canvas night. Sunny had suggested it as a way to bond and blow off some steam, and with the day I’d had, it seemed very fitting. I could soak up some good flavors and revel in her.

When I walked into the gallery, I spotted her immediately. I was a few minutes late, thanks to traffic. She sat behind an easel alone, wearing a soft pink sundress. Her hair sat atop her head, lashed there with a dark pink ribbon in a messy bun. Strands spilled from it, curling around her neck and shoulders, and she looked up at me with a grin, waving me over.

There were two dozen other easels, all of which had couples from all walks of life behind them. The gallery was known for events like this, and Sunny told me they booked out for months. We’d gotten fortunate enough to find an empty easel due to an unexpected cancelation.



I shrugged out of my jacket, draping it over the back of the artists chair, and sat down next to the beautiful woman who held a long paintbrush in hand, grinning at me.

“I’m so glad you’re here. We’re just getting started.” Sunny’s voice was hushed. Her eyes scanned my body and she batted her eyelashes. “You’re overdressed.”

“You are too,” I said playfully. “We can’t really take that off here, though, can we?” I winked and picked up a brush from the tray at the bottom of the easel.

The instructor tapped something on his own easel and started speaking, telling us about the painting we as couples would make as waitresses and waiters walked around filling each couple’s glasses of wine. We would work on a solid background at first, then add in a vase and some flowers. It sounded simple enough, until I started watching Sunny go at it and found myself entranced by how gracefully her brush glided over the canvas.

“Oh, thank you,” I told a young man who filled our glasses with a sweet Moscato as he set a plate of chocolate-covered strawberries next to them. I picked up the glasses and handed one to Sunny after setting my brush down. I hadn’t even painted a stroke.

“Gosh, that smells heavenly,” she said, but her expression soured to a frown.

“What’s wrong?” My immediate desire to chase away whatever was annoying her kicked in as she handed me the glass.

“I’m not sure. I’ve just been feeling too tired and moody. I really want to drink, but I know if I do, I’ll just be too tired to...” She wagged her eyebrows at me and I knew what she meant. I chuckled as I set the glass behind us and downed my own wine in one gulp.

“Well, that’s not stopping me from loosening up a bit.” The chair squawked as I

pulled it across the tile floor closer to her. I positioned myself so that I could place one knee on either side of her and drape my arms around her hips to watch her paint. I was supposed to be painting too, but this felt closer to Zen for me.

“Not going to have a stab at it?” The corner of her mouth lifted in a grin, and I pressed a kiss to her cheek.

“I’ve got what I came for.” Sighing happily, I told her, “It’s so good to see you doing something you enjoy besides work.”

The silent way she acknowledged my comment by continuing her work and watching me in her periphery spoke of the bond we were building. She felt comfortable in my arms, and I loved her here.

“How did your meetings go?” she asked. I’d spoken with her about some important meetings I had, but I hadn’t told her the details. At some point, if we were going to really make a go of this thing, I’d have to tell her. Right now just didn’t feel like the correct time.

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“They were alright. You’re better.” I nuzzled my nose into her neck and nipped at her earlobe. “I don’t want to talk about that when I have such a beautiful woman in my arms.” We must’ve seemed odd to everyone else, a twenty-something bombshell with a middle-aged graying man.

“People are watching,” she giggled as she put more paint on her brush and brought it back to the canvas.

“Let them watch. In fact, let them talk too. I’d love to shout from the rooftops that my heart has found its home and I never want to feel alone again.” My grip on her tightened, and she paused painting to look up at me. Tears were brimming in her eyes, but she blinked hard to push them away.

“If you don’t stop being sweet, I’m gonna cry, and it will ruin my makeup.”

“Well, we can’t have that. I want my blushing beauty to be smiling, not crying.” I grinned at her as she pecked me on the lips before turning back to her canvas.

“I’ve been thinking...” Sunny drew the brush downward, creating the line on the left side of the canvas for the edge of the vase.

“Yeah? About me?”

“Funny,” she said, “but yes.” Her eyes flashed with happiness as she continued. “I was thinking maybe I don’t have to rush back to Tampa after all. I mean, things are good here for now. Tampa is there if I can’t stand it here anymore, but I’m finding my center again. And the company isn’t bad either.”

Warmth spread through my chest and belly at her words, but another rankling sensation gnawed at me in the very same breath. I wanted to lose myself in giddiness over the fact that she might be considering staying here for me. There were complications, however, that threatened to derail anything we managed to build.

Rick would never approve of this. I'd lose my friendship, and what would that disapproval do to his relationship with Sunny? On top of that, when she found out I was the owner of the pharmaceutical company that produced the drug and ran the trial that Kira joined, the drug that killed her...What would Sunny say then?

"I'm so happy you're thinking that way," I said, placing a kiss on her cheek again. She was happily lost in the art, distracted and not noticing how my body stiffened, my chest constricted.

She'd just been through a lot of bad stuff lately. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt her more. Her admitting to considering staying here only brought it home, made things more serious for me. What was I thinking, pretending I could date Rick's daughter behind his back? Thinking Sunny would ever forgive me for letting her friend take a drug that killed her...

Of course it wasn't my fault, but grief—her grief—wouldn't see it that way. She'd see me as the monster, and that was what I was. A monster for even tempting her heart to fall in love. She was going to hate me for that.

15

SUNNY

I yawned as I crawled onto Carter's bed after our long night of painting. Opting for no wine to avoid getting sleepy hadn't helped at all. I was just exhausted no matter what I did. When the painting was finished and people were clearing out of the gallery, I

had energy to spare, so I asked him to bring me back here to his place. Now, I felt like lead weights were tugging my eyelids shut.

“Do you want to rest a while?” he asked thoughtfully as he stretched out next to me. His gentle fingers curled a few hairs around my ear while I tucked my arm under my head and smiled up at him.

“Absolutely not. I don’t know what’s gotten into me lately. I’ve just been too tired to function. Maybe it’s just working longer hours than I was in Tampa. Another yawn snuck its way out, reaching up to wash over me in more waves of fatigue.

“It’s really okay if you need to rest. I can read or watch a show, and if all we do is sleep that’s okay. I’m not expecting anything.” Carter pressed his lips to my forehead. A cloud of his cologne circled me as he did, drawing a smile to my lips again.

“You really are the sweetest man I know. Do you know that?” I thought about other guys I had dated in the past, how their personalities differed from Carter’s. I could chalk it up to him being a bit older and more mature, probably more experienced in life. Or maybe he really did just care about how I was feeling and that was the difference. Those other guys never gave a crap about my heart.

“How about something else that might help you feel better? A back rub?” he asked. I scrunched my nose. “A glass of wine?” I shook my head but kept a straight face. I’d been having suspicions about that slip-up with the condom that day in my father’s Malibu home. The fatigue, the emotions...I wasn’t going to take a chance.

“Alright, then, what about a hot bath?” Carter’s eyes scanned my face, and I thought about it for a second. He was trying so hard to be sweet and take care of me, and while I figured a bath would only make me sleepier, I didn’t want to discourage him.

“Sure, a bath sounds great,” I replied and then watched as he slid off the bed to scurry

away and draw a bath for me.

Having a man who would go to any length to help me warmed my heart. I let my eyes close and relaxation sink me into the sheets while I listened to him preparing things in the bathroom. Eventually, I felt a soft hand on my shoulder and a shake.

“You dozed off...Do you still want the bath?” Carter asked, hovering over me.

I blinked hard a few times and nodded, rolling to my back to let him take my hand and help me up. It was only a little after nine, but it felt like midnight as I rose to my feet and followed him into the bathroom.

He had a steaming bubble bath ready, candles lit, soft music playing. I drowsily blinked and let him help me out of my clothing. His hands trailed over my skin, lips kissing softly in nonsexual places until I was nude. Then he helped me climb in and sit down.

The water was perfect, not too hot, not too cold, but I felt lonely. “Stay with me?” I said, peering up at his towering form.

“Wouldn’t dream of leaving.” Carter winked as he loosened his tie and slid it off. Then he unbuttoned his cuffs and rolled up his sleeves. He knelt beside the tub and took my hand.

“You don’t have to undress too,” I explained, flushing a deep red as my brain caught up with my mouth.

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“Oh.” He chuckled, a low rumble that sent butterflies spiraling in my belly. “I only planned on washing your back.” He smiled coyly and winked at me again before he unbuttoned his shirt and let it fall to the floor. His chest was sculpted and muscular. I tried not to ogle him but it was just too difficult not to stare at the perfect specimen in front of me.

“With abs like that, you can wash my back anytime.” I snickered, ducking my head into the bubbles for a moment to hide my blush. Suddenly, I felt like a teenager, hiding a secret crush on a much older man. Carter grinned at me and cocked his head.

“Feeling a bit better?” he asked as I rose back out of the bubbles and wiped them off my face.

“Well, when you start taking your clothes off it does something to me.” I shrugged a shoulder and felt the blush deepen. I was still exhausted, but the idea of feeling him against me was comforting. “Want to join me?”

I didn’t have to ask him twice. The water level rose a little as Carter settled into the tub behind me, nestling against my back. I sank deeper into the tub, letting my heavy eyelids fall as I leaned back against him. Relaxation seeped through every inch of me as his fingers kneaded away the knots that had formed in my muscles from painting. The combination of the warmth, the bubbles, and his presence lulled me into a state of utter relaxation.

“You’re right, this was exactly what I needed.” My eyes drooped closed for just a second before popping back open again when he stopped massaging me.

As he worked his way down my back and then back up again, I couldn't remember the last time I had felt this safe or cared for. We really did have a deep bond forming, and I was stupid to deny it. It didn't matter to me that he was older than me by fifteen years or that he'd been divorced, or even that he was my dad's best friend. What mattered was our connection, the fact that we'd found each other and that our hearts were bound together by so many things.

"You know," I started thinking of how Carter had said maybe I'd find something worth staying here for. "I've been thinking."

His hands continued to massage me, every now and then finding a sensitive spot. I lay against his chest with my eyes pressed shut and he kissed my temple.

"What's that?"

"If I stayed here in LA, and we did this..." Gesturing with my hand, I made water slosh around. "This thing we're doing. How do you think my dad would react?"

Carter didn't answer right away, instead his hands stilled and his breathing hitched in his chest. When he spoke, his voice was a soft rumble in my ear. "He wouldn't be happy, but I think if you're happy, that's all he'd really care about." I wasn't sure if that was true at all. Deep down, I was worried that Dad finding out I was dating Carter would be like a nuke dropped on my family. Dad would be livid.

I turned slowly over my shoulder and saw the concerned expression on his face. It looked like he'd put some thought into this too.

"I know it's a lot to ask you to stir up more drama with your dad after everything you've been through." Carter ran a hand through his dark hair, and I wondered if he was having doubts about his friendship with Dad.



“It’s not that simple,” I said, feeling the last of my resistance crumbling away. It was too good with Carter, this connection we had. I couldn’t walk away from him now, not when I finally felt like I belonged somewhere. “Things with Dad haven’t ever been simple.”

“No, I get it,” Carter said, releasing a long breath. “And you’re right, we don’t know how he would react until we tell him.”

“So, you’re okay with us giving this a try? You and me?” Taking each other’s hands in the water between us, I looked into his eyes—saw the want and hope flickering there.

Carter nodded and brought my hands up to his face to kiss my knuckles. “I want this more than you could ever know.”

I felt a weight lift off my chest as I leaned in to press my lips against his. It was slow and tender, the kind of kiss that made my heart skip a beat and the butterflies in my stomach double in number. Carter’s arm slid around my waist, pulling me close as our mouths melded together. With each brush of his warm lips against mine, my willingness to fight for our happily ever after only grew stronger—no matter what the cost.

A longing started to grow in my core too. The intimate moment of finally getting our hearts and minds on the same page gave me a burst of energy I wanted to expend pouring out my affection on him. I deepened the kiss and took my hands from his, resting them on his shoulders. He gripped my hips harder and pulled me down onto his lap where I felt his swelling member.

“Carter...” I breathed needily against his lips. Those cerulean eyes of his only darkened as he slid a hand up the inside of my leg, sending goosebumps over my whole body.

“I think I’m falling for you, Sunny,” he said against my lips before reclaiming them once more. His other hand slid down my torso and under the water where he found most definitely not-innocent places to explore. I gasped into his mouth and dug my nails into his shoulders.

“Mmm, Carter,” I moaned. His name on my lips sounded sweet, intoxicating. I wanted to hear it on repeat forever.

The hand around my thigh moved higher up, until a calloused thumb slipped over my clit and my breath hitched. Carter’s lips moved down my jawline, trailing heated kisses along my neck as he made his way to my collarbone. I arched into his touch, feeling more alive than I had in weeks. The world around me was slowly melting away, leaving only the two of us in this moment where I could forget anything but his touch.

“Carter,” I moaned again as his kisses trailed lower, lifting up to keep pressure constant on that sweet spot between my thighs as he gripped his dick and positioned it.

He groaned and bit gently at the column of skin between neck and collarbone before saying roughly, “Let me have you now, and don’t hold anything back from me anymore.”

With a moan of approval, I pulled Carter’s face back up to mine and kissed him with every ounce of desire that filled me. It was searing hot, lustful. He held himself upright as I slowly sank down, the head of his dick pushing against my slick entrance until I held it in place. Then his hand moved, and it was all in my control.

I leaned forward, taking him inch by inch until his cock was at my cervix. My body stretched and clenched around him as he filled me so completely, his pelvis pressing against my heat. Our breaths mingled in the humid air as our eyes met and held. I

could see the same fire burning brightly in his that matched mine—a desire to consummate us, to prove we were worth the risk no matter what happened tomorrow.

“You are so incredible,” he breathed, “so beautiful.”

“Mmm,” was all I could answer as my eyes fluttered shut and my head hung back.

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Carter began to move, his cock sliding in and out of me, long deep thrusts that lit a fire inside me. I clung to him for dear life, my grip tight on his shoulders as I moaned through gritted teeth. Water sloshed around us, up and over the rim of the bath, and my lips crashed against his with force. Carter groaned against my lips before biting one and sucking it into his mouth. The slow, delicious burn of orgasm started to build in the pit of my stomach, radiating heat outward through my veins.

As he thrust into me again and again, I couldn't stop the whimpers and moans escaping me. Carter cupped my breasts, massaging them and twisting a nipple between finger and thumb while his other thumb continued to rub my clit in small even circles. With a muffled cry I shattered around him, my muscles contracting hard around his cock as pleasure coursed through every fiber of my being.

I twitched and jerked. My hips clenched around him involuntarily, feeling every final thrust as he grunted out a stream of profanities. His movements were concentrated, purposeful as he drove my orgasm until his eyebrows rose.

"God, I'm gonna," he grunted, and I lifted off of him, allowing his dick to pulse white stringy loads of cum into the bathwater. Carter jerked and twitched, but his thumb continued to rub my clit.

He smiled and looked up at me through heavy eyelids, and I rose slowly on shaky legs. "Let's not sit in that," I said, cringing, and he chuckled.

We climbed out, rinsed off in the shower, and then he dried me off, wrapping the towel around me before drying himself. I waited while he pulled the drain plug so the water could drain. His hand rode the small of my back as we walked to bed where I

curled up on my side, feeling a bit nauseous from all the activity.

We were on the same page about what we wanted—a chance to have a real relationship now, one I felt like I was finally ready to have. But even as he pulled me against his chest and peppered my shoulder and cheek with kisses, I felt uneasy.

“What if Dad freaks out entirely?” I asked him, but inside I also wanted to ask what if I’m pregnant? Because everything was seeming to point to that. The drunken romp in my bedroom the day we met five weeks ago was fun, but my gut told me we had made a mistake.

“Then we’ll talk it out, okay? He’s your dad, baby. He’s going to love you forever no matter what. He might get mad for a while, but he’ll get over it.” More kisses rained on my damp skin and Carter’s arm tightened around my middle again.

“What about you?” I asked. Dad and Carter were good friends. If this destroyed their friendship, I’d never forgive myself.

“We’ll be fine, Sunny. Stop worrying.”

Carter’s words weren’t as reassuring as he probably hoped them to be, mostly because half of my question remained unanswered. What would he think if he found out I suspected being pregnant? He’d already told me how gut-wrenching it was to lose a child, how he wasn’t really fond of the idea of more children because of his trauma and the fear of it happening again. How would he feel if I really was pregnant?

How would I feel?

## CARTER

Nudging the bedroom door with my toe, I carried the tray of breakfast into my room. Sunny lay on her side with her phone in hand scowling at the screen, and I could already imagine who it was and what they wanted. She'd been sleeping when I slid out of bed to make her this plate full of eggs, sausage, and buttered toast. Now, she looked up at me and sighed.

"Everything okay?" I asked her, padding softly to the bedside to set the tray on the nightstand. I reached behind the stand to pull out the lap desk I kept back there.

"Dad...Ugh!" she groaned and turned to her back, holding the sheet to her chest. "He demands to know where I am and why I never came home. I sent Mom a text yesterday before wine and canvas night that I may stay out all night. She knows I'm dating someone and?—"

"You told your mom?" I grinned at her feeling a bit giddy that she'd told Melanie about us, even if only in theory and not my name.

Sunny smiled as she pushed herself up on the bed, and I set the lap desk over her thighs. "Yeah, so what if I did?" Her hand rose to her lips and she looked a little green, her smile fading as quickly as it appeared.

"You okay?" The last few days she'd seemed off. In fact, she told me last night how sleepy she'd been for a week now, and all the signs pointed toward the flu bug that'd been going around for a while.

"Just feeling...off," she mumbled, but she swallowed hard and I knew what was coming.

Sunny pushed the lap desk away and threw back the covers, almost knocking the tray

of food off the nightstand. I watched her rush to the bathroom as I readjusted the tray, and I heard her throwing up, which further proved my point. She was sick, and I needed to take care of her.

When I walked into the bathroom, she was kneeling on the floor next to my toilet, hair held to the side with one hand. I crouched next to her and took it, holding it for her so she had two hands free. It was a very humbling position for her—naked and vomiting—but I tried to make it less awkward for her by resting my hand on her back and talking gently to her.

“Shh, hey, it’s okay.” I’d seen several cases of the flu already this month, so it wasn’t a surprise that she was sick. When you worked in a clinic around sick people all day, you tended to either build a healthy immune system or you got sick frequently. Sunny appeared to be the latter.

“Wow, I don’t feel well.” Sunny pressed a hand to her chest and looked up at me in her periphery. I snagged some toilet paper and handed it to her, and she mopped herself up. When she flushed the toilet, which was mostly water and stomach acid seeing as she didn’t eat dinner last night and no breakfast yet this morning, I helped her stand.

“Well, let’s get you back to bed then,” I said, letting go of her hair. She stooped to slurp some water from the sink and rinse her mouth, then she let me guide her back to the bedroom where she covered her mouth and nose at the sight of the breakfast I cooked.

“Wow, I don’t think I can eat. I’m so sorry.”

“No worries, babe. Just rest a bit.” I folded back the covers and let her climb in, checked her forehead to see if she felt feverish—she didn’t—then I carried the food out of the bedroom. In the kitchen, I scarfed as much down as I could in a few

seconds, then I grabbed some water and mints and returned to the bedroom to find her lying on her side.

Her hair was splayed out on the pillow behind her, and she looked at peace with her eyes shut. They popped open as I sat on the edge of the bed and took her hand in mine.



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“Stay with me for the day. Let me take care of you.” I pushed some strands of her hair off her face and tucked them around her ear. She blinked slowly, fatigue weighing on her. Even if the only thing she did all day was sleep, I’d feel better knowing she was being cared for properly. At home, she would lock herself away and suffer in isolation.

“Alright, but I’m not staying in bed all day. I want fresh air. I think it will help me.” Sunny sighed softly. I could tell she was exhausted, but the fight in her wouldn’t quit. She was right, however, some fresh air would do her good.

“I know just the place,” I told her and smiled.

Two hours later, after a shower, a piece of dry toast, and a long drive, we pulled up to one of my favorite spots in all of California. The orchard in Moorpark had been around for ages, and I used to visit every fall until Hope died. Sunny’s eyes lit up at the sight, and I knew I’d made the right choice.

“Oh my gosh, it’s so cute,” she squealed, but she couldn’t hide the tiredness in her eyes. I knew she was feeling miserable, and I hoped the sunshine and fresh air would help her feel better.

“Yes, and we’re going to pick fruit and have a walk, but if you get tired or you’re not feeling it, you let me know.” I unbuckled my seat belt and angled my body to face her.

“I promise,” she said, and the smile on her face lit up the car as she opened the door.

I took her hand, and we walked into the barn where rows of shelves stacked full of produce and jars of products made from it lined the walls and center. It felt more like a grocery store than a barn despite the dirt floor, which gave it a unique home-grown aesthetic. Sunny's eyes scanned everything, and her fingers weaved through mine.

"Oh gosh, I just love it." She stopped by some bright green apples and picked one up, but I clicked my tongue.

"This isn't where we pick them, silly." I nodded at the door out the back of the barn and smiled. "Out there..." I didn't think her smile could get any brighter. I put my hand in the small of her back as she set the apple back down, then we stopped by the counter and took a pale green basket for our fruit.

She rested her head on my shoulder as I led her through the rest of the barn, where handmade crafts and leather works were displayed, and into the sun on the back side.

"How did you know about this place?" Her hand rested on my stomach, arm wrapped around my back.

"Oh, I learned about it years ago and used to come here a lot." I thought of Hope, how I wished she was here to enjoy the sunshine and picking fruit. She'd have been old enough to eat some of it now all on her own, but life never gave us that chance. I was happy, though, to share this with Sunny.

"Thank you for bringing me here," she said, and then she pulled away with a playfulness to her gait. She snatched my hand and started pulling me, and we ran like kids toward the apple grove where fruit trees sprawled their branches out, laden with heavy fruits ripe for picking.

Before our basket was even full, Sunny's phone started to ring. She didn't pull it out. Instead, she kept reaching for more fruit, and I paused to ask, "Aren't you going to

get that?”

“It’s just Dad. He’s just going to lecture me again.” Her words helped me see the frustration she’d been going through, something I wish I could remove from her shoulders. He was her father and he cared, and while I didn’t necessarily agree with his tactics, I did think she misunderstood him.

“Sunny, you should answer.” I held the basket back and offered a gentle look of disapproval and she sighed, dropping another apple in the basket.

“Fine,” she huffed as she pulled it out, but her eyebrows went up. “It’s not Dad.” Her face blanched as she swiped across the screen, and I didn’t get a look at it before she held the phone to her ear and said, “Hello, Mrs. Baker.”

I didn’t immediately recognize the name, but I could see it was something that was affecting her. We walked away from the grove, toward a bench near the fence line leading back to the barn. Sunny sat as she listened, every once in a while glancing up at my face. The longer she listened with the phone pressed to her ear, the longer her face looked, until the same fatigue from this morning had returned to etch itself across her forehead.

“Yes, thank you for calling me. It’s good to know.” I sat beside her and put the basket on the ground at our feet as she ended her call with a goodbye, and my hand instinctively went to her back as she sat slouched over, staring at the phone.

“Is everything okay?” I was concerned, but not overly so. Sunny was a strong woman, and though she’d been through a lot, she was handling it better than most people.

“It was Kira’s mom,” she said, looking up to meet my gaze. “They know what happened.”

After learning from Rick that Kira had been involved in one of our drug trials when she died, I braced myself for this news. I thought it would come from Joseph or Rick even, not Sunny. But fate ordained that we'd be together today during this call, and it meant I had to be strong for her and leave my worries out of it.

"Do you want to talk about it?" My hand smoothed circles against her back as she toyed with her phone, unlocking it and locking it again over and over. Her head hung again, and I watched tears drip to her knees and dampen the fabric of her shorts.

"They said there was a complication, something about the drug she was trialing and a comorbidity." Sunny sniffled and then looked up at me. "They didn't test her for diabetes, and the drug was hard on the kidneys. I never knew she was diabetic. I don't think she knew she was diabetic either..." Sunny's lip quivered, and I pulled her against my chest as she started to cry.

Of all the things to happen, this was a major failure on the part of the company. The team should've done the proper testing and not just taken a person's word for things. This should have never happened.

"That's really tough," I said, not knowing what to say. Guilt flooded my chest, consuming my thoughts. I should have been there for her, but I was fighting myself now.

"She had a heart attack because her kidneys shut down. I should've seen it, Carter. I should've helped her." Sunny was a blubbering mess. I gripped her by both shoulders and pulled her back to look her in the eye.

"This is not your fault, okay? You didn't do this, and there was no way you could have known." My words came out a little forceful, but I couldn't let her blame herself, not for this. It was the same way I felt when Hope passed, like I could've stopped it, or seen the signs. But there was no way for anyone to predict what would

happen in either circumstance, and it took me months of counseling to fix that one tiny thought.

“Look, let me take you back to my place.” I stood and took her hand. Suddenly the basket of fruit didn’t seem so important anymore.

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“No, I want to go home. I want my mom.” She stood with me, picking up the basket, and we headed for the barn.

I was a little disappointed that she would rather go to Melanie for comfort than me, but I understood. A woman always needs her mother even late into life. So we paid for the fruit and walked to the car. I drove quietly, holding her hand as she cried and used all the napkins from my glove box, and when we got to Rick and Melanie’s house, I insisted on walking her to the door. In her emotional state, she didn’t stop to protest.

As we approached the front door, Rick swung it open. His eyes were drawn in sadness, lips pursed, and he stared at me in confusion. “Carter, what are you doing here?”

“I’ll call you, okay?” Sunny said, glancing at me, then Rick. She passed by him and vanished into the house while I stood on the stoop watching her, my heart aching.

“What’s wrong with her?” Rick demanded, and I sighed.

“She’s just heard about her friend’s death, the cause of it...” The only thing on my mind was how desperately Sunny must’ve been hurting and how guilty I was that my company had made such a horrific mistake. I could never go back and fix it; death was as permanent as things come.

Rick loomed in the doorway, staring at me, until his face of concern contorted into a scowl. “Was Sunny at work? What were you doing with her?”

I had no excuse. The clinic was closed today. No one was working. And after that conversation with her last night, about the two of us dating and telling Rick, I couldn't continue the charade. I looked him in the eye with all the courage I could muster and did what I thought was unthinkable.

“Rick, Sunny and I are seeing each other. We were out together when she got the call, and I brought her home to?—”

“You what!” he spat. His face flushed red instantly, and his grip on the doorknob tightened until his knuckles were white. “What on earth?”

“Rick, I'm sure this is a shock, and I'll give you all the time you need to absorb it, but I love your daughter, and we are trying to make this work.” I stood firmly, jaw set, eyes locked on him, watching him grow angrier by the second.

“Get out of here.” Rick's chest puffed out and he backed into the house, just inside the darkness where his features took on a menacing look. “And stay away from my daughter. My God, Carter, she's a child.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but he continued in a booming voice that startled me.

“She's vulnerable and broken, and when she finds out it was your company behind all of this, do you understand how hurt she'll be?” He shook his head, and without another word he slammed the door in my face.

I stood there for a second feeling hurt and broken, but guilt soon flooded my chest, then my mind, then my gut. Rick was right. I had no clue what I was doing. The minute I found out my company was involved in that trial, I should have told her. I should have told her who I really was from the beginning and not waited, and now it would seem like I was hiding things from her, manipulating her. I was such an idiot.

And when Sunny found out, she'd be devastated. She'd never speak to me again.

17

SUNNY

I heard the shouting, Dad going off on Carter, but I didn't stop to intervene. I was too upset to listen to any of it or deal with it. I walked straight to my room and shut the door, collapsing on my bed in a heap of emotion and tears. Only moments later, I heard the door slam and Dad's angry stomping in the hallway.

My door burst open, and I blinked my eyes open to see through blurry, teary vision that Dad stood with a glare on his face in the doorway. He seemed larger than normal, like those times when I was a kid and I'd done something wrong, and he put the fear of God in me with nothing more than an angry expression.

"Soleil, what were you thinking? The man is twice your age. You can't go sleeping around with?—"

"Stop!" I spat, forcing myself upward. My stomach rolled again, threatening to force more bile up, and the toast Carter insisted I eat. I was done—sick of him telling me what to do, where to live, what to think or feel. I had enough. "Dad, you can't keep getting in the middle of my life. I'm not a child anymore. I'm twenty-eight years old. I've lived on my own for almost ten years, and I'm only back because of what happened."

"Soleil, I?—"

"No," I said, cutting him off again. "No, I've had enough. I know you care, but I am my own person, and I'm not listening to you anymore. You can't fix me up or control my life. And you don't have a say in who I date or what I do." Hot tears burned my



eyes and cheeks. I was supposed to be grieving, not fighting my parents. “I just found out why Kira died, and I’m really upset, but all you care about is the fact that I was out with Carter. Can’t you see how messed up that is?”

“Soleil, I’m sorry, I just...” Dad’s words failed him for the first time in my entire life.

“Please leave my room, and please stop nosing into my life.” I waited as he backed out of the room just as angry as he’d come in, but he didn’t say another word. I’d made my point, though I didn’t know how well it would stick later on when I had to sit across from him at dinner and look him in the eye.

I couldn’t believe what Mrs. Baker told me about Kira. If only she had known that her body wasn’t handling her blood sugars correctly and that because of it her kidneys were already struggling, she would be alive. I should’ve known, and looking back I blamed myself because the signs were there. Her constant sense of thirst, being fatigued and bleary-eyed, the way she said her fingers tingled sometimes. All signs of high sugar I should’ve pointed out and never thought about.

Sobs wracked my body so hard I never heard when Mom walked in. She curled up behind me on the bed and wrapped her entire body around me like I was a little girl again. I felt the tissues she shoved into my hand and wiped my nose, but nothing would ease this ache. This all came down to something very preventable. And on top of all of this, throwing up this morning at Carter’s house only made my very real fears even more palpable.

“Hey, baby, it’s okay. Listen, take a deep breath, okay? This isn’t good for your health. Your blood pressure has to be so high right now.” Mom sat up and brushed hair out of my face. Obviously, she’d heard the news too, or she’d be asking what’s wrong. Or maybe she heard Dad screaming at Carter. I didn’t know.

“Mom, she should be alive,” I whimpered, dabbing my face again. I hadn’t felt this

amount of pain in weeks, and it was all too much. I blurted out, “Mom, I’m not okay. I’m worried.”

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She reached for more tissues from the box on my nightstand and shoved them into my hand with a look of confusion. “What’s wrong, dear? Is it because of what Dad said?” She shook her head. “I heard...I’m not sure what to think. Dr. Price is well?—”

“Mom, please,” I whimpered. “Don’t lecture me. I’m really freaking out.”

Mom stopped and held my hand for a second. With my free hand I wiped my face again. “The heart wants what it wants, Sunny. I can’t tell you not to feel things. I just want to caution you that you’re grieving right now, and if you saw things more clearly maybe?—”

“Mom, my God,” I hissed. At least she wasn’t lecturing me. “I think I’m pregnant.” The truth blurted out sounded a lot harsher than the way I wanted it to come out, but it was alive now, swimming around this room and her brain.

“Oh dear,” she sighed. “Okay, well...” Mom nodded a few times and smiled politely, then looked into my eyes and said, “Sunny, life has a funny way of working things out, alright? So, let’s not get too worked up right away.”

The tears finally slowed enough for me to catch my breath and think about things. It felt so bittersweet thinking I may be bringing a life into this world on the heels of losing my bestfriend, like she was passing her soul to me for safekeeping. And sitting in this silence with my mother not criticizing me allowed me the space to process things.

“I’m a little scared.” Honestly, I was terrified. Carter made it clear he didn’t want

kids. I was dumb to think he'd be happy about this at all. He would think I was a foolish immature woman, and he'd be furious. Not to mention his own fears—how could I do that to him? Trigger his PTSD from losing his child?

“Alright, well the first thing we do is get a test to clear the air. We can't react until we have facts.” Mom nodded solemnly and stood up, letting my hand drop to my lap. “Don't worry, I won't tell Dad, at least not right now. You'll have to do it though, because he's a smart man, Sunny.” She clicked her tongue at me. “I'm surprised he didn't figure out you were seeing Dr. Price when we had that dinner and you rushed off all flustered.”

“You knew?” I asked, peering up at her.

“I suspected...” Mom winked and walked to the door. “I'll be back. You just rest.”

I rolled back onto my side and curled up, pulling the comforter over my head. If Mom let it slip to Dad, for sure Dad would go right to Carter and tear his head off again. This whole thing was a huge mess at a very bad time. I couldn't even take care of myself properly. How would I care for a baby? And what would Carter think anyway?

Mom said not to react without facts, but there was no way I was stopping this panic from consuming every ounce of energy I had left. I closed my eyes and prayed to whatever god was listening that he could make this all nothing but a bad dream I would wake up from. I couldn't handle any more loss in my life right now. I wanted Carter by my side for a long time, not running away flaming mad.

“It’s nothing but the flu, Mr. Heath, I assure you. You’re going to be absolutely fine. Just take the cough medicine and make sure you’re hydrating. If your heart rate goes up again, I suggest going to the hospital. Dehydration can be serious with this strain.” I smiled at the older man whose hands still shook even though I’d tried to reassure him. He came in with a racing heart thinking it was a heart attack, and it was nothing but a bit of dehydration. I gave him an IV for fluids and some prescriptions.

“Thank you so much, Dr. Price,” he said before another coughing fit. I helped him off the exam table, offered a tissue to cover his mouth, then ushered him out and promptly used hand sanitizer to clear my hands of the germs.

Sunny had been out for two days now, calling in sick before I arrived both days. Jackson took the calls and told me she was suffering from the flu, like half the people coming in. I wasn’t surprised. After the weekend and seeing how ill she was at my house, then getting the shocking news of Kira Baker’s cause of death, I figured she’d have a rough week. I just didn’t think she’d ignore my texts and calls the way she was, which told me she was probably sicker than either of us thought. I was surprised I had no symptoms.

Following Mr. Heath out, I let him into the reception area to pay his bill with our volunteer receptionist and walked on toward the break room. I needed five minutes to myself after seeing so many patients this morning. Jackson was in a room with another, and at least five more sat in the waiting area, which I noticed as Mr. Heath walked out. The day promised to be insane again. We could really use Sunny’s help, but if she was truly sick, she was in the right place at home.

I sat at the break table and dialed her number for the third time in two days, only to get her voicemail again. I was worried, but not just about whether she was feeling well. The news about Kira was shocking, and then I’d gone and dropped a bombshell in Rick’s lap. His outrage at my announcement shocked me. I knew he’d be perturbed, but I didn’t figure he’d have thrown me out of his house over it. We were

adults; we should've been able to sit down and talk things out.

So, when a fourth call to Sunny's phone went unanswered, I decided to do the next best thing. I dialed Rick's number and waited as it rang through.

"Now's not a good time, Price," Rick said as a gruff answer. He hadn't called me by my last name in years, which was a testament to how angry he was about this whole situation.

"Hello to you too, Rick. I'm calling to ask you a sincere question, and I hope you can at least give me a straight answer." I was shocked he even answered at all. Perhaps our friendship wasn't entirely dismantled by my profession of affection for his daughter.

Rick didn't say anything. I heard a vacuum running in the background and assumed he was at home. He had to have been aware that Sunny wasn't feeling well since she lived with him, but to what extent he'd give details was a mystery.

"Sunny hasn't come to work since last week. I knew on Saturday morning she was feeling ill, and I was calling to check on her, as her boss." I added that last part to remind him that I did have official reasons for calling to check, that not everything was about the relationship.

He grunted in a very unhappy sound, but said, "Soleil is sick. She's been in bed for days now. Melanie is caring for her, and we don't need your concern. I don't know if she's returning to work." The last bit shocked me. After the intimate moment we shared in the bath Friday night, I figured she'd have felt differently about things. If this was Rick's attempt at controlling her by not allowing her to return to work, I was going to be furious.

"Why do you have such a hard time understanding that we're two consenting adults

who actually care about one another? Rick, you're a smart man. She's grown up. You don't have to protect her from me. You know me?—"

"Well, you don't exactly have a child, now do you? So how would you know what a father might feel if his daughter dates a man twenty years older than her?"

His words were a slap to the face. Rage flushed my body making my cheeks burn. I bit my tongue and pulled the phone away from my ear, but I couldn't respond. If I did, it wasn't going to be pretty at all, so I hung up instead, choosing to take the high road.

Tears pricked my eyes. What I wouldn't have done to have my little girl here, to fiercely protect her the way Rick was guarding Sunny's heart and mind, thinking I was bad for her. The jab hit me right where it hurt; he had intended it to do that. I wondered how long it took him to think that up, but stewing on it was only going to make me go mad with frustration.

I rubbed my forehead and jerked my sleeves down into place, then dialed Sunny's number again, only for it to go directly to voicemail again. This time, I left a message.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:40 am*

“Sunny, babe, call me. I know you’re sick, but I just need to know you’re okay and that you’re doing alright with this news...” I paused, thinking of what else I could say to her to help her come out of this shell she’d hidden in, but I had nothing except, “I love you.” Maybe it was dumb of me to say that on a voicemail and not in person, but I felt it, and I learned the hard way to never let anything go unexpressed because life was too short.

“Doc!” Jackson called, looking for me, and I sighed. It was time to get back to work, but I’d carry the weight of that interaction with Rick the rest of the day.

I rose and slid my phone into my pocket to return to work, but it started buzzing, an incoming call. As I strolled back toward the reception area, I pulled it out, thinking it might be Sunny calling me back finally, but the number and caller ID were from Joseph. I looked up at Jackson, who had a haul of patients headed for exam room one.

Narrowing my eyes at him in question, I cocked my head and he said, “Family—same symptoms.”

“Ah,” I told him as he ushered them into the room. He stood in the hallway looking back at me.

“One sec,” I told him, then answered the call. “Yeah, it’s Price.”

“Carter, I need you to come down here. Just drop everything you’re doing. I have the two doctors who’ve been doing the baiting, and I want you here when I talk to them.” Joseph sounded rushed, almost out of breath, and it made my heart jump.



“Crap,” I hissed, knowing the work load we were already under. “I’ll be there as fast as I can.”

Jackson cast a doubtful look my way and asked, “What is it?”

I moved toward him, already feeling bad for what I was about to ask him, but this couldn’t wait. We’d been looking into this for weeks now, and with the development happening in our branch in Florida, we had to move on this when we could. The last thing we needed were more patients being poorly screened and having issues. These people were sometimes desperate to make a little extra cash.

“Remember what I told you about those doctors in other clinics baiting patients to join trials?” My eyebrows rose as I pocketed my phone again, already wondering what traffic would be like.

“Yeah, what’s going on?”

“Well, Joe needs me at headquarters. We’re gonna talk to them in person. I gotta go man. I’ll be back as fast as I can, but this is super important.” I loosened my tie and ran a hand through my hair, and he nodded.

“Yeah, yeah...go, man. I got this. No problem.”

Another glance through the pane glass window at the waiting area told me he most definitely didn’t have this, but I had no choice. “You’re a lifesaver, man.”

I rushed out and into my car. In fifteen minutes, I was exiting the elevator sending Joseph a message that I was there. He met me down the hall from the conference room. His hair was disheveled like he’d been pulling it, and I felt just as frazzled as he looked.

“So have you been in to see them? What did you tell them they were here for?” My words were rushed, and I understood why he was flustered. I felt flustered too—confronting them wouldn’t be easy.

“I just asked them to come down. They don’t know. And no. I haven’t been in to see them at all. I was waiting for you. I’m not sure how to approach this all.” He stuck a finger in his collar and tugged on it.

These guys probably thought they were doing the company a service, and they’d be shocked to learn that we weren’t so happy about what was happening. They were part of the problem, but not the whole of it though, and we had to find out who was at the top of this to put an end to it. If we punished the doctors and not the recruiters in charge of the payouts, we’d have to come back to this situation in different clinics with different physicians later on.

“Let’s go in then,” I told him, sucking in a breath to help myself remain calm. The frustration over Rick’s insult was still swirling in my chest. I wanted to be levelheaded about this and not go off the rails because my friend was a total jerk. PTSD triggers aside, this was a challenging conversation to have.

Joseph opened the door and we breezed in. I’d never met these two doctors, didn’t know them from Adam, but they both knew me. I was certain of that. There was recognition on their faces as they stood and extended their hands in greeting.

“Thank you for coming in,” Joe told them as we shook hands, and then we all sat down around the oblong table. Waters had been set out by someone, condensation clinging to the glasses. I massaged the bridge of my nose before beginning what might be a very heated conversation.

“Gentlemen, I appreciate you coming in to have a discussion with us. I’m sure you are probably wondering why you’re here.” My phone buzzed in my pocket, but I

ignored it in favor of getting to the truth. “It’s come to our attention that both of you have been working with our recruitment team to invite people to join our recent drug trials.”

The men exchanged confused and nervous glances. One of them, whose name tag read Dr. Peters, said, “Yes, that’s right.”

I cleared my throat; it felt constricted like a snake had coiled around it choking me. “We are concerned about the ethics of inviting low-income patients into paid drug trials. We feel it’s unethical and that we are putting patients’ lives at risk by not carefully considering them.”

“With all due respect, Mr. Price,” the other man, Dr. Wilkinson, said, “It’s not our job to vet the people for the trials. We’re just paid to tell them about it.” His eyes were firm, but the man next to him looked a little squeamish.

“You’re not in trouble here,” I told them, though I didn’t care for how he disrespected me by not using my proper title. “We’re just trying to get to the bottom of this so we can improve our methods and ensure every person in the trial is qualified and not at risk.” Sunny’s words about Kira not being screened properly ate away at my conscience. That never should’ve happened, but it was a whole different problem. We shouldn’t have been preying on low-income individuals and their need for financial stability with untested drugs.

“What Dr. Price is trying to say, gentlemen, is that we’re doing our own internal process for quality assurance.” I hated how Joseph boiled it down to how business was run, but that was his job. Make the business run smoothly. “We’d like the name of the men you are working with. Nothing more.”

The true test was if they’d cough up the names. Now that they knew we were looking into things, they probably could deduce that we were cutting off the cash flow and

their moneymaker would go up in smoke. Both of them stared at us, tight-lipped and silent.

“We’re not on a witch hunt to punish anyone; we just want to do what’s right,” I told them, but I could tell by their expressions they weren’t going to give up information so easily. I settled in for what could be a very long conversation and pulled my phone out to see what notification I’d missed.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:41 am*

It was a message from Sunny, so I opened it immediately.

Sunny 11:47 AM:I'm feeling a bit better. Have dinner with me?

My chest released like a bowstring firing an arrow, the tension coiling outward until I could breathe again. One thing at a time, my life felt like it was correcting itself slowly, hopefully. I didn't respond, choosing to focus on the meeting, but I was glad she had made an effort to reach out. I was beginning to think Rick had brainwashed her into thinking I was evil.

Right now, I had to get through this meeting, then I could go have a very hard discussion with her. I had to tell her what was going on before someone else did. It was the only way to salvage the relationship because I knew how upset she would be.

19

SUNNY

Carter and I went back and forth a few times this afternoon but finally decided on me arriving at his house around seven for dinner. I stood at his doorstep wringing my hands. Dad grilled me before leaving as to who I'd be with and where I was going, and I made it very clear to him that I wasn't telling him and that I didn't like how he insisted on knowing every detail. He was upset, but I slipped out when my Uber arrived.

"Sunny," Carter breathed out in a deep exhale. He pulled me into his arms before I could say hello and kissed the crook of my neck, burying his face there. "How are

you doing?”

When he pulled away, I met his gaze and felt gut sick again. I’d made the decision to come over and tell him about the baby right away. The guilt was consuming me and so was the nervous energy. I’d thrown up so many times this past weekend, I felt like my insides would fall out any second. I couldn’t keep carrying this, fearing his reaction.

“I’m better,” I told him, smiling, but it was a fake smile, plastic—imitation. I’d learned over the years to wear this professional smile on hard days and especially around my father. For all Carter knew, I had the flu and was healthy again. My news would probably gut him, but I hoped that somehow I could reach through the mess of fear and triggers to find the man who adored his baby that passed. The man who originally wanted a child and loved being a father.

“Come in,” he said, glancing over my shoulder like he expected someone to be watching us. He ushered me into his living room which was a bit messier than I remembered. Stacks of papers were strewn about on his coffee table, a few empty beer bottles beside them. There was a dress shirt and tie draped over the back of the sofa, shoes by the bar. Carter appeared to have been very busy or distracted by something.

“Can I get you a drink? Some wine? A seltzer?” His eyebrows rose as he shut the door and smiled at me, passing me to head toward his kitchen.

I pressed a hand to my belly, thinking of my little guy, and it made me smile. “Just water is fine.” After finding out in an overly dramatic way with Mom and Luna that I was pregnant, it started to dawn on me that I had been given a gift.

Most women my age would be horrified at an unplanned pregnancy, especially in my situation, where the father didn’t want kids necessarily. I, however, found it sweet

and heartwarming. Life shifted in a very negative direction when Kira died. I lost my best friend. But I gained a baby. I felt like she sent me this gift, someone to love, someone to love me. Someone who couldn't just desert and hurt me, and for that I was thankful.

"One water, coming up," he said with a grin and vanished. I walked over to the couch and sat down, ignoring the mess. My heart was thumping hard against my chest. I'd come with the purpose of telling him about our unborn baby, and I had no clue how he was going to take it. When I got that text message he sent, telling me he loved me, I melted. I couldn't keep this from him and risk tarnishing that love. He'd fought so hard to come back from the brink after his divorce and the heartbreak of it all. I had to give our relationship a fighting chance by being honest.

"Here we go," he said, smiling as he plopped down. For a moment, his eyes scanned the mess around us, and I thought he looked panicked. I took my water and sipped while he scooped up the papers and stacked them, then set them aside on the end table. "My gosh, I'm sorry about the mess. I've been working on something..." His forehead crinkled and his eyes darkened.

"Hmm, what's that?" I asked, swallowing the water and setting the glass down. It did nothing to calm my nerves at all. Mom told me to be bold and just spit it out, but I didn't want this to be traumatic for him.

"Nothing too important to distract us. My gosh, I missed you so much I took the chance to call Rick." Carter chuckled, but I saw the expression behind it. Dad must've reamed him again by the looks of it. Carter's eyes were still stormy.

"How'd that go?" I asked with a wince. My hand rose to my hair, instinctively tangling in the soft waves. I hated that I was so easy to read, so predictable. Carter probably read me like a book. My hair twirling was so obviously a sign of my nervousness.

“About as well as you’d think. He had the nerve to talk about Hope...” Carter huffed and I clenched my jaw. The couch suddenly felt very uncomfortable. My back went rigid, muscles tensing. “Told me I ‘didn’t have a child so I wouldn’t know.’ I get it, he was angry, but my lord, the man can be very hurtful at times.”

My chest ached. I reached for him and rested my hand on his back as he continued to tell me in detail how he felt, which ripped my heart out.

“Rick just doesn’t understand how bad that kind of thing hurts. He never had his balls handed to him like that.” He rubbed his temples, then jerked his sleeves down into place. “When you go through something like that and fight back to some semblance of normalcy, anything can set you off. I’ve been burying myself in work all afternoon to try to shake that, but I’m seriously raging mad.”

I rubbed his back for a second, not even knowing what to say. Hearing the words spill out of his mouth, I knew I couldn’t bring up the baby right now. He’d already been upset by Dad’s selfish mean statements. How could I make it worse by bringing it up again? Anything I said could trigger worse emotions than this, and I of all people knew how that felt. Hearing from Mrs. Baker on Saturday brought up all those raw emotions. I felt like she’d just died right in front of me all over again.

“Wow, that was really awful of him. I’m so sorry he’s like that sometimes.” I never thought I’d have to apologize for my father’s bad behavior, but here I was hoping to smooth things over. I loved my dad, even though he was a total jerk sometimes. And I loved Carter, though he didn’t know it yet.

“Well, enough about me. You said there was something you wanted to talk to me about?” Carter turned the full force of his gaze on me, and I wilted like a three-day-old rose out of water. My plans were going up in smoke, and I scrambled to find something talk-worthy to discuss with him.



In my haste, my mind landed on: “I’m staying in LA.” The decision had been made by my mother, who insisted that I couldn’t raise a baby alone in Tampa. She convinced me that Luna and I could get an apartment, away from Dad’s prying, and she’d be here to help me through pregnancy and birth and maybe the first year. She was right; I would need her. But I didn’t see how I’d ever get through this without Dad’s meddling.

“You have just made me the happiest man alive,” Carter said, pulling me onto his lap. I had no choice but to straddle him with the way he forcibly handled my body. Not that I minded one bit. I missed him, and I craved being intimate with him. I just hoped it would’ve been celebratory after he accepted the truth and we vowed to raise the baby together as a family.

I chuckled to mask my own discouragement, but I fell into a kiss that warmed me to my core. When I pulled away I said, “And I’m going apartment hunting with Luna next weekend probably.”

“You don’t need an apartment. Stay with me...” Carter’s lips found mine again, definitely eager to get on with the pleasurable parts of this night.

The apartment idea with Luna wasn’t a suggestion; it was a must-have. If things went sideways with Carter, I had to have a backup plan. I’d be staying here in LA anyway, but I wasn’t going to go back to Mom and Dad’s house because I got dumped. How bad would Dad treat Carter then?

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“Mmm,” I sighed as he sucked my pulse point and kneaded a breast. “I’d love to, but you’ll have to fight my dad to the death.” Both of us chuckled as the tension between us over my father’s reaction to Carter dissolved. We’d get through that part well enough, probably both on the sworn enemy list, but we’d manage. It was my secret I wasn’t sure if we’d survive.

“I’ll take that challenge if it means I win the prize.” Carter grinned against my lips as he started pulling my shirt up out of the waistband of my jeans. It wouldn’t be long before I’d have to wear an entirely different wardrobe, and every thought like that made this moment feel even more conflicting.

“Dinner...” I mewled, as he reached up my shirt, pulling my bra to the side.

“It’ll be ready in twenty minutes. We have time.” When he lifted my shirt and shoved his head into it to suck a nipple, I gasped and giggled. “Mmm, you taste good,” he said, pulling back. “Dinner can wait.”

My core tightened as he sucked my nipple into his mouth again, swirling his tongue around its hard peak. My hand rested on his shoulders as I grinded against him and rolled my hips.

“Carter,” I breathed his name, and reached for his belt buckle. I undid his pants and slid my hand inside his boxer briefs.

His erection was rock-hard against my palm and I stroked him slowly, loving the way he pulsed in my hand. “Bedroom,” he mumbled between each kiss along my collarbone. I let him lead me by the hand to his bedroom, only half hoping he

wouldn't notice anything different in my body. I'd never been pregnant before. I didn't know if a man could tell or not. Carter folded the sheets back, revealing clean white linens that begged to be stained with our passion.

He undressed me, and I was glad I'd worn a lace thong and matching bra to feel sexy just in case this happened. He tore my bra off as if it were on fire, and his face dipping between my breasts had me panting. I dug nails into his shoulders to quell the noise I wanted to let out as he pushed me down on the bed and I bounced. He stripped as I shimmied out of my panties, and then he was back on top of me, between my thighs lapping at my juices.

"Carter," I moaned his name, thrusting my hips up to meet his mouth as he worshiped every inch of me. His tongue swirled around my clit, drinking me in. His moans of pleasure matched mine.

A thought crossed my mind about protection or lack thereof, but it was fleeting as he slid two long fingers inside me. My internal muscles contracted around his digits, welcoming him home like it'd been years instead of days since he'd last been with me.

"God, Carter," I moaned, and arched my back as he added a third finger. My core may as well have been on fire. He knew all the right buttons to push and twist and pull to make me writhe underneath him in pure ecstasy, and we hadn't even gotten to the main course yet.

He chuckled against my core as he kissed his way up my sopping wet pussy across my body to my neck and stopped to taste my pulse. "You're so responsive, Sunny." He then flipped me over onto all fours, and I moaned as his hard length rubbed against my entrance. "Take me," he grunted in my ear, nibbling on my earlobe.

I reached back and guided his length into me, moving him in and rocking against his

invading dick. He was so hot and hard against my insides, the walls of which pulsed to accept every inch of him.

“Oh, God yes,” I moaned as he slid deep inside me with a gritted groan. In the back of my mind, I knew I should tell him to wear a condom, that not doing so would reveal something I didn’t think he was ready for, but the feeling of his flesh against mine was too exquisite. I craved it so much.

Inch by delicious inch, Carter took me, until we were linked by more than just our bodies. Our hips met with a wet slap as he started finding my rhythm. He moaned and thrust even harder into me from behind, and I grunted as my orgasm rocked my whole body. I tingled all over. His name bounced off the walls of his bedroom uttered by my lips. My body convulsed and pulsed, and when the sensations passed, he slowed and pulled out.

I almost lay down, worn out from the energy exerted, but he held me there, lowering his face to my core where he drank me in again. His tongue swirled in my juices, coating his face, letting his beard scratch my sensitive skin. It was erotic and pleasurable, and when he slid his fingers back into me, I came almost instantly. The second one more powerful than the first.

“Carter,” I whimpered, my keening so loud I was sure the neighbors would call the cops. Carter ignored me though, lapping up every drop of my juices and then some. He finally took pity on me as I bucked and arched against his skilled tongue, flipping me over onto my back again.

His face was a mask of desire and need as he positioned himself at my entrance, but paused. His chest was heaving; I could read the expression in his eyes. A knowing passed between us as he backed away and glanced toward the nightstand, but I reached down and stroked him.

“Allow me,” I told him, still half drunk from ecstasy. I sat up and he stood next to the bed as I took his dick into my mouth, cupping his balls in one hand.

“Sunny,” he hissed as he arched into me. “Oh God.”

I increased my speed, bobbing my head up and down his shaft, milking him with my mouth, and when I sensed he was close, I sucked even harder. His face contorted in an almost painful expression and then he came, shooting his warm, wet load down my throat and onto my tongue. He tasted salty with a hint of tanginess. I swallowed every drop, drinking him in just as he’d done to me moments before.

Carter collapsed next to me, panting and sated. His eyes were hooded as he gazed at me with complete and utter adoration in his eyes. “Wow” he said, resting his forehead against mine. “I love you.”

I wrapped my arms around his chest and caught my breath, thankful for dodging the condom question for now. “You’re incredible...And I...” I couldn’t say it yet. I did love him, but it felt horrible saying so while keeping this secret.

“Yeah?” he asked, and I pressed my eyes closed.

“I’m starving,” I admitted falsely, but he kissed my forehead and popped off the bed.

“Say no more. I’ll get dinner. You stay there.”

He slid his boxers on and walked out while I curled into a ball on my side and pulled the blankets over me. I was kidding myself if I thought telling Carter would ever be easy, but I had to respect that his emotions were raw today after that talk with my dad. I felt horribly guilty, but I was so afraid to hurt him. I had to regroup and ask Mom what she thought about it.

And I had to pray Dad didn't find out in the meantime.

20

CARTER

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:41 am*

I woke when I heard the front door click shut, but before I got dressed and out there, Sunny was gone. She left a note saying she was heading home, plans with Luna today. I watched the Uber drive off and frowned. I was hoping to take her out this afternoon and show her a few good communities where there was always something up for rent, but I couldn't be upset.

Besides, I had plans with Jackson to go for a run, which was what I should be doing. I needed to stay focused on self-care, and while this whole mess with the company was going on, I'd been neglecting it.

I jumped in a fast cold shower to wake myself up more, then donned a T-shirt and shorts. By the time I got my sneakers laced up and a muffin crammed in my mouth, Jackson was ringing the bell.

I strolled out with my house key in my pocket and opened the door to find him already jogging in place. "What's up, brother? Let's get our run on." His hair bobbed on his head like the ears of a floppy dog, and I chuckled at him.

"Fine, but remember I'm a year older than you." I shut and locked my door, already enjoying the warmth of the fall morning on my skin.

"Try to keep up, old man," Jackson teased, taking off.

I sprinted after him and we fell into step, my phone beating against my thigh in my pocket. It'd been a few weeks since we'd gone for a run, and it felt good. My chest burned after the first few blocks, but I settled into a good rhythm when we started talking.

“You know, I saw a few patients this morning.” Jackson heaved his words out, struggling for air more than me, but I didn’t taunt him.

“Supposed to be your day off, but you go in anyway? Next, you’ll be asking for a raise.” I laughed, but he wasn’t so amused by that.

“Seriously, man. I just stopped by to check on the blood tests for a patient last week, but there were a few people in line outside, so I let them in.” We came to a stop at a red light, pressing the crosswalk button. I was already glistening with sweat and Jackson had large beads rolling down his face, his shirt almost drenched.

“Man, you’re too dedicated. You gotta take some time off. Those people will always be there.” I used the hem of my shirt to mop up my forehead and wished I had a glass of icy water to cool my throat.

“Rick was there, Carter.” Jackson glanced up at the sign counting backward from ten in neon lights. “Wanted to know where Sunny was, if she was working.”

I couldn’t stop the eye roll from surfacing. Rick’s prying and micromanaging were the reasons Sunny had moved to Tampa in the first place, and his incessant need to know everything got on my nerves. He was going to drive her to want to leave again, and just when she’d decided to stick around.

“You okay?” he asked, and I scowled as the light flicked to green and the walk signal flashed.

“Fine,” I grunted as we took off again. “It’s just annoying that Rick can’t seem to let Sunny live her own life. When she tries to leave the house, he has to know where she’s going and who she’ll be with. She’s not a kid anymore, but he treats her like one. I’m shocked she doesn’t have a curfew.”



Jackson struggled to keep up with me this time because the fury I felt drove my steps. I ran faster than I was previously, but I never sensed the burn. Rick was really starting to harsh my mellow in a horrible way.

“He’s her dad, Carter. He cares...Maybe he’s just trying to protect her.” I offered an annoyed expression at Jackson, and he held up his hands defensively as we rounded the corner to turn toward the park. “Look, I’m just saying you’re almost old enough to be her dad.”

I stopped abruptly, leaning down to rest my hands on my knees and catch my breath. I was frustrated that even Jackson was taking Rick’s side now.

“I’m not old enough to be her dad, and we’re both consenting adults.” I was a bit too angry with him. It wasn’t his fault, and I didn’t want to drag our time down. “Sorry...I just. We’re in love, Jacks, and Rick can’t see that. No one has any right to judge our relationship because we’re both adults. If she were younger than twenty-one, then maybe, but she’s twenty-eight.”

“I get it,” he said, and he dropped it.

We started running again, but I couldn’t find a good topic to talk about anymore, so we didn’t talk at all. I was stuck in my head, worrying if Rick would end up telling Sunny about the trial and my real position as owner of that pharmaceutical company. Every step I pushed myself harder and harder until I thought my lungs would burst. We did a lap around the park and started a second when my phone rang.

“Go on, I’ll catch up,” I told him as I pulled my phone out.

Jackson ran on, not looking back as I unlocked my phone and answered the call from Joseph.

“Hey, man, is now a good time?”

I huffed and heaved, but I said, “Sure.”

“Didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“Just out for a run. What is it?” I pressed, not feeling like running anymore at all anyway. Another group of runners passed, women who were chatty. I stepped to the side and off the path, and Joseph continued.

“We got ’em.” I sensed the celebration in his tone. “Peters and Wilkinson are going to fess up. They’ll be here first thing Monday morning to chat; they just want job security.”

Finally, something was breaking my way. After hours of trying to get those bozos to talk, Joseph had somehow gotten through to them. I looked into the sun and squinted, then back down the path where Jackson had disappeared.

“Great. I’ll be there. Thank you so much for this update.” I was thrilled to hear we were moving forward. I wanted this to be wrapped up as quickly as possible. The sooner, the better. I knew I had to tell Sunny about everything, but I wanted real answers for her, a way to help her see I was taking this problem seriously and planning to make huge changes that would ensure no one else suffered the same fate as her friend.

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Maybe then the news that I'd kept this secret of my true identity from her wouldn't come as such a horrible shock.

21

SUNNY

The entire day had been so busy, I'd barely sat down except for at the foot of an exam table while speaking with patients. The clinic was packed with people experiencing the flu or flu-like symptoms. I'd managed to keep my personal protective equipment in place, but there was a chance I was going home with a bug in incubation period. More reasons to vomit—just what I needed.

When a lull in sick people streaming into the clinic struck around one in the afternoon, I leaned on the wall outside the break room and closed my eyes. My feet hurt; my back screamed at me, and I knew I'd never make it until 5 p.m. closing time without a caffeinated beverage of some sort, but I was trying to limit my caffeine now that I knew I was pregnant.

Jackson ushered his last patient out of the hall and into the reception area then strolled up to me with a knowing smirk on his face. "First hard day, huh? Don't worry," he said, slugging me softly on the shoulder the way he always did to Carter, "you'll get used to it." He jerked his chin upward toward the break room and said, "Come on. I'll buy you a soda."

Glancing one more time through the window to the waiting area to make sure we didn't have any more patients, I followed behind him and collapsed in a heap on one

of the plastic and metal chairs around the break table. I folded my arms and rested my head on them while he opened the fridge and rifled through it. When I heard the fridge door shut and a chair's feet scrape over the linoleum, I lifted my head.

"Here, drink," he ordered, pushing a water in front of me. He had a soda, but I knew it was the last one there. I'd checked earlier when I was sorely tempted to caffeinate, but I'd managed to dissuade myself. Had he given it to me now, I'd have taken it without hesitation.

"Sure, you get the caffeine. I get hydrated." My complaint drew a chuckle and he offered me the can, but I shook my head and opened the water. It was better for me and the baby.

"So now that things have slowed down, I'm happy to get a chance to talk to you." Jackson cracked open the soda and smiled at me like he hadn't just worked six hours of the most stressful day of his life.

"Yeah? Am I in trouble?" I chuckled again, bringing the water bottle to my lips to sip.

"No, actually the opposite." He leaned forward and set his soda down but kept his hands wrapped around it. "Carter told me he's upping your responsibility around here. He's offering you a ten percent raise in pay, and he wants you to start opening now and then. That's pretty impressive. I've been here for four years with no raise."

A warm feeling filled my chest, and I sighed happily. I knew Carter had gone out on a limb with my dad, standing up for us, and after telling him I was sticking around he probably felt responsible for me. I knew I'd have Dad's help if I needed it, even if we were at odds right now, but it was kind of Carter to help me out so I could be independent. I'd have to thank him for that later.

“Yeah, wow. He hadn’t told me. Thank you.” Leave it to Carter to be the sweet man who allowed Jackson to give me the good news and share in the credit.

“I guess he thinks you’re doing a great job around here. I think so too.” Jackson wasn’t that verbal about his likes or dislikes, so to me this was a compliment in the highest regard. It energized me more than the caffeine would have, so when the volunteer receptionist called, indicating we had a patient, I got up.

“You rest. I’ll take this one.”

Leaving my water sitting on the table, I walked down the hallway to where the receptionist stood with a clipboard in hand and a frown on her face. “This one’s a mess. I’m afraid it’s not the flu.”

“Thanks,” I told her, taking the clipboard. I looked down at the sheet filled out by my new patient and noticed the diagram of the human body where patients check boxes to indicate where their symptoms were. It was the easiest way to get to the root of things when patients didn’t speak English. This one had the stomach and chest ticked off and also the face, and the severe frowning face was circled.

The chart wasn’t that concerning. I’d seen dozens of these before today, but I understood the volunteer’s facial expression of shock when I rounded the corner and saw the bruises on the woman seated on the exam table. They were dark purple things, marring her arms and face, so bad I almost didn’t recognize her.

“Freya?” I gasped, walking deeper into the room. I dropped the paper on the stool and stood right in front of her trembling form, pulling out my penlight instantly. The bruises on her head were bad enough that I feared she might have a concussion. “What happened?” I asked, but I already knew. She didn’t have to tell me she’d been beaten to a pulp; I could see it with my own eyes.

“I, uh...I fell down the steps and?—”

“No,” I said with a little more emphasis than I intended. I never meant to make her jolt with fear or shock, but that was what happened. “Don’t you lie to me. We’re friends, Freya. Please tell me what happened.”

While my fingers searched her arms and face gently, searching for signs of a fracture anywhere, Freya’s head hung in shame. She let me manipulate her joints, palpate her neck and spine. And when my physical exam was done, she let me hold her hands and look her in the eye.

“Brad, he...” She swallowed and let her head droop again. “He was just drinking, and we got into a tiff. He got out of control.”

The fact that she was confessing this made me feel relief that was quickly consumed by the mounting rage. I wanted to march over to her apartment and tear that man to shreds for doing this. He had no right to lay his hand on anyone like this, let alone a woman half his size that he was supposed to be loving and caring for.

“Jackson,” I called, certain we needed an X-ray or two.

“What? No,” Freya breathed, but I was following protocol.

“Babe, I know you’re nervous but he’s just going to come with the X-ray machine, okay?” I put my hand along her jawline and felt the worst of the bruises there. She winced, pulling away and shaking her head.

“Sunny, I ...”

“I know you’re scared. Let me just treat these things first, and we’ll talk. Okay? My job right now is to be your doctor. When we know if you have anything broken, I’ll

be your friend.” I had to push aside the rush of adrenaline and anger. Jackson popped his head in and I grunted, “X-rays,” which he seemed to understand.

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Thirty minutes later, after we had ensured there were no broken bones, Freya, Jackson, and I sat in the break room around the tiny table. He got her a cup of coffee and I sipped my water while she told us her story.

“I guess I’m ready,” she sighed, nursing the mug of hot coffee. She hadn’t touched it, treating it more like a comfort item than the beverage it was. It sat on her lap cradled between both hands as she hunched over and resigned herself to the fate I knew she’d suffer in the end.

“It’s going to be okay,” Jackson said, reassuring her. He had already called the police. It was our duty to report domestic violence when we saw it come through the clinic, though most women didn’t really come out and admit their partners were the ones putting the bruises on them.

“He’s right. And I’m going to be with you every step of the way.” I held her hand again, proud of her for taking this step finally. She had no idea the good life she could have on the other side of this.

“He just gets too angry.” She shrugged and met my gaze longingly, like she didn’t want it to turn out this way.

“They say we attract the same sort of partners on repeat because there’s something wrong with us,” I started and held her gaze. “But really, we’re just used to life being a certain way. We overlook the red flags because we want to believe in the good in people. You wanted so much to believe that Brad was a good man, and with the right therapy, he probably is. But you can’t live like this anymore.”



The words came out making sense, but I was speaking to myself too. Freya was making a very bold move, being brave enough to see that she deserved better from life than a man who would beat her around. I was actually moved by that so much it made me internalize what was happening.

There was no comparison between her situation with Brad and mine with my dad or Carter. Still, it motivated me to do what I knew had to be done. If she was brave enough to get the help she needed, I had to be strong enough to place boundaries in my life and tell the men in my life what I really wanted from them. Dad needed to back off and Carter needed to step up.

“The police are here,” I heard and turned to see the receptionist standing in the doorway. Two uniformed police officers stood behind her, one of them a woman around my age.

“You’re in good hands here, Freya. I have to step away to check on other patients, but I’ll come back in a bit. You tell them what you told me.”

Freya nodded, blinking out a few tears, and Jackson stood to walk out with me. The officers walked in and shut the door while we stood in the hallway reeling over what happened. There was one more walk-in patient in the waiting area, seated on one of the chairs. Jackson took one look at me and grunted.

“I’ve got this. Go collect yourself,” he said, patting me on the shoulder.

There was no time to collect myself. I pulled my phone out and hid in exam room two to call my father. I had to do this before I lost the nerve. My insides were shaking as it rang through, and all I could think was how angry he’d be when I told him the truth about me and Carter and my plans for the future.

“Soleil? Is everything alright?” Of course he’d ask that. I never called him during the

day.

“Yes, Dad. I’m fine. I just wondered if you and Mom would want to have dinner with me? I’d like to talk to you about something important.” This time there was no finger twirling in my hair nervously, no lip worried between my biting teeth. I was determined to be strong and tell him like it was.

“Of course, dear. I’ll let Mom know. Where would you like to eat?” Dad had no idea the storm coming for him. HurricaneSunny was about to make landfall, and I prayed it wasn’t a total catastrophe.

22

## CARTER

The air was rife with tension as I sat in the conference room next to Joseph, drumming my fingers on the table that stretched between us and the two doctors we’d linked to the drug trial scandal. That was what we were calling it now—a scandal—because it was likely to turn into one, especially when Kira Baker’s family learned how poorly our team had handled her intake.

Peters, now the ringleader, massaged his temples. We’d been at this for over an hour already, but the men were adamant they could not provide us the specific names of our recruiters who were giving the payouts. Joseph suggested following the money trail, but to investigate our bank transfers, who made them, who approved them, and who initiated them would mean alerting board members, which we were avoiding until we had a potential solution for this problem. The fewer people who knew, the better.

“Gentlemen, we can sincerely appreciate your financial conundrum. You’ve gotten comfortable with the payouts you’ve received from GenOne Pharmaceuticals, but

that money is going to stop now whether you help us or not.” Joseph tented his fingers and leaned over the table with elbows sliding along the smooth, polished wood. “People are being put at risk and being told trading their health for money is okay.”

Peters scoffed and shook his head, wiping one hand down his face. “If your drug trials are safe then why does it matter? You’re telling me side effects can play politics? Joe, you’re blowing smoke. Those people are no different than the ones who hear your commercial and call the hotline.”

It was Wilkinson’s turn to chime in, and I had to control my angry reaction when he spoke. “Peters is right. We’re not doing anything you’re not already doing. You offer a payout to people on the commercials to call in and do the drug trials. How is this baiting and unethical?”

My hands gripped the edge of the table firmly as I forced myself not to stand up. I swallowed hard and gritted my teeth, wanting to lash out at him, but Joseph’s calm demeanor helped smooth things over. He held out a hand toward me to back off, which I tried to do, but in spite of my best attempts to relax, I couldn’t even sit back. I was, however, able to not speak harshly.

“Mr. Wilkinson, we’ve had an incident in Tampa during one of our drug trials where a young woman, unaware of a condition she already suffered from, died from a complication during a drug trial. Now”—Joseph sighed hard and continued—“that was a mistake on the side of our screening department. They took her word as law and didn’t test her for the condition. We’ll deal with that. What is really concerning is how these people are hard up for money and being convinced this is an answer to their problem. A miracle.”

“So, what’s that got to do with us?” Peters was seriously annoying me.

“What’s that got to do with you?” I snapped, and I clenched my jaw to push away the

worst of my angry outburst. This was my name, my company they were putting at risk, and people whose lives I cared about. “These people are sick, broke, desperate for any solution to their life at times. Some of them don’t even speak proper English, so they can’t inform doctors of preexisting conditions. And so many of them are lying to us about those conditions in order to qualify because the sum they might receive is too tempting. They need the money.”

Wilkinson rolled his head around on his neck and glanced at Peters with an expression of defeat. We all promised when we took that oath, to first do no harm. Convincing desperate people to sign up for drug trials was risky at best, and catastrophic at worst. So far there had been no other fatalities in our trials, but we’d had several instances—which Jackson and I had discovered through this investigation we were doing—where folks had bad side effects that could’ve been prevented.

“Please help us reduce the number of people who are doing risky things. If you don’t give up those names, the recruitment team will just continue pursuing other doctors. This thing will grow, and how many people will be suffering or maybe eventually die because of it?” I implored them with my tone and the pleading expression on my face.

If they weren’t willing to work with us, we’d be forced to go to the board, which meant a whole lot of drama. I wasn’t keen on it, but I’d do it if it meant saving people from suffering or possibly dying.

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“Yeah, alright...” Wilkinson was the first to cave, and I had never been gladder to hear a man finally break. I wasn’t proud of having to beg these men to do the right thing. No one should ever have to beg someone else to do the right thing.

Joseph reached into his inner breast pocket of his suit coat, pulled out a small notepad and a pencil, and slid them across the table. “Write the names here,” he said, indicating the notepad, but Peters leaned forward and put a hand on Wilkinson’s shoulder.

“Wait. We need to make sure we’re not going to face serious repercussions. We were just doing our jobs. Neither of us thought of those things, and we weren’t to blame if patients lied about their health histories or couldn’t tell your team they had preexisting conditions.” It was just like a snake to bite someone and then blame it on the victim. Peters’s angry stare hardened as I met his gaze.

“We can’t help what those patients might do, but I’m not planning to fire either of you.” As much as I wanted to, I knew we needed them to work the clinic hours. And they were good doctors aside from this fluke.

“I want it in writing,” Peters said bluntly, and Wilkinson’s shoulders squared.

“Yes, we should have it in writing,” he said, sucking in a deep breath and letting it out. We were finally getting somewhere with them, so I kept the train rolling.

“Good, we’ll have a contract for you ready this week.” I stood and extended my hand, hoping to put this all behind us as quickly as possible.

“Thank you, gentlemen,” Joseph added, also extending his hand. We shook on it, and the doctors left. It was frustrating that the only thing they were thinking of now was protecting themselves, but the entire industry had turned that way. Doctors cared more about their malpractice insurance and covering themselves in the event that someone sued them than how their practice affected sick people.

“Joe, get that contract ready ASAP. Call legal and tell them we need it today.” I scratched my head, wishing I could pour myself a drink and unwind. But the day was still young, and I had a lot of work to get done, patients to see. Maybe a call with Sunny would help unravel some of the tension coiled in my chest, and I could invite her to dine with me tonight.

“Sure thing, Carter. And I’ll schedule a meeting with the head of operations to discuss a policy change for incoming test subjects. We’ll get on top of the prescreening for these lower-income patients right away. You’re right. After what happened with Baker, we can’t really afford to skimp on screening.” He shook my hand before I headed out.

The whole day so far had been nothing but one stressor after another. As I walked to my car, I pulled out my phone, a little desperate to feel some relief from the tension. Sunny’s phone rang three times, and I almost hung up, figuring it would go straight to voicemail, when she answered.

“Hey, Carter,” she said, but she sounded a little glum. Her tone was mellow, not chipper like I expected.

“Sunny, how are you doing?” It was amazing to me how quickly I could push away and forget my own tension the instant I heard her tone and suspected she was down.

“Oh, it’s been a tough day.” She sighed hard. “Freya came in again. She’s finally letting me help her.” The impact of that must’ve been crushing on her. I felt the

weight she was carrying from where I was all the way across the city.

“Wow, that’s really good, and it must’ve been difficult. Are you okay?”

“Yes,” she said, sounding more resolute. “I’m actually really good. I’m having dinner with Mom and Dad tonight to tell them I’m staying here and finding an apartment. And I plan to tell my father that you and I are together.”

I imagined that cute little lip of hers slithering between her teeth while she bit down. It wouldn’t be an easy thing for her to stand up to Rick. “Do you want me to be there?” The way Rick reacted when I talked to him was out of control, though Sunny was his daughter, not just a friend. He had no choice but to love and care for her. But he didn’t have to hold ties with me at all. Infact, he didn’t have to keep my secret either. He could very well use it as ammunition to hurt me, by revealing the truth to Sunny.

Though, he’d never see it as hurting her too, but I knew it would.

“No, that’s okay. I’m sure it will go smoother this time if I tell them on my own. Mom is sort of tense about it, but she knows. And Dad, well...Dad will blow up either way, but I’d rather you not get caught in the crossfire this time. Soon though...We will have a relationship with my family; it’ll just take time.”

The longer she spoke the lighter she sounded and the more I felt dread anchoring every cell in my body, weighing me down further. She was so hopeful for us, and I loved that. But Rick had a nasty temper at times, and knowing how fragile Sunny was made me fearful that he’d purposefully let things slip that he knew wouldwake her upwithout the intention of hurting her, just to get back at me.

“You okay?” she asked, and I cleared my throat.

“I’m good. I’ll be here if it gets rough and you need to talk.” Forcing a smile to my face so my words came out sounding happier, I said, “I love you, Sunny.”

“Love you too, Carter. I’ll call you later.”

Sunny hung up, but my hand continued to press the phone to my ear as I stood glued in place in the parking lot. I could never call Rick and demand he keep my secret. If I did, it would be manipulation, both of him and of Sunny. I had to let the cards fall where they may, but dammit if it didn’t shake me to my core. How was I supposed to finish my workday knowing what could happen?

23

SUNNY

When I walked in, I was calm and collected. That interaction with Freya today at the clinic shook loose some of the insecurities I had about dealing with my father’s overprotective nature. At twenty-eight, I shouldn’t have to tell him he can’t ground me or take away my phone, but to the little girl inside of me used to his shenanigans, I felt like something had finally given way in my heart. Like I was able to separate myself from his opinion of me and knew I deserved better.

We hadn’t eaten dinner as a family since I found out I was pregnant. I’d been busy with work and spending time with Carter, and Mom had avoided the topic altogether. I gathered that Dad’s reaction to Carter’s confession about me dating him had put a wedge between them too. She kept glancing at me nervously, avoiding eye contact with him. Luna was off at college missing it all.

The wait staff even seemed to sense that something wasn’t quite kosher, or maybe Dad told them not to disrupt us so we could talk. I sat stiffly on one side of the booth and Mom and Dad sat on the other side; Mom poring over the menu, Dad sighing



heavily every few minutes as if he had something on his mind he wanted to bring up.

“Lots of choices,” Mom hummed, but I heard the anxious tension in her tone. Dad looked up at me as I glanced at Mom. I could cut the air with a knife. Waiting until we had our food to talk had been my plan, but this was agonizing without either of them opening up real conversation.

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“Yes, lots of choices,” Dad echoed Mom, staring at me the whole time.

“Well, I’ve made a choice,” I said as I gathered the courage to bring up what was on my mind. I kept the image of Freya looking into my eyes and asking for help in my mind. Doing difficult things was part of adulthood, and Dad would never take me seriously as an adult so long as I continued to allow him to micromanage me. I felt standing up to him was the only right thing to do.

“You have?” Dad asked. He set his menu down, though I didn’t think he’d even glanced at it. “What’s that?”

Mom’s eyes flicked up to meet mine, and for a second, I saw fear there. She hid behind her menu acting ashamed or scared, like a child who was guilty of something and not ready to face the consequences.

“Well,” I started, remembering my rehearsed speech so I wouldn’t forget anything. “I’ve decided to stay here in LA.” I didn’t pause, not allowing him any time to chime in until I’d said what I needed to say. “Luna and I are looking for apartments I can afford. I got a raise at work, so I’ll be able to handle it myself.” His expression soured when I mentioned the clinic, but I kept going. “And the only help I’ll need is someone to go with me to Tampa to sort out my things there.”

My palms were drenched. I rubbed them on my jeans and avoided eye contact. When I told Dad I was moving to Tampa with Kira, it hadn’t gone over well, and while I was actually talking about moving back to LA, I already knew he wasn’t happy about certain things. Like the fact that I’d be getting my own place even though he wanted me at home. I hadn’t even gotten to the hardest part yet.

As if appointed by God himself, the waitress walked up with her pad out to mark down our orders and smiled brightly at us. “You folks ready? I can take your order.”

“Uh, sure,” I said, stealing one more glance at the menu. I only planned to order a salad, but Dad held up his hand to halt me.

“We’ll hold off for a few more minutes,” he told her, and she shrugged and walked away while I offered a confused look.

“You need a minute to look over the menu?” I asked, and Mom hid again, this time raising the menu higher so I couldn’t see any part of her, not even her poofy bangs.

Dad’s shoulders were more relaxed now. He sat a little straighter, face a little happier. “Well, dear, that’s great news,” he responded, ignoring my question entirely. “In fact, it’s amazing news.” His eyes rose up, and recognition dawned on his face as he looked over my shoulder at something behind me.

A quick glance over my shoulder revealed what he was focusing on, and instant anger bubbled up. Tonight was supposed to be about me talking to my parents, and Dad had gone and invited a man to join us again, someone I’d never seen before. I slid out of my booth seat and threw the napkin down on the table as I snatched my purse. There was no way I’d ever get through to him.

“Soleil,” Mom whined.

“Soleil, please sit down,” Dad said firmly, and I shook my head. I might’ve even stomped my foot in anger.

“No, don’t you get it. I’m not a kid, Dad. I’m almost thirty. Fourteen months, that’s all. Fourteen months and I’ll be thirty years old, and you still treat me like the seventeen-year-old whogot stood up for prom.” I was so heartbroken, but it was anger

that came out. “I’m in love with Carter. We’re together. I’m not available for any of the men you try to fix me up with.”

My arm swung wildly as I spoke and gestured. It smacked the admittedly good-looking man in the chest, and I winced at what a fool I was making of myself.

“Soleil, you’re causing a scene.” Mom’s voice was tight, but I could still see the shame in her eyes.

“I don’t care, Mom. I’m not doing this anymore. I love Carter.”

“Just because you’re having his baby doesn’t mean it’s love.” Dad’s words were a slap to the face. I stood there with my jaw hanging, gaping at Mom, whose head hung in shame. That was why she was acting strange for the past half hour. She’d told him about the baby and now he knew how serious things were between me and Carter. And maybe he’d tell Carter. “You should really look into the men you date more carefully, Soleil. You might find out things like the fact that Carter has a connection to Kira you don’t know about.”

Fear shot up my spine, and I turned without saying anything else and walked out. I didn’t care how it made me look. I didn’t care that Dad would be embarrassed with his buddy, or that Mom probably felt bad and wanted to apologize. I needed air, and I needed Carter’s arms around me.

I hailed a cab, which unfortunately cost me a fortune. Cried the whole way across town to Carter’s neighborhood, where I tipped the cabby and tried to remove the evidence that I’d been crying from my face before ringing Carter’s bell.

The door swung open and he looked surprised to see me. I’d told him I was having dinner, but that lasted less than forty-five minutes before it was ruined. Now I was a mess, trembling and emotional. Dad hadn’t just crossed a line. He was trying to burn

a bridge, and I was still on it.

“I thought you were having dinner,” Carter said, but I threw myself into his arms as tears started again.

“Dad...and Mom...” I blubbed and stutter breathed. He pulled me into the house and shut the door behind us.

Carter held me tightly, smoothing my hair down my back, kissing the tears off my face until I could finally breathe. “Dad was awful. He said horrible things and he had another man to set me up with. I was supposed to be—” I couldn’t finish. Just thinking about what he said had gutted me. I just wanted to feel Carter holding me now.

“Hey, shh, it’s okay. I’m here.” His strong arms pinned me against his body as I clung to him until he led me to the kitchen where he seated me on one of the bar stools and got me a drink of water. I sipped, sucking in breaths to calm myself, using a paper towel to dry my face. It scratched my chin, and I probably looked hideous with mascara streaks and puffy eyes, but Carter crouched in front of me and cradled my cheek in his palm.

“So it didn’t go well. It’s okay.” I was so absorbed in my own drama that I hadn’t even stopped to say hello to him. I felt bad, especially when I saw how tired he looked.

“God, Carter, I’m so upset.” My bottom lip quivered, and I pulled him in for a hug again. “I’m sorry if you’re having a bad day too.”

“It’s okay with you here.” His hands rested on my hips, and I felt his fingers kneading my flesh. “I just want you to be okay. I’m sorry that you’re not getting along with your dad. I feel like it’s my fault.”

“No,” I said, leaning back. “It’s not your fault. I made these choices too. I love you, and I want you even if it upsets him. He has to understand that I’m my own woman.” Dad’s approval used to mean everything in the world to me, but there came a time when a woman had to make her own choices for what was right in her life. Now was my time.

“Well, I feel bad anyway.”

“Make it up to me?” I said, though he really didn’t have to do anything but be with me.

“Anything,” Carter said, curling some hair around my ear.

“Help me forget everything for the next thirty minutes.” My eyes danced between his and he blinked languidly, seeming to get the message. Getting lost in his arms was the only remedy for this feeling I had, the only thing I could think to drown my discouragement and anger, and I wanted to pour myself into it wholeheartedly.

Carter gripped my hips and pulled me toward him on the chair. My legs slid across the seat as he rose up and brought his lips to meet mine. His kiss was slow and passionate, building warmth in my body as he parted my lips and drew his tongue over mine. I moaned against his mouth, arms coiling around his neck and pulling him closer, all thoughts of my disastrous dinner with my parents gone. I’d deal with the fallout tomorrow, when my heart wasn’t in pieces. Tonight, I was going to get lost in the beautiful man who made me feel whole and complete and loved unconditionally.

He slid his hands around to undo the button on my jeans while I tangled my fingers in his hair and sighed into his mouth. I tilted my head back to give him better access to taste the column of my neck, gasping when he traced a path down to my collarbone.

“I love you, Soleil,” he breathed against my skin, moving his kisses lower. My heart beat double time as he unbuttoned my jeans. Slowly, torturously slow, he slid them down my hips and then helped me step out of them. The feel of Carter’s cool,

calloused hands on my skin made me shudder as he pressed me back against the chair and dropped to his knees to slide my panties off too. I sat back down, perched on the very edge of the seat while he spread my legs and kissed up my inner thigh.

My entire body thrummed as he glanced up at me with those cerulean eyes that could stop time itself if they'd wanted to. His hand reached between my thighs and gently rubbed me right there, making me moan loudly.

Carter's eyes danced with desire as he brought his mouth to my aching sex. He kissed me there, licking and sucking the sensitive folds until I saw stars, until all I could do was clutch the counter and ride wave after wave of pleasure.

"Oh God," I breathed, his name an exhale on my lips as he continued to pleasure me. "Oh my God."

"God you taste amazing," he said between licks and sucks and kisses rained on me. Warmth pooled in my belly as he got me to the point of no return and then backed off again and again, teasing me mercilessly until I was a quivering mess. Then he thrust his fingers into me and I came undone, spasming and jolting until I thought the chair would break under my weight.

I was a puddle of molten goo when he finally straightened, undid his pants, and stroked himself. My head was arched back, eyes shut as he slid into me slowly, inch by inch savoring the full length of his dick until his hips met my inner thighs.

He stayed there for a moment, kissing my neck. I could smell myself on his face and it made me grin.

"I love the way you feel," he whispered, pressing a kiss to my ear. A shiver ghosted across my spine as I clutched at his arms, tensing as he moved in and out, gently rocking his hips against mine.



The stress of the last two hours melted away, replaced instead by Carter's attention and how good it felt to be connected to him like this—mind, body, and soul. We kissed between frantic thrusts, desperate to reaffirm our bond against whatever life threw at us next.

The chair's feet squeaked as it walked across the floor from the force of his thrusts. Carter pursued, desperate to be deeper inside me, and I pulled him closer too. Neither of us stopped to consider protection. Neither of us were able to even pause and think that carefully.

And when he flooded me and I felt it draining out around his still-thrusting dick, I wrapped my arms around him and felt more tears welling up. These ones came from a deep place of sorrow for the secret I knew would probably shatter his world. He clung to me, staying in me far longer than was necessary. He grew limp, slid out, but he still held me until I pulled away.

I was ashamed of myself for using sex to stave off the worst of my emotions, and I felt bad for using him like that. Dad's words haunted me. "Just because you're having his baby doesn't mean it's love." It was hurtful and untrue, but what sort of person was I for not telling Carter about the baby when he deserved to know.

"Are you hungry?" Carter asked, standing up. He grabbed a kitchen towel and wiped himself clean, then handed it to me while he buckled his pants back up. I shook my head as I wiped myself clean and quickly dressed.

"I should go...Mom..." I had no excuse. The reason I was leaving was shame and nothing else. That and confusion too.

Dad knew Carter better than I did, and he'd said some things that made me feel afraid. What did Carter have to do with Kira, and why did Mom not even seem surprised to hear that? I was too emotional to bring it up to him, and he seemed hurt

by the fact that I wanted to go.

“Are you sure? You don’t have to go. You can stay.” He reached for me, but I pulled away.

“I think I should go. I’m sorry, Carter. I just have some things to think about.” I walked forward and pressed a kiss to his cheek. Now the shame felt suffocating. “I’ll call you, okay?”

He nodded and I left without saying goodbye, feeling overwhelmed and confused by everything that was happening. I didn’t know what to think or feel. Dad was furious, Mom wasn’t to be trusted, and I had no best friend to vent to anymore. What I needed was time and space and a bit of peace to sort all of this out before it consumed me.

24

## CARTER

I watched her walk out the door yesterday evening feeling helpless and unable to understand why her mood shifted so suddenly. She’d come crashing into the place after what happened with Rick and Melanie, and all I wanted was to comfort her, which was what I thought I was doing until she walked back out, still in a state of emotional distress.

This morning I woke up alone, feeling the weight of heavy emotion pressing me down. Work was stressful during this flu season. And trying to sniff out the obvious corruption in my own company was trying every bit of patience I had. Now fear mingled with all of it, convincing me that Rick was going to tell Sunny the secret I should’ve told her the minute I found anything out. Living a life of anonymity had benefits until things like this happened.

I forced myself out of bed, reading a message that Joseph had the contracts ready. Peters and Wilkinson were set to meet with us in just over an hour to sign them and give up the names of the people within the company responsible for paying doctors to pressure high-risk people into the trials. I should've been relieved to have this information, but my mind could only focus on one thing at a time.

More immediate than my risk of public shame over a potential scandal with the company was my fear that Sunny would be hurt by all of this. That somehow, she would blame me personally for what happened and never want to speak to me again. It felt selfish to fear her leaving me when in reality she had every right to be furious with me for not telling her about things up front. It just hurt so badly knowing she could walk away the way my ex did and never look back.

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I showered, forced myself to eat a slice of toast and drink a glass of orange juice, then headed into the office to meet with Joseph and the doctors. I was on edge, probably too emotionally amped up to be professional. My mind was clouded with insecurities and anxiety; I drove on autopilot.

At the office, I bypassed reception entirely, choosing the service elevator in the back to avoid as many people as possible. I called Sunny four times, but she never answered. Jackson sent me a message saying Sunny had called in sick again, said she wasn't feeling well and didn't want to share germs. Bygerms, I was sure she meant emotions. She didn't want to face me, and I didn't blame her. I assumed Rick had said something, and it was only a matter of time before she pulled the plug on us.

Joseph saw me coming from the opposite direction as normal and offered a confused, narrowed-eyed expression. "Everything okay?" he asked. I grumbled a nonword in response and followed him into the conference room where Peters and Wilkinson sat at the table with cups of coffee in hand.

"So gentlemen, are we ready?" Joseph produced a manilla file folder out of the briefcase situated on the table and slid the folder across to them.

"As long as the contract is good," Wilkinson said, opening the file folder.

I sat with Joseph across the table, gripping the arms of the rolling chair. My interest in these two was minimal now. They were pawns; we had bigger fish to fry. If we played our cards right, we were days from shutting this whole thing down.

Wilkinson signed first then passed it to shifty-eyed Peters, who sat for at least ten

minutes reading over the contract. While he pored over it, I turned to Joseph and scowled at him. This was just the tip of the iceberg as far as malpractice within the company went. We needed to do a complete audit of company policy and standard operating procedure for trials.

“Have you had a chance to look into our Tampa branch and find out what went wrong there?” I could never give Sunny her friend back, but I could help ease her mind and put her worries to rest by following up with what happened and fixing it, so it never happened again.

“Not yet, but I will.” Joseph didn’t look at me as he spoke. He sat with squared shoulders watching as Peters finally signed the contract.

“You can’t just brush this aside. As CEO you’re responsible for what happens in this company.” I felt my temper rising, forced higher not by my actual anger at him but due to the unresolved emotions I carried about Sunny. Why hadn’t she answered my calls? What was going on in her mind? She went home, back to Rick’s house, and how could I know if he’d told her about me owning GenOne?

“I understand,” Joseph said, turning to glare at me as Peters shut the file folder and slid it across the table. His expression was stern and dark, like he was sending me a message I didn’t care to receive.

“I don’t think you do. A woman died because of our failure, and that should never happen.” Hot under the collar didn’t begin to describe how I felt. I was a starving, caged animal, and my prey was right in front of me.

“I do, Dr. Price, and I’m taking care of it.” Ignoring my anger, he leaned forward and collected the contracts, peeked at them to make sure they were signed, and turned toward the doctors and said, “Now, would you like to provide us with the information we requested? We need names, gentlemen.”

I chewed the inside of my lower lip in a rage, wanting to bite his head off. I wasn't thinking clearly at all. Everything in me felt obsessed with getting to Sunny, finding out what she knew, and pleading with her to understand my situation. I didn't ask for my father to dump this entire thing into my lap. I should've sold it years ago, but the profits from GenOne funded dozens of clinics all over this city and the state of California.

"You deal with this, and deal with it now." I stood, tucking my tie into my jacket and buttoning it. I couldn't sit here anymore and try to pretend I was okay. Joseph was more than capable of fixing this and if he didn't, I'd have the board vote him out.

"Carter, please..." Joseph looked up at me, still annoyed, and I turned to walk out.

"Finish this, Joseph, or I will." My threat hit him, turning his glower into a glare, and I left the conference room in a huff. I was irrational and out of control, and the only thing that would help me settle was to speak to Sunny. Never in my life had the fear of the future been so large in my mind that I had a hard time grounding myself.

It felt like I was spiraling again, the way I did when Hope died, and I couldn't let that happen. I needed to talk to her.

25

SUNNY

I lay in my bed listening to the sounds of the house around me. It was silent for a long part of the day while Mom was out with her friends shopping and doing lunch. Dad was at work, where I should've been too, but my heart was too broken to see patients. I'd spent the day in bed searching ads in the real estate section for apartments in good neighborhoods and crying.

My plan to stay here in LA didn't feel right anymore, and all because of one sentence my dad blurted out in anger as I stormed out of that restaurant the other night. I was supposed to be happy to put down roots here, start a family with Carter maybe, but a haze of uncertainty clouded every thought I had now.

"You weren't supposed to tell her!" I heard Mom shout, pulling me from my thoughts, and I figured she was angry with Dad for blurting out that jibe about the baby. She promised not to say anything until she was forced to. I was furious with her, but I understood at the same time. They were my parents. He was bound to find out at some point, though I'd much rather have told him myself.

"Melanie, you're being ridiculous. She had a right to?—"

"Stop it. Just stop it," Mom snipped, cutting him off. The voices were muffled, several walls separating us, but I knew the angry tones. I'd heard other fights between them, multiple times. I knew it was part of life. You can't live with someone for decades and not get on each other's nerves now and then.

The arguing went on longer than I liked, so I pulled my pillow over my head and tried to drown it out more completely. Was that what this was between me and Carter? A fight? Things were tense and odd, but he hadn't seemed like that. I was the one to walk away, not answer his calls, and call in sick to work. I was the reason there was this painful distance between us.

That realization didn't help me at all, though I knew I could fix it by just taking an Uber over to his house and talking with him. My insecurities about the baby and about what Dad meant when he said there was some sort of connection between Carter and Kira that I had missed were the things driving the wedge between us. I needed answers, but I was afraid to have them.

I didn't even hear when Mom knocked on the door, but I felt her hand on my hip

shaking me. I jolted in surprise, then turned over and shoved the pillow under my head. My phone lay on the mattress running the battery dead as my search for an apartment stalled.

“I’m so sorry, Sunny,” Mom said as she sat on the edge of the mattress and rested her hand on the side of my knee. I lay curled in a ball looking up at her. My chest was full of anger toward both her and my father, but I needed comfort. It was such a conflicting feeling to want comfort from the person who hurt me.

“You told him...” The words were hollow even though there was a torrent of emotion behind them. She needed to know how outraged I was.



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“Sweetheart, he’s your father and he cares about you. And I know sometimes the way he goes about things is misguided or?—”

“He is trying to micromanage me, Mom.” I sat up and pulled my pillow to my chest, wrapping my arms around it and resting my chin on it. “I asked him to have dinner, just the three of us, so I could talk to him about my plan to stay here and the fact that I’m not breaking up with Carter. And he invited a man to set me up again.”

I would never understand that incessant need he felt to force me toward a man. It boggled my mind why he thought I couldn’t take care of myself or be satisfied being single—or dating someone he didn’t approve of.

“Your dad is just...” She stopped and stared at her lap, pulling her hand away from my leg. There was no way to defend his behavior except to make him seem not so bad. And maybe he wasn’t horrible, but to me it was stifling.

“He approves of Carter to be his best friend, his golfing buddy, his drinking buddy, his poker buddy, and yet the instant Carter wants to date me, he’s a horrible man?” I shook my head and buried my face in the pillow for a second. When I looked up at her she had an expression of sympathy.

“Honey, your father wants what’s best for you. He just thinks Carter is too old. Look, when this baby is graduating high school, Carter will be close to retirement and you’ll be forty-five, in your prime.” She frowned and reached for my hand, so I let her take it. When she put it that way, I started to understand why both of them had doubts, but I had no doubts in my mind at all—at least not about his age.

Carter was the one for me. It didn't matter if he was older than me. When you meet your soulmate you know, and his heart was intricately connected to mine on a vibrational level we couldn't explain. We belonged together.

"Mom, what did Dad mean when he said Carter isn't who I think he is? What did he mean about a connection between him and Kira?" When Dad had said that, Mom hadn't batted an eyelash at it. I brushed that off as her being too ashamed or feeling too guilty about telling him about the baby to have any true reaction, but the longer I thought about it today, the more I knew there was more to it.

Now, her eyes shifted away from me, looking at the pile of used tissues on the nightstand from my day of feeling sorry for myself. Her shoulders drooped a little more, and she sighed.

"Honey, you just have to talk to Carter about it. Alright?" She patted my hand and met my gaze again. "Dad has his concerns about things, and he goes about them absolutely the wrong way. I've had a talk with him about the way he tries to force you into situations to meet men he approves of. He won't be doing that ever again, but this situation with Carter has to be resolved somehow."

"I'm pregnant with his baby. How do you think it's going to work out?" My angry retort brought tears to her eyes and she stood up, blinking them back.

"I think you should just talk to him..."

I covered my face to hide the fear I knew would be there. It wasn't so easy to just walk into Carter's house and talk to him about these things. I wanted my mom to shed some light on it so that I would have some sort of clue what situation I'd be walking into. Nothing made sense to me. How could Carter be connected to Kira in any way?

“Mom,” I said, pulling my face out of my hands and forcing tears away as I spoke. “I’m scared to tell him about the baby.”

Her eyebrows dipped and pulled together. She walked back to the bed, sat down, and handed me the box of tissues off the nightstand.

“Why are you scared to tell him, sweetheart? He’s going to be a father. It’s his right to know.” Her eyes searched me, and the tears started to escape though I blinked rapidly.

“He doesn’t want kids, Mom. After his daughter died it was really traumatic. He told me he doesn’t want kids again because he’s afraid the same thing will happen, that he can’t stand the idea of hurting that badly again.” My face hurt from all the crying and blowing my nose. My skin was raw, so dabbing my tears away felt better than wiping them. The tissues had built-in lotion but they were still scratchy to my raw nose.

“Oh, baby,” she sighed, and pulled me in for a hug. “I understand his fear. He’s been through something very painful, and you have such a big heart to want to protect him.”

Leaning on her shoulder, I slid my arms around her torso and let her hold me. “You should see the pain in his eyes when he talks about her, Mom. How can I cause him fear for his future again? I’m so torn inside.”

She rocked me from side to side, patting my back, smoothing her hand up and down my shirt. “Well, honey, there’s this song called ‘The Dance’ by Garth Brooks that goes something like this...” Mom started to sing such a beautiful but haunting melody that had me crying harder. “I could’ve missed the pain, but I’d have had to miss, the dance...”

My mind went to Kira, thinking of the happy times we shared, laughing and texting.

The way we'd go shopping or clubbing. We'd dance for hours and then come home and relive it by talking about it all night. Mom was right. I could've lived without the pain of losing her, but to not know her, to push her away just because I knew this pain might be possible would have meant I never got to experience the good things we shared.

Carter was hurting because of the pain, but the sparkle in his eyes when he spoke of his little girl's life, what joy she brought him, that was the part worth it all. The dances in our life made room for us to move past the pain if it came—when it came.

“Just talk to him, baby. You'll see he's not going to be angry with you, and you can help him work through the fears.”

Mom held me for a few more minutes before she walked out of my room leaving me to cry. I didn't fully trust that Carter would be okay about the baby, but I also didn't think I could stand it much longer if I didn't learn what Dad meant by him having a connection with Kira. I just wanted all of this to be over and for my heart to feel secure again instead of this raging tempest of fear and uncertainty. I had to talk to him, even if it meant something painful would happen. Even if I had to remember my own dance just to survive the wake of it all.

26

## CARTER

The hallway was sterile, the faint hum of fluorescent lights overhead echoing in the quiet. I stood at the door to the conference room, my hand resting on the cold metal handle. The tension in the air was thick, like it had been soaking into the walls for days, maybe weeks. I wasn't sure what they'd been expecting, but they weren't ready for this. I could feel my jaw tighten, the familiar anger curling up inside me.

I glanced to my side at Joseph, who stood next to me, his face a mask of concern, but I could see the unease beneath it. He hadn't said much since the moment we uncovered the extent of what was going on, but I could tell it had shaken him. This was my company, but he was supposed to lead it, protect it—but now everything was on the verge of coming apart.

He exhaled slowly, rubbing his temples as if trying to push through a headache. “Carter, I know this is...a lot, but let's keep it civil. We need answers, yes, but we don't want to burn bridges unless we have to.”

I didn't respond immediately. I didn't want to be civil. These men had crossed a line. I wasn't going to let them squirm their way out of this with a few rehearsed words. They had knowingly broken the law, exploited the vulnerable to meet their quotas. And now, it was time for them to face it.

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“I’m not here to play nice,” I finally said, my voice quieter than usual, but still firm. “They’ve already ruined whatever goodwill we had left. Whatever’s coming, it’s on them.”

Joseph nodded, his expression hardening. I knew he was worried about the fallout—about the damage this would do to GenOne’s reputation. But it wasn’t just the company on the line. It was everything we’d worked for, everything my father had built. I wouldn’t let these men destroy it.

Without another word, I pushed the door open, the soft click of it echoing in the tense silence that followed. The men at the table stiffened as I walked in. There were five of them, all seated in a neat row, their eyes flicking between one another like trapped animals. Each one of them knew why I was here.

I took my time walking to the head of the table, my footsteps deliberate, my mind focused on the task at hand even though I still hadn’t settled things with Sunny. I didn’t sit immediately, just stood there, staring down at the men who had put this entire operation at risk. They knew what I wanted from them, and now they were going to give it to me.

For a few moments, nobody spoke. I let the silence hang in the air, letting the weight of what was about to happen sink in. It wasn’t an accident. They’d made a choice, a conscious one, and now they had to own up to it. The tension was almost unbearable.

Finally, I spoke, my voice sharp and to the point. “I’m sure you know exactly why I’m here.”

The man closest to me, Miller, the head of recruitment, cleared his throat. His face was flushed, eyes darting around the room like he was looking for an escape. “Carter, we didn’t?—”

“I know exactly what you did,” I cut him off, my voice hard. “You’ve been offering bribes to get people into drug trials. Incentives to boost your numbers. You thought no one would find out. But I found out.”

The men shifted in their seats, their faces a mix of guilt and fear. Miller opened his mouth to speak again, but I didn’t give him the chance. This wasn’t about hearing excuses. I wasn’t here for apologies.

“This wasn’t a mistake,” I continued, my voice ice-cold. “This was a deliberate, unethical, and illegal action. You preyed on the vulnerable. You took advantage of them. And now, you’re going to answer for it.”

Miller tried to speak again, but his words were lost in the rush of anger bubbling up inside me. I couldn’t let them walk away from this. Not after everything they’d done.

“You’re going to be reassigned,” I said, my voice flat now, almost mechanical. “You won’t be handling any more trials. And you’d better pray that’s the extent of it, because what you’ve done here could bring this entire company down. And the authorities will get involved if they have to.”

Miller opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He was trapped, backed into a corner, and he knew it. The others sat frozen, avoiding my gaze, hands gripping the edge of the table like they might fall off if they let go. The air in the room felt suffocating. I wanted to push them further, to make them feel the full weight of what they’d done, but the silence stretched on.

Joseph cleared his throat, stepping forward. “Carter, this is—” He paused, glancing at

the men, then back at me. “We need to make sure we handle this legally, carefully.”

I shot him a hard look, my blood still simmering. “Handling it carefully is what got us here in the first place.” I stormed toward the door, my frustration boiling over. “You want to protect them, Joseph? You’ll be the one explaining this to the board when it all falls apart.”

Joseph stepped forward, his hand reaching out. “Carter, wait?—”

I didn’t stop, turning to face him briefly. “Get the answers, Joseph, and don’t mess around with me anymore. I’m done playing nice.”

I stormed to the door and let myself out. This was the exact reason I had never wanted to get involved with company politics. My father knew I was the caring type who could sit by patients’ bedsides and nurse them through ailments. Running the corporate part of things wasn’t in my wheelhouse. I’d let Joseph deal with this, and I’d deal with him later.

I left headquarters, my mind still spinning, when my phone buzzed—Sunny. She thought I’d be at the clinic and wanted to speak with me. I hesitated for a moment, but there was no use putting it off any longer. I’d been anxious about this confrontation, but now I knew what was coming and no one had to tell me. I knew Rick, and I knew he probably told her everything by now. I got in the car and headed straight there, fearing what would come next. Rick wanted me out of Sunny’s life, and he was willing to hurt me to make sure I stayed away. I just hated that Sunny was collateral damage in all of this.

At the clinic, I parked out back, making my way in with a heavy heart. For days, I’d eaten nothing, too stressed and worried to force myself to have an appetite. I’d been focused on the contracts and investigation, while being distracted by fear that my days with Sunny were over. Jackson hadn’t been able to console me, though seeing



patients did help a bit.

When I walked into the break room, Sunny sat at the table wringing her hands. Jackson was in a room with a patient, and there were a few more waiting in the waiting area. I should be putting my lab coat on and calling one of them back, but Sunny had to come first. She was more important to me than anything else. Her eyes rose to meet mine and I could see she'd been crying.

Her eyes were puffy, nose red and swollen. It appeared raw, like she'd been using too many tissues. I wanted to scoop her up and hold her, but there was anger in her eyes too and maybe a hint of fear.

"Hey," I said, settling on a chair I pulled next to hers. We were close enough our knees almost touched, but not quite.

"Carter, I need to know what's going on. My dad said you have some connection to Kira, and I'm starting to wonder if?—"

"Woah," I said, cutting her off. Her tone was biting and harsh. "Try to take a deep breath." My heart hammered against my ribs. It came as no surprise at all. This was my fault. I knew better than to keep a secret from her.

"I don't want to take a breath, Carter. I want answers." Sunny's eyes flashed with anger and defensiveness. "Dad said you aren't who I think you are. Mom didn't give me any answer, and now I'm asking you. What is going on?"

I watched the way her chest shook as each heartbeat pulse through it. She backed away when I tried to touch her, standing and pacing the room. I let my shoulders drop and shook my head. I had to be honest with her, though I knew it probably meant her leaving me. She deserved the truth, and I wanted her to know I wasn't some monster.

“Sunny, please sit down,” I asked, but she kept pacing. I had no choice but to blurt it all out. “My father died about five years ago. When he died, he left me the company he built from the ground up. I’m the owner of that company now, and I run these clinics off the profit, but I don’t run the company. Okay?”

She stopped pacing to narrow her eyes at me. Her hand rose to her hair, finding a loose strand and wrapping it round one finger as I watched her swallow hard.

“What company, Carter?”

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A knife plunged into my chest. I closed my eyes and breathed out, “GenOne Pharmaceuticals,” as I let my head hang in shame.

“But that’s who made the drug that killed Kira.” There was a slight whimper in her tone, and I massaged the bridge of my nose in an anxious habit.

“Yes,” I said plainly.

“And you own it? And you knew this and you didn’t tell me?” I heard the rise of her emotion even before she started crying again.

“Please, Sunny.” I stood, reached for her, but she stepped into the hallway. Her lip was quivering, chest still heaving and she shook her head, backing away from me.

“I’m so glad you kept secrets from me,” she blurted out in pain. “Because I’ve got secrets too.”

“What? What do you mean? Sunny, come back here.”

I took a few steps into the hallway, but she turned and stomped toward the back exit, vanishing into the parking lot as the door slammed shut. None of this was supposed to happen. I was supposed to be with her. We were made for each other, and my secret kept ruining that.

And I was so angry with Rick for interfering, but I was angrier at myself for failing. I had no one to blame but myself.

## SUNNY

I was so distraught when I rushed out of the clinic, I wasn't thinking straight. I couldn't go home, not to face my father and his smug I told you so, which I knew he would throw in my face. And I had no desire to be in public with this mental breakdown. The only place I could think to go was the women's shelter where Freya had been staying since she decided to break ties with her abusive ex.

The Uber met me right where I told him, two blocks from the clinic near a shady corner where a bench kept me company while I cried. The driver gave me a tissue from his glove box that was actually a brown paper napkin from one of any number of fast-food restaurants. And it was just as scratchy and irritating to my raw nose as the tissues with lotion Mom bought for me.

Thankfully the driver said nothing, not even so much as a comment about my crying or where I was being dropped off. I sent him a large tip as I climbed out of his car and walked up to the shelter entrance. It was an older cinder block building, with graffiti and one boarded-up window. But inside I knew there were very caring people who helped women like Freya. She was in a good place here, and I needed her company.

I walked through the front door and immediately there were two women at my side, coaxing me into an office.

"Oh honey, come on in. Let's get you some water and a tissue," the older of the two said. She had silver hair, a pretty smile, and she smelled like lilacs in spring.

"What's wrong, sweetheart?" the younger brunette asked. She guided me to a hard plastic chair and I sat down, sniffling. I wondered what they thought of me, probably that I was a battered woman needing assistance.

“I, uh, I’m just here to see a friend. Her name is Freya,” I told them, and they both smiled in recognition.

“Are you in danger, honey?” The one with silver hair crouched in front of me. Her soft, weathered hands wrapped around mine as she offered a look of deep compassion.

“Oh, nothing like that. I’m having a very bad day and I’m pregnant, so I’m overly emotional. I just wanted to visit my friend.”

She nodded at me, then handed me the entire box of tissues. “Here you go. We’ll get Freya for you and you two can have a visit.” She stood turning to walk out the door, and the second one lingered a moment.

“Are you sure that’s all?”

I bobbed my head at her, not really wanting to go into details. I didn’t even know why I was here. Freya was going through so much on her own. She didn’t need me to weigh her down with more things to worry about. But there was no Kira, no comforting mother to wrap me in a warm hug. Luna was off at UCLA again, and I was alone. Where else would I have gone?

I waited only a few minutes before Freya breezed in. She looked fresh and sober. Her bruises were mostly yellow now, though a tinge of purple remained around her right eye. She’d had her hair cut and her face looked fuller, like she’d been eating healthier. She sat down next to me and took my hand.

“Sunny, what’s wrong? You look so upset.”

“Well,” I sniffled, sucking in a few stutter breaths, “I’m not doing so great.”

“Alright, well dish. I’ve got all day.” She squeezed my hand and focused on me, and I unleashed.

“I’m seeing someone, and I just found out some horrible things about him. He owns the pharmaceutical company that manufactures the drug that killed my best friend, and he hid it from me.” It all came out in a jumble—every detail about Carter and his secret, the way Kira died, how distraught I was, and after that, his trauma and how he lost his baby and how I was pregnant. I was sobbing and heaving so much I threw up, and Freya held my hair back for me.

When I finally calmed down, she put her arm around me as I laid my head on her shoulder. I hated how life had treated both of us. It felt like neither one of us got a fair shake. But here we were, finding each other again after all these years, and I was grateful for her company and the fact that she was a good listener.

“I suppose he was probably ashamed of keeping that secret.” Her words sunk in, coiling around the ache in my heart from being lied to. “He doesn’t run that company, but it hurt you anyway...”

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I didn't want to feel sorry for him or even understand his perspective. I wanted to be angry with him. I wanted to justify my rage and cut him off, but deep down I knew she was right.

"I can't look past it, Freya. He kept that secret from me. He should've told me." I didn't know if I was more hurt that he kept it a secret or that he hadn't felt safe trusting me with it. If I had known, would I have fallen for him so hard?

"You're having his baby, and he doesn't know, hon. You think he's going to react well when he finds out you kept a secret too?" She squeezed her arm around my shoulders, rocking me gently.

"You're right, but that doesn't make it any easier." I sighed and sniffled. I'd cried just about all the tears I could cry now, but somehow they kept coming.

After nearly an hour of talking I left the shelter and headed home. On the cab ride, I looked through hotels and tried to find one that offered weekly rates. I didn't want to stay in the same house as my dad. He might've been right about Carter and his connection to Kira, but that wasn't the only problem I had with him. I'd never be able to sort out my feelings with him hovering over me.

Mom was home though, bustling around the kitchen to put lunch together for her friend group set to arrive any minute. When I walked in, she stopped her preparations and stood in my doorway as I found my duffel bag and started shoving things into it. I'd never be able to carry everything I needed, but this would get me a good start.

"Sunny, you don't have to go." Mom crossed her arms over her chest and pursed her

lips in sadness.

“I do, Mom. I’m going to be in town. I’m not jetting off somewhere, but I can’t stay here. I need space from Dad and this whole situation.” I shoved a handful of panties, a few bras, and a wad of socks into the bag and returned to my dresser for more.

“Where will you go?” The worry in her tone pinched my heart, but I wasn’t giving in. I wasn’t staying here.

“I think a hotel...I’m not sure.” I hadn’t really found a good place that was affordable. If I dipped into my savings too much, I wouldn’t be able to afford all the deposits for an apartment, and I’d end up coming to Dad to borrow money, which I hated the idea of.

“Then stay in Malibu, honey.” She sucked in a breath and sighed.

“I can’t. Dad will know.” I didn’t want to take another handout from them. I didn’t want anything tethering me to my father’s assumption I was unable to provide for myself.

“I won’t tell him a thing. And you can pay rent if you want.” The doorbell rang and Mom’s gaze flicked over her shoulder. “I’ll leave the key on the bar, okay? Just think about it.”

I watched her walk away as I put a few T-shirts into the bag. It was a kind offer considering. Mom probably felt guilty over everything, and I could really use the help. Staying at the Malibu house would give me the space I needed from Dad but the safety net of somewhere I knew and felt comfortable. And my gut told me after what already happened, the way Mom told Dad about the baby, she’d be keeping this secret for me.



I had too much to think about and try to process. It was a smart choice. So I finished packing, took the key, ordered an Uber and headed to Malibu. A few days in hiding would hopefully give my heart time to unwind and process what I was going through. If not, maybe Tampa was a better option—putting distance between me and the past.

28

## CARTER

Sunny stormed off in a huff just as my phone started to ring. I walked after her, desperate to make her stop and listen to me, and Jackson stepped out of an exam room and shut the door behind himself, planting one of his hands in my chest.

“Hold on man, what the heck?” He glanced at the door and then turned back to me. “Everyone in this place heard you two screaming at each other. What’s wrong?”

I pushed him off me and walked to the door, but Sunny was gone, not a trace of her in sight. “Dammit!” I growled, spinning back around. The phone in my pocket ringing only made me angrier. I yanked it out to see it was Joseph and swiped to answer: “What?”

“Woah, Carter, I just called with an update.”

His patronizing tone reminded me that I was out of control enough to be set off. “I don’t want an update. I want things fixed. Do you hear me? Done. No more updates.”

Jackson pushed me into exam room three and shut the door as I continued to shout profanities at Joseph. I felt like my world was spinning out of control and someone needed to stop it. The anger came out of me so suddenly, I couldn’t contain the explosion. Years of fear and insecurity overwhelmed me as I lashed out.

“And don’t think you’re getting away with this. People could die. Kira Baker’s death is on your hands, Joesph. If you don’t get things straightened out, you’re fired.” I was set to continue spewing threats, but Jackson took my phone and said something into it softly then hung up.

“You’re out of control, Carter. You need to calm down.” His hand, still pressed into my chest, felt like a thorn. I pushed it away and snatched my phone, dialing Sunny’s number.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m fine,” I snapped at him. The call went to voicemail, so I called again instantly. Three times, then four, each time it went to voicemail until it stopped ringing through at all. She’d shut her phone off or lost service, but it was safe to say she’d never pick up even if I kept trying.

“What happened?” Jackson asked me. He stood between me and the exit, making me feel trapped in this tiny room with him. I did the only thing I could think of—pacing the far wall and holding back another outburst.

“Rick told her, Jacks. He told Sunny about GenOne. He told her I’m the owner, and now she blames me for her friend’s death.” Raking a hand through my hair I kept pacing. I couldn’t stand still. It felt like my whole world was falling apart. She just rushed out without letting me explain anything, and I would have. I’d have told her every detail, how my heart and morals always put me at odds with my father. How I refused to be a part of his company until he left it to me in the will. How I’d have sold the entire thing if not for the fact that the profits cared for all these sick people.

“She probably needs time to cool off. She’ll call you. Just give her some space.” His words sounded good, but I didn’t believe him. Sunny was devastated. She rushed out of here like I’d taken her heart and stomped on it, and in a way I had. I’d broken her more than even her best friend’s death had.

“You don’t get it.” I stopped and glared at him. I could feel the heat in my cheeks, the pressure behind my eyes. I was working on a heart attack if I didn’t calm down. “Her friend died because of the drug GenOne makes, Jackson. She blames me for that. She’ll never come around. She doesn’t even know the facts, and I can’t talk to her to tell her.”

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Opening my phone, I pulled up her contact information and thrust my phone in his face. “Memorize her number. You call her from your phone. Tell her she needs to listen to me, or hell, just tell her the truth yourself. I need her, Jackson. I don’t want to lose her.” I saw the past two months of my life passing through my memories in a slow montage of pain and heartbreak. We were so good together; this shouldn’t have been happening.

“Sometimes a breakup is just a breakup, Carter.” He pushed my phone away. “We’re not in high school. She’s a grown adult. You have to give her space. If she wants to work it out, she’ll call you.”

“No, I can’t accept that.” I started for the door, but his hand shot out and pushed me back again.

“You’re not leaving this room until you calm down. We have patients to think about.” He pushed me until I backed up to the stool and sat down. “Take a few deep breaths. Try to let this go a little. If you need the day, that’s fine. I can finish up by myself, but I can’t deal with patients who are upset because of your drama.”

I stared blankly at the wall, letting his words sink in. I felt numb, hollow inside as he walked out and shut the door. Every muscle in my body was tense. I craved a drink to calm my nerves. I couldn’t very well just show up at Rick’s house and demand answers. It was obvious he had pushed Sunny to question me, and I was the one who did the damage. I didn’t even think Melanie would have sympathy for me. At this point, all I could do was wait and see if Sunny reached out again. It felt like torture.

The only thing worse than waiting was not knowing if she would ever call me. I had

finally connected with someone, only for my family lineage to come back to haunt me. I didn't know if I'd make it. Losing Sunny felt like losing Hope. But how was I supposed to mourn the loss of someone who was still alive? How was I supposed to go from knowing her so intimately to being a stranger to her again?

29

SUNNY

Mom told me she was coming for a quick visit since I hadn't been answering her calls. It was the only reason I wasn't startled when I heard the front door open. I lay on the couch in the Malibu house watching rerun after rerun of shows on MTV, sulking and stewing in the negative thoughts I'd been having ever since Carter told me he'd been lying to me since the day we met.

"Sunny? Baby, I'm here," Mom called, though it sounded like she had ducked into the kitchen first. I heard cupboard doors opening and closing, the fridge, and then she walked into the living room holding a takeout bag from one of my favorite soup shops. I lazily sat up and shut the TV off as she walked over and sat down next to me.

I said nothing as she opened the brown paper bag and took out the takeout cup, emblazoned with the label from the soup shop, and then a plastic spoon and some salt packets.

"Here, honey, I brought you your favorite comfort food. I want you to eat something." I texted her earlier telling her I had no appetite. It was true; I hadn't eaten today, and yesterday I only had a half sandwich at lunch.

Nothing looked appetizing, and anything I ate came right back up anyway. But this soup had my mouth watering and my stomach growling.

“Thanks, Mom,” I mumbled, accepting her offer of a cardboard cup and spoon. The first bite was heavenly on my tongue, sluicing down my throat like a stream through the desert. It might come back up, but for now my stomach was happy to welcome some warmth and nourishment.

“You look so tired, Sunny. Have you been sleeping?” She started doting, picking up the used tissues, amassing them in the paper sack. She stood and shuffled around the living room collecting my cups of water left on various surfaces where I’d sat the past several days.

“Not well,” I admitted, still slurping down the soup. My nights had been restless, my days full of overthinking, numbing myself with television, and napping when my brain got too full.

“I’m worried about you.” She pouted for a second while she watched me eating soup, then walked out of the living room.

I didn’t want her to know exactly how hungry I really was—ravenous—so I waited until she was out of the room before I lifted the cardboard cup to my lips to drink the broth as quickly as possible. It was delicious and my body needed the calories. I was sure the lack of appetite was due to depression and my aversion to throwing up, but I also knew I had to eat. Growing a baby was hard work and took its toll.

When Mom came back in, she sat down next to me. She had a glass of water and some tablets, which I wasn’t sure what they were. She held them out to me, and I narrowed my eyes at her as I set the cup to the side.

“Vitamins,” she said, nodding. “You need nourishment, honey. You’re having a baby. You can’t starve yourself in grief. You have to think of the baby.”

I groaned as I took them and picked up the water, washing the tablets down before

returning to eat more of the soup. She accepted the empty glass in return and cupped it in both hands as she watched me take each bite, as if she were policing my eating habits now to make sure I ate every bite, the way she did when I was a kid.

“You always half starved yourself when you were sad, you know?”

Ignoring her comment I said, “I just don’t feel like eating...All I do is think about the baby, and Kira, and how bad it hurts that no man in my life fully respects me to treat me like the woman I am.” After swallowing the last of the soup and handing the cup to Mom, I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand and sighed. “I deserve better.”

Mom took the cardboard cup and the glass and stood again. “You’re right, you do. And so does my grandchild.” There was little Mom could do to make Dad or Carter grow up and fix what they’d broken, so she did what moms do. She hovered like a helicopter trying to care for me.

“I know,” I mumbled, slumping down onto the couch on my side. I curled into a ball while she walked out, and I listened to the sounds in the kitchen again before I saw her reappear.

“Honey, have you called Dr. Fetters to set up some prenatal care? You need to be taking good vitamins and eating right.” When she sat on the corner of the coffee table only inches from me, I knew she was here for the long haul. I’d end up lying here while she cleaned the whole place and made me eat dinner. Probably end up napping too, but she’d treat me like a sick child instead of just a brokenhearted pregnant woman.

“I haven’t. I’ve just been too emotional. Mom, he really hurt me by lying.” My mind had been consumed with the why of this whole thing. Kira had undiagnosed diabetes, and the medication they put her on was so hard on her kidneys, it shut them down when they had already been strained from the high sugar she didn’t know about.

They should've tested for that.

“Yes, well he kept that secret for a good reason. Did you talk to him about it? Asked him why?” Mom’s head tilted to the side, and I closed my eyes. I was keeping a secret from him too, but I had a good reason. To protect him. His reason for keeping a secret was to protect himself. We were not the same.

“I didn’t, but does it matter? They never tested her body to make sure she had good kidneys before they pumped her full of?—”

“Woah,” she interrupted. “First of all, it was a pure accident. Do you think the company wanted to kill her?”



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I sighed a lot harder than I should have because Mom was making sense, and I hated it. I didn't want to rethink this. I wanted to be mad because I was hurt.

"Sunny, Kira didn't know that was going on in her body. If she had, she never would have gone in that trial, or she'd have at least told them. And Carter doesn't run GenOne. He just owns it. The board and the employees run it. He didn't even ask to own it. It was given to him. I think you need to talk to him, and I know you need to schedule an appointment." Mom stood, slapping the tops of her thighs.

Frustration over her leaking my secret to Dad still lingered in my chest, but I'd gotten over that for the most part. I couldn't stay mad at my mom. Who else was going to take care of me if I pushed her away?

"I'm gonna do some dishes. You rest a while. And make that appointment." As I suspected, Mom waltzed off to do her thing cleaning the whole house while I sulked and thought about what she said.

I pulled my phone out and scheduled an appointment using my OneCare app to see my ob-gyn. As I went to set my phone down, it started ringing. It was Carter for the millionth time. Like clockwork he called every day, at least five times a day, and each time I silenced the call.

But this time I went a step further by shutting my phone off. I wanted a nap, and I wanted to forget everything Mom just said because I didn't like how vulnerable it made me feel. I loved Carter, and he had no reason to lie to me. I wanted to hold onto that anger for a while still.

## CARTER

My call went straight to voicemail for the third time today. Sunny had shut her phone off for the day apparently, or maybe it just died. I had no clue where she was or what she was doing. She called Jackson the day of our argument and told him she quit, so I didn't expect to hear from her at all after that, but it didn't stop me from obsessing about it and calling her several times a day.

I sat in the break room near the end of the day, stressed and not holding it together very well. I had a few patients ask me if I was alright, so I assumed that meant my body language and facial expression were speaking louder than my "I'm fine" I tossed at them.

The patient load was light. I could've told Jackson I'd had enough for the day and gone home already, but I didn't want to go back to my home where I'd spent so much time with Sunny and stare at those walls. Lie in the bed we shared. Eat at the table I'd made love to her on a few times. I didn't know how I was ever going to move on from this. If it had been something where it was mutual, where we both decided it wasn't going to work, it would've been different. This was torture.

I had hurt her beyond belief, kept a secret from her that under normal circumstances wouldn't have been a huge issue. I'd have told her about GenOne eventually, and it wouldn't have mattered. But with what happened to Kira, there was no coming back from the depths of my mistake. I never intended to hurt her, but there was no way to know how all the details would line up perfectly to create the disaster that happened.

"Carter," Jackson said, standing in the doorway of the break room. I looked up from where I sat at the table and blinked slowly. My eyes were heavy with emotion, though I knew I'd never sleep if I laid down.

“Yeah?”

“Rick’s here to see you. He insisted that he speak with you right now. He seems frustrated.” He stood with his hand wrapped around the doorjamb leaning on the wall, only his head and left shoulder peeking around the corner at me.

I narrowed my eyes at him in confusion. Rick here to see me? I didn’t know what he could possibly want now. He’d gotten what he wanted. Sunny walked out of my life. He drove the wedge between us and convinced her that I was a monster before I even had the chance to talk to her about the truth, and now she wanted nothing to do with me. My calls had gone unanswered for days.

“Send him in,” I said numbly and sat back in the chair to wait for him.

Jackson walked away. I heard the door to reception open and watched on the monitor, which I had been ignoring, to see Rick follow him back up the hallway. Rick looked upset, but that was par for the course lately. The last time I’d seen him look calm or at peace in any way was when he asked me to give Sunny that job, or perhaps the day of that party where this whole mess started.

I’d like to have gone back to that day and undone what happened. How Sunny flirted with me and the choices I made, but how could I truly regret that? I’d spent so many amazing days with her, connected with her in a way that healed my heart. To undo every part of our relationship would be to reverse the good times we had, not just the bad times, and I’d do it all over again, even live through this pain again, if it meant I could have those moments.

“Carter.” Jackson appeared in the doorway and pushed the door open, and Rick strode past him into the break room, standing over me with his hands on his hips.

I stood, smoothed my tie down my chest, and nodded at Jackson, who left the room

and shut the door. Rick didn't speak at first, too busy looking me up and down to articulate why he was here. I did the same to him, noticing he was dressed casually for a change. His polo and Dockers were out the norm for him, but the deep scowl and haggardly expression he offered I'd grown used to.

"Have you spoken with Soleil?" he asked in a gruff tone, and I shook my head.

"Haven't you? She lives with you..." My entire body was tense from fear of what new trauma this interaction might bring. He had a way of twisting the knife sometimes, and I wasn't prepared for it. I knew how reactionary I was and how easy it would be for me to bite his head off if he said the wrong things.

"No, I don't know where she is."

My heart sank at his words. If her own father didn't know where she was, then where could she have gone? Back to Tampa alone? The thought scared me, that Sunny would really vanish into thin air and tell no one where she was going. I had hurt her that badly...

"My God, have you called the police?"

"The police?" he asked, shaking his head. "According to you she's a grown adult and she can do what she wants." He ran a hand over the top of his head and scowled at me.

"What did you do, Price? I trusted you with her. I thought you understood how vulnerable she is."

My mind raced at the idea that she was out there hurting, all alone, not reaching for help at all. He was right. How could I have done this to her? As much as I wanted to let myself fishtail into that pit of self-loathing, I couldn't. It wouldn't do me or Sunny

any good. Rick had to see that his pushing her made this even worse.

“You’re right. She’s an adult. She can make her own choices, but did you stop to think that if you hadn’t been trying to micromanage her life, she might be at your house instead of God knows where?” My heart played war drums against my rib cage. I loosened my tie and walked around the table, feeling angry enough I could punch him right in the nose.

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“Don’t you start with me. You kept things from her and everyone else in your life. It wasn’t my fault she found out and saw you for what you are.” Rick didn’t back down. He walked toward me puffing his chest out as if he were challenging me to a fight. I refused to back away.

“And if you didn’t try to set her up with every single man in this city, maybe she’d have felt more comfortable telling you things, or asking for your help. You’re overbearing, Rick. She hates it. Can’t you see that?—”

“I see it!” he shouted as his chest heaved a few breaths. “I’m not a blind fool. Besides, Melanie tells me every day. I don’t need you on my case too.” His thumb and pointer finger pinch the bridge of his nose as I take a step back and tug the sleeves of my shirt back into place. When he looks up at me with a sincere look of concern and anger, I brace myself. “She’s pregnant, Carter. Melanie told me everything. I know this is a horrible shock to you, but she’s alone and she’s hurting, and there’s no way I’m ever going to get through to her again.”

His news felt like a smack to the face. My hands clenched into fists, for a second doubting he was telling me the truth. But while Rick was temperamental and a bit controlling, the one thing he wasn’t was a liar. I backed against the table, perching myself on the edge and gripping it for stability as my head swam. She was pregnant? But she hadn’t told me anything. Was that what she meant when she said she was keeping secrets too?

“What?” I asked to no one in particular. Sunny was out there hurting, alone, and pregnant with my baby. My eyes rose to meet his, but he had calmed significantly. The monster of a man who came in to tear my head off had been replaced by a gentle-

eyed giant who looked sad.

“Before you say anything, I don’t know where she is, but Melanie does. She’s in contact with her and gives me regular updates to make sure I know how badly we both failed her.” He pursed his lips as his shoulders slumped. “The very instant Sunny contacts you, you tell me. And you make this right, Carter. I won’t stand for her being alone and having a child on her own.” It was the first time I’d ever heard him use her nickname, and I was shocked by it, but also by the fact that this seemed like a resignation. He was telling me I had to do the right thing, and to our generation that meant manning up and taking care of her.

I watched him walk out, but I couldn’t move. I leaned against the edge of the table feeling the ebb and flow of shock coursing through me. Sunny being pregnant meant a new baby, a new chance for my heart to be torn out of my chest the way it had been when Hope died. I knew why she hadn’t told me; I didn’t have to question it. Though we’d been careful, it had happened, and I’d told her I didn’t want more kids. She had to be terrified to tell me, and on top of that, all of this stuff with Kira.

I grappled for a chair and let my legs give out beneath me, thankful the chair caught me. What was I going to do now? I had hurt her beyond belief, but she carried a part of my heart now, beyond just my affection for her.

31

SUNNY

The needle pinched as it stuck into my arm. The nurse was being careful, but blood draws were always a bit painful no matter how gentle the phlebotomist was. I held the bandage to the inside of my elbow and sighed as she finished up.

“It’ll just take a few minutes and we’ll be right back with you. Dr. Fetters will be

right in.” She smiled in her professional way, the way I’d smile if I were the practitioner, and I had a patient here for a pregnancy test.

Luna sat on a chair along the wall of the tiny clinic exam room with her hands folded in her lap. She’d taken the day off of school to come with me when I called and told her I’d like company. Mom would’ve come, but I knew she would have made a huge deal about me not eating anything for those few days, and I didn’t need to hear the lectures. After the soup she brought by, I managed to force myself to eat three times a day because I knew it was the right thing. I still threw it all up, but I ate at least.

“Sunny, you don’t have to do this all alone.” Luna stood and walked over to the exam table, resting her hand on my knee.

“I know, you’re here,” I said boastfully, faking a smile for her sake.

“I mean Carter, not me.” She frowned and tilted her head. My hand rose to find a strand of hair to twirl, but with all the vomiting lately, I’d taken to tying it up in a messy bun. It kept my long locks safely tucked away so I didn’t have to hold it out of the toilet or trash can. The nervous energy had to go somewhere though, so I chewed my lip.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I told her. I’d been avoiding his calls and messages, thankful he was older so I didn’t have to sit and read a million texts a day.

“Well tough, we’re talking about it now.” Luna could be just as stubborn as my mother, a nag at times. My instant thought was regret over asking her to come along, but it cooled as she started talking. “Carter really is the man of your dreams, Sunny. I know you can’t see it because of the pain, but I see it. I’ve known him for a while. Dad would bring him over and they’d have card games. Carter would join us for dinner. He’s not the horrible man you might think he is.”



I didn't want to feel what she was feeling, but when I looked into her eyes, I saw how sincere she was. She squeezed my knee and rested her head on my shoulder as she continued. "You're hurting, and I get that. But Dr. Price is probably hurting too. You can't possibly think he hid things from you on purpose with the intent to hurt you. If he had known how it would hurt you, don't you think he would have spoken up sooner?"

Everything she said made sense, just like the stuff Mom told me the other day. I knew Carter, and I knew his heart well, probably better than any of my family did, including Dad. My heart hurt though, a clawing ache at my soul that relentlessly hammered me. I couldn't shake the questions I had about his secret keeping, and I was guilty of it myself, which didn't seem fair at all.

The door popped open as Dr. Fetters walked in. He glanced up at me and smiled, walking over to his stool to sit down. Luna hovered by my side, but she no longer rested her head on my shoulder.

"How are you doing today, Soleil?" Dr. Fetters's large brown eyes studied me intently as I swallowed the frustration I'd been feeling. I was pregnant and not planning it, depressed after losing my best friend, and heartbroken over the state of my relationship—or non-relationship at this point; I didn't know.

"I'm okay," I told him, burying the truth yet again.

"The chart says you've been having morning sickness?" He flicked his gaze at my chart and then back up to my face.

I bobbed a shoulder and nodded, saying, "Yes. I took a home pregnancy test, and it came back positive. I've been throwing up a lot. I think I need vitamins and some anti-nausea meds." If I were the one prescribing the medications, it would be a prenatal and some doxylamine and B6, but I wasn't the medical professional in this

situation.

“The bloods came back positive, Soleil. Congratulations.” He didn’t offer a smile, but I didn’t want the congratulations. I was content enough with the situation and knew I would grow to love this baby with my whole heart, but right now my heart was so raw I didn’t know what I truly felt. “We’ll get you some prescriptions and set you up for your first real appointment. We’ll do a sonogram to measure the fetus and determine your due date. How does that sound?” He stood up and clutched the chart to his chest as I sighed again. Something else I wanted Carter here for.

I nodded, but it felt more like I was watching someone else respond. The air in the room was thick, pressing against my chest. A sonogram. An actual picture of this tiny life inside me. The reality of it hit harder than I was prepared for. I wasn’t just sick; I wasn’t just feeling weird. There was a baby growing inside me. Carter’s baby.

Luna squeezed my knee again, anchoring me to the moment. I let out a breath and turned back to Dr. Feters, who was already scribbling something down.

“We’ll start you on a prenatal vitamin today,” he continued. “And I’ll prescribe some Diclegis for the nausea. It’s a combination of doxylamine and B6, which should help with the vomiting. Try to stay hydrated. I know eating has been tough, but small, frequent meals can sometimes help. Dry toast, crackers, things like that.”

I nodded again, this time more firmly. “Thank you.”

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He glanced at the chart again, then at Luna. “Would you like us to go ahead and schedule the sonogram now, or would you like a few days to think about it?”

I knew he was offering me an out, a way to stall, but I shook my head. “Let’s schedule it now.”

He smiled, small but reassuring. “Alright. I’ll have the nurse set it up. We typically aim for around eight weeks for the first scan. Based on your symptoms, I’d say you’re close to that, but the ultrasound will confirm.”

Luna let out a soft sigh beside me, and I knew she was relieved I wasn’t putting this off. I could feel her staring, but I kept my eyes on Dr. Feters. “And, um...” My throat was dry as I forced out the question. “Can I get a copy of the sonogram picture when we do it?”

His expression softened. “Of course. Most parents like to keep them.”

I wasn’t sure if I’d be keeping it for myself or if I’d be sending it to Carter. Probably both.

Dr. Feters jotted down a few more notes before looking up. “Do you have any other questions, Soleil?”

A thousand. A million. But none that I could ask here. None that he could answer.

“No,” I said, voice quieter than before. “Not right now.”

“Alright. The nurse will be in shortly with your prescriptions and appointment details.” He hesitated, then added, “And if you need anything else, even if it’s just to talk, don’t hesitate to reach out.”

I forced a small smile and nodded.

As he left, Luna exhaled, long and slow. “That wasn’t so bad, right?”

I ran my hands over my thighs, trying to smooth out the wrinkles in my leggings. “I guess not.”

She studied me, and I knew she wasn’t convinced. “Sunny…”

“I don’t want to talk about Carter right now.” My voice came out sharper than I intended, and regret immediately followed. I sighed and shook my head. “I just… I can’t yet.”

Luna didn’t push. Instead, she looped her arm around mine and leaned her head against my shoulder again. “Okay,” she said softly. “But you don’t have to do this alone.”

The words settled into my chest, heavy but comforting. No, I wasn’t alone. I had Luna. I had Mom. And whether I was ready or not, I had this baby. And sooner or later, I’d have to decide if I still had Carter too.

After finishing up at the clinic, Luna drove me home and hugged me goodbye. I let myself into the house and locked up. I’d left my phone here on purpose so I wasn’t distracted by it or forced to push away thoughts of Carter when I knew he would be messaging or calling.

When I went to the bedroom to find it and check for notifications, I saw a message

from him.

Carter 2:12 PM:Sunny, is there any way we can talk? Please, I have so much to say to you.

I perched on the edge of the bed as my stomach rolled with nausea. The pharmacy would fill the prescriptions, and I'd have a delivery guy drop them by for me, but right now, there was nothing to help me with the feeling that I had to throw up again. Carter's request definitely didn't help.

However, while I was still angry with him, Mom and Luna's words had gotten to me. I couldn't keep pushing him away and expect him to be there if I needed him. It was time to put on my big-girl pants and handle this like an adult. If things were going to go sideways, I had to let them go and not try to stop the inevitable.

After all, I owed it to myself to get those answers, and Carter deserved to know the truth about his unborn child, even if he didn't want a future with me or our baby.

I sent him the address to the Malibu house, and all that was left to do was wait. Now that he knew where I was, I knew he'd show up and want to talk, and I prayed I was ready to talk when he got here.

32

CARTER

My palms were drenched, shoulders tense as I walked up the steps to the home in Malibu Sunny had sent me the address to. The minute I saw it I knew where it was, and I felt foolish for not thinking of it last week when she vanished. Of course Melanie would let her stay here as a respite from Rick's overbearing personality while she was going through so much turmoil.

I skipped the bell, choosing to knock gently. She was the one who sent me the address; she knew I'd be here.

The door swung open slowly, and a very hesitant, anxious-looking Sunny stood in the dim entryway. She looked tired, but just as beautiful as ever. I paused before saying anything, taking the moment to admire how pretty she was without makeup or her hair done. Her messy bun and sloppy sweats screamed motherhood, and it already looked good on her, but the internal reminder sent up warning flags my PTSD hated.

"Could I come in?" I asked cautiously, and she stepped aside.

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My feet carried me across the threshold, pausing just past her to wait for her to shut the door. I wasn't expecting her hand to loop around mine as we walked into the living room that was bathed in the fading light of the setting sun. It made me acutely aware of how anxious I'd been the instant she touched me, and half of that nervous energy lifted.

I stopped and turned to face her near the couch, and she didn't shy away from my hand as I cupped her cheek and pushed a strand of hair off her face. "I've been worried about you."

Sunny's eyes brimmed with tears already, lip worried between her teeth. "I didn't mean to make anyone worry. I just needed some space." She blinked the tears back as I gathered myself.

I had prepared everything I wanted to say for days now, but suddenly given the opportunity to talk to her, I found myself not knowing where to start.

"I'm sorry, Sunny. I shouldn't have kept secrets from you." The secret she harbored, one I knew about thanks only to Rick's overbearing nature, played at my thoughts, but it was hers to tell. I'd already made the choice not to be angry with her for keeping it. I had enough to deal with pushing my fears away.

"Carter, I?—"

"No," I said, pressing my thumb to her lips. "Let me go first." Her eyes blinked rapidly, forcing more emotion away, and I continued. "Your dad came to see me. He's really angry about some things, but I understand that. He's your father. He

wants what's best for you, and so do I. I didn't tell you about GenOne or the other companies my father left me because I want a normal life.

"I was raised the son of a billionaire, went to private schools, had the best of everything except a parent to love me. My father was distant and cold. I knew that sort of money could corrupt a person. I wanted to be a normal man, with a normal life. I distanced myself from my parents before they even died, and when I learned I was the sole benefactor of all of Dad's possessions, including his shares of multiple companies, I didn't know what to do."

My eyes searched her face hoping for some reassurance that this was sinking in. My desire not to associate myself with my own companies was selfish, but I had a pure heart and good intentions. "I've had nothing to do with GenOne or any of their operations until recently, when I learned that there were some corrupt things going on. I stepped in to make things change, but until then, I only took the profits from them to run the free clinics." The pad of my thumb traced her lip as her gaze darted around my face. "Sunny, I want you to know what happened to Kira is the most horrific thing I could think of. I'm not stopping until I change things."

Large tears rolled over her cheeks as she closed her eyes, hiding those beautiful hazel irises from me. My hand left hers and rose to cup her other cheek, both thumbs swiping tears away as fast as they would come.

"Carter, I have something to tell you, and I'm scared of what you'll say. I don't want you to be angry with me, because I didn't plan this on purpose, and I know how you feel about this but?—"

I couldn't resist pressing my lips to hers gently to silence her. Watching her torture herself was painful to me. I had a lot of uncertain emotions, and I'd already made an appointment with my therapist to discuss the terror this topic brought. Still, the last thing I wanted was for her to do this to herself.



When I pulled away, I whispered, “It’s okay. Just say it. I’m here.” Rick deserved to be nailed to the stake for the things he’d done, but Sunny didn’t need more anger in her life. It was her news to divulge, and I planned to let her speak it herself.

She sniffled and reached up to wipe her eyes, but I didn’t release her. Her hands covered mine; her eyes met mine, and she sobbed.

“I’m pregnant. I didn’t mean for it to happen. It was an accident, that day in my room. The female condom shifted, and I was so drunk and?—”

“Hey,” I whispered, smiling at her. It was the most painful thing I had ever done to make myself remain calm and fight the nervous system trigger. Sunny was the most important thing in my life, and ensuring she was okay emotionally would be the priority of my life from now on. “I love you, okay? And it’s okay.”

Sobs shook her entire body. She curled into my chest, tucking her arms between us as I wrapped mine around her and held her close. The idea of being a father again terrified me deeply, but somewhere inside there was a current of hope and joy. I remembered when I found out Hope was coming, how I felt so excited and instantly in love. The idea that she could be taken from me in such a tragic ending never occurred to me then. I wanted that feeling now, so I tapped into the joy of what a new life could bring as I fought the terror of what-ifs.

“You’re not mad?” she asked me. It tore my heart in two that she feared that from me. I’d failed to really communicate my heart to her, and I felt ashamed.

“I’m not mad at all, baby. I’m scared, and you know why, but that’s not the feeling I have right now. Right now, I want to make sure you’re okay. I want to know we’re okay, that we aren’t ending things. I’ve tormented myself so much the past week about this.” Pulling her back by her shoulders, I looked her in the eye. “I love you, Soleil Douglas, and I want a life with you. And if you want children, then I want a

thousand of them. Just be patient with me while I handle some things in my mind that are diffic?—”

Sunny’s lips crashed into mine hard. She kissed me through the salty tears, past the anger I knew she felt toward me, with a passion I hadn’t felt in weeks. Her arms strangled my neck, forcing her mouth against mine, and I returned the kiss with equal passion and fervor until I couldn’t breathe and I forced her to back away.

“I love you too, Carter, and I want a future with you. I was just scared.”

“I know. Me too.” I wiped the moisture from her cheeks before grabbing her hand and tugging her with me to the couch. I intended to sit and talk about our future, what we had waiting for us outside the walls of this house, when Rick would breathe fire down our necks and life turned back to reality. But instead of sitting next to me, Sunny straddled me as she wiped tears off her cheeks. Her hips settled down on mine, and her hands pulled my head closer, pressing our mouths together again.

I was powerless to resist her, and why would I even want to? Sunny’s lips nipped at mine, pressing desperately as she ground her hips against mine. The electric desire that had been there since day one roared back to life, and any misgivings I had about Rick finding out or the baby resting in her belly faded into the background as she pushed my shirt up over my abs and raked her nails over my pecs, demanding more contact.

My hands slid down her back and gripped her hips, lifting her so we could be perfectly aligned. A growl rumbled up my throat at the welcome sensation of our bodies coming together again. Sunny moaned through our kisses, fingers tugging at the fly of my jeans until she found what she was looking for. She teased me through the fabric, and I groaned out my approval. There would be time for slow and meaningful later, time to savor every second of reconnecting with her body. This was a desperate, animalistic need we both had been harboring since the afternoon after our

tryst in her bedroom.

Pulling away from her mouth, I suckled on her neck, inhaling her scent while my hands moved to tug at the drawstring for her sweats. She had my jeans undone, was pulling my swollen dick out of my boxers. Her fingers wrapped around its girth and stroked while I reluctantly pulled my hand from her sweats and pushed her hips backward. A whimper escaped her lips, but she had to stand to remove the sweats. As she did, I peeled my jeans and boxers down to my knees.

Sunny stood before me in a pair of pink, lace panties, and my eyes ravenously took her in. Her breasts were fuller, her stomach slightly rounder, and I had never seen anything sexier in my life. Her hands returned to helping me the rest of the way out of my pants before stealing my shirt, and she straddled me again, this time with all barriers out of the way.

33

SUNNY

My thighs settled down around Carter's hips as my swollen sex pressed against his hardness. My moisture slicked the space between us, causing my grinding hips to slide along his length. His hands gripped and kneaded my curves while I devoured kiss after kiss.

"Can I have more?" I breathed against his mouth, a question he knew the answer to by the way my hands tipped his head back and pressed our lips together.

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With a growl, he devoured my lower lip with his, sucking and sucking until I was a dizzy mess. Then he broke the kiss and looked deep into my eyes, his molten pools swirling with a heady mix of lust and promises of things to come. My breath stuttered in anticipation as he lowered his mouth to my waiting breast. His tongue swiped along the cleavage between them, their tips puckered at the attention. My nipples strained even more for his touch, hot aching buds yearning for release.

“I’ve wanted this,” he said against my skin, capturing one hardened tip between his lips and flicking it with his tongue.

The sensations rocketing down my spine had me moaning out his name. “God, Carter.”

His lips trailed along the valley between my breasts, his hands groping and squeezing them. My head arched back as he dragged his tongue across my chest, hissing air over a few moles that dotted the way. Gooseflesh prickled my skin, amplifying the sensations from every touch. He knew all my spots, knew how to drive me insane with just a simple touch. My hips rose and fell on his length as he began to thrust upward into my body.

“You feel so good, baby,” he growled against my skin as he lavished more attention on my breasts. One hand slid down my stomach, between my legs. His digits dipped into my wetness, swirling and collecting the proof of my arousal before bringing it to my other nipple.

The contrast between cool and hot nearly sent me over the edge. I bucked more violently against him, needing more than his teasing touches. “More.” I whimpered as

he flicked his tongue around my nipple before suckling lightly again.

“More?” he teased, a satisfied chuckle vibrating across my skin. His fingers teased my folds before rubbing my clit in time with the hardness of his cock in me. I was on the edge, desperate for release as his fingers edged me closer. His thrusts came harder, hips pumping upward into me at a rhythm I couldn’t match, so I let him take control. When I did, my coil snapped, sending me over the edge.

My body jerked and clenched down around him. He slowed in response, savoring the pulsing of my thick walls around his dick. The waves of pleasure hit me slowly, ebbing and flowing as he continued to massage my clit, and I leaned down to kiss him again.

“God you’re really good at that,” I told him before kissing him harder.

Carter leaned in further, sliding his throbbing length even deeper into my depths as the last waves of my orgasm subsided. His movements were slow and deliberate, each thrust sending anew sensation coursing through my body. I moaned and tangled my fingers in his hair, clinging to him as he continued to rock inside me. His breathing quickened, hot puffs of air dancing against my wet skin, fueling the fire within me again.

“God I want to taste you,” he growled, licking the nipple he’d spread my juices on.

I grinned with hooded eyes as I pushed myself away from him and stood slowly. He lifted one leg and propped my foot on the couch next to him, then proceeded to lower his head to my core and start licking.

“Oh God,” I breathed as his mouth engulfed my swollen clit. His tongue flicked and stroked me, each movement more pleasurable than the last. “Oh yes, right there.”

He moved his hands up my thighs, spreading my legs farther apart to give him more access to my aching core. He sucked on my entrance and massaged my clit in one long stroke before doing it again and again, each time faster than the last.

“Carter,” I whimpered as he plunged a finger inside me, curling it to hit my G-spot. The sensation was indescribable, causing me to buck and arch against his face. My knees felt like giving out, my entire body trembling and craving another release. I splayed my hands on his back and leaned forward over him as it neared, barreling ever closer to the point of explosion.

When it came, waves of white-hot pleasure rippled through my body, causing me to shudder and dig my nails into his back. His fingers inside me, the way his tongue lapped at my moist folds—he knew what he was doing and I loved him for it.

He continued to torment me until I pushed him away and collapsed against his chest, panting for air as I straddled him. “God, Carter,” I gasped, my voice nothing but a raspy moan in the quiet room.

He smiled against my shoulder and peppered kisses along my neckline, his erection still hard between us. “You’re so sexy when you come,” he mumbled against my skin.

I blushed and closed my eyes, enjoying the afterglow as it coursed through me, from the tips of my toes to the ends of my fingers. Carter’s cock twitched between us, clearly ready for more. And I was more than willing to oblige him. My hips rocked gently, and he growled as he nipped at the inside of my breast.

“Guess no condom is necessary now?” he mewled, and I reached between us to guide his dick into me.

“Guess not,” I responded, shocked by how easily he lifted me to flip me over onto my

back. The fluid motion was so quick I gasped and snickered as he buried himself in me deep again.

“Do I get to do this to you every day for the rest of my life if I want?” Carter started thrusting slowly as I spread myself and hooked my ankles behind his back.

“I think you might...” His lips stole my words again, and I let them.

His thrusts were slow and deliberate, the complete opposite of our first time. I spread my legs farther apart, meeting him each time he bottomed out. “God, Carter ,” I moaned into his mouth as he hit me deep again and again.

He broke the kiss with a growl, bracing himself on the couch as his thrusts quickened. I admired his chest, touching and letting my fingertips trail across his skin and lower to my core where I massaged my own clit. His angle and speed were perfect, hitting my G-spot.

“Sunny,” he grunted as he continued thrusting. I could feel him throbbing inside of me, his heat suffusing mine in the most intimate way possible. I looked at him, his face contorted with lust and pleasure and love.

His release came with a grunt and twitching, warmth spilling into my core deliciously. He slowed his thrusts and stopped. His weight pinned me to the couch cushions, and I wrapped my arms around him. Carter’s lips pressed against mine, which I returned as gently as he offered to me.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered as he lingered with his forehead pressed against mine.

“Don’t be. You did nothing wrong. Okay?” Carter’s fingers reached up and brushed a few stray hairs off my forehead. “I’m the one who should be sorry...And your dad.” His mention of my father soured the mood slightly, but I clung to him when he tried

to pull out.

“I don’t want to talk about him. Just us...You and me and our baby.” My fingers played at his sides, but he backed away anyway, pulling out. I felt his sex drain out of me and quickly got up before it soiled the couch. It ran down my inner thigh as I rushed to the bathroom to clean up. When I came back, he sat in his boxers on the couch. I had a towel wrapped around my waist, knowing this little rendezvous was far from over.



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Carter patted the cushion next to him, and this time I opted to sit by his side and cuddle into his embrace. When he asked me if we could talk, I didn't expect myself to feel so overwhelmingly comforted just at seeing his face. The real talking still had to happen, and I didn't know if this was the calm before the storm, or the rainbow following it.

"Sunny, I know you don't want to talk to your dad, but you need to." Carter's words made me bristle. He of all people should know how much Dad had upset me. My father had tried to shove men toward me for weeks, some of them right in front of him. How could he not be upset by this?

I stiffened and sat up, clutching the towel around my body subconsciously. "Carter, how can you defend him? You've seen what he's like." I felt my lower lip quivering, not even trying to stop the slight twitch. I wanted healing between us now, not more division.

His hand rose and cradled my cheek, pulling me in for a soft kiss. Then he let me go and said, "Sunny, I know. But you only get one father, and I looked into his eyes and saw the pain there. He's sorry for being a jerk to you, babe. He wants to make it right, and I won't let him harass you anymore. You have me on your side now, and he knows it. Besides," he said, lowering his hand to my belly, "Baby Price needs a grandpa even if he's a curmudgeon who likes to nitpick."

I hated that he was right. I hated that my mom had been right, and Luna. Freya had even cautioned me not to give up on my dad, not having had one herself as a child. It was time to let the hurt go and face reality, that I did need my dad. I simply didn't need him the way a child does. I needed his encouragement now, not his parenting.

“What if he can’t stand the idea of us being together? And what if he is angry about the baby?” I knew he knew about the baby after that rude comment in the restaurant the last time I spoke to him. Based on that comment, I suspected he was angry about it, though I didn’t know his real thoughts on the matter.

“Then we’ll handle it.” Carter looked skeptical, eyes narrowed, lips pursed. I knew this had to be hard on him too. His first child died, and the fear of it happening again...I couldn’t even imagine.

“Are you okay?” I asked him softly. No one in this world meant more to me than him, and knowing this situation might be frightening to him felt like a dark cloud hanging over us both. I wanted more than anything for him to be happy and celebrate with me, but that reality might never happen.

“I’ll be okay, Sunny. I just need some time to process things. I’m going to see the counselor I worked with after Hope died. I know they’ll have a lot to say about this, and it will help. But I don’t want you to think for a second that I’m upset with you or angry.” The pad of his thumb brushed over my lip. “I am so happy to have you in my life, and after a moment to sit and think and process, I realized that I do want this baby. I want what I never got the chance to have with Hope, and I couldn’t be happier that I get to share it with you.”

His reassurance coiled around me, drawing me into him. I laid my head on his chest and let him play with my hair as he spoke softly about Hope and how much he loved her, how much he knew he already loved our baby. The warmth of his tone lulled me into a deep sleep as he held me, and for the first time in weeks, I slept peacefully, curled up against his chest.

The wand glided over Sunny's abdomen, slicked in the gel used to help provide a clearer image. Sonogram technology today was so different from the type available when my ex was pregnant with Hope. The perfect three-dimensional image of our baby on the monitor brought tears to my eyes as the tech positioned it and snapped pictures.

Sunny's hand clung to mine, smile on her face while I chewed the inside of my cheek in anguish. Seeing the baby only made it more real. I'd met with my therapist who gave me excellent grounding techniques for this moment, but they were failing me. Fear over the future made me lose all conscious thought, lost in my swimming imaginations of panic and dread.

"Baby is healthy and growing, and I'd put your due date around February fourth." The tech grinned at Sunny, who looked up at me and squeezed my hand.

"Did you hear that, Daddy? A Valentine's baby..." Her tone was chipper and light.

After finally reuniting with her last week, I'd spent the better part of the last eight days with her at Rick's home in Malibu. I understood now why she'd been adamant about finding her own place when she decided to remain in LA instead of going to Tampa, but this tormenting fear put me on edge, making me think it would be better if she were in my home with me where I could keep an eye on her. I knew that wasn't what she wanted, but it would make me feel much better.

"Valentine's," I repeated numbly, watching the screen. The machine kept malfunctioning, picking up a second heartbeat which the tech complained was impossible.

Sunny's expectant eyes studied the monitor carefully as the wand slid over her skin, and I noticed the uptick of the tech's face, eyebrows going high.

“Ms. Douglas, I know Dr. Fetters said you were measuring slightly larger for this pregnancy already. I expected it to be a large fetus, perhaps you’re farther along than you thought.”

“No, it’s not possible. This is Carter’s baby.” Sunny’s sudden tense expression made me tense too. I knew she’d been dating someone before me, but she never let on that a pregnancy with that guy might be possible. After the yo-yo of emotion getting here, seeing my therapist to deal with the uncertainties I was facing and everything else we’d fought through, I didn’t want to have any more shocking news.

“Oh, I know it is.” The tech grinned as she rocked the wand to one side. As she did, two perfect silhouettes came into view on the monitor as two heartbeats synced up to almost match perfectly. “You’re having twins. Do you see this?” Her finger stretched out to point at the monitor where it appeared their hands were locked together. This tiny, they barely had appendages, but I saw it with my own eyes.

“Oh my gosh, Carter, look!” Sunny whimpered. I felt her grasp tighten around my hand. She was so thrilled with this news I could almost get lost in the sensation of her hope and joy filling the room.

“Twins,” I breathed out slowly, still trying to wrap my head around this new bit of information. Fear seized me in a stranglehold. Sunny was taking it in stride, but I don’t know how I would manage this. “Okay, we can do this.” I squeezed Sunny’s hand reassuringly, my other hand trembling against my leg. I said it more for her benefit and perhaps to bolster my own sense of confidence which faltered at the idea of one baby, let alone two.

“They appear to be fraternal, which is better than identical. You’ll need extra care, extra doctor’s visits and of course there is the chance you’ll be on bed rest near the end. But, congratulations on your perfect little Valentine’s babies!” the tech happily cooed. She seemed to be far more pleased than either Sunny or me.

Sunny's excited, stunned face was enough to coax a smile out of me. I leaned in and kissed her cheek before folding her in my arms. "You okay?" she whispered, so I nodded.

"Just breathing through the insecurities," I told her as the tech finished up a few measurements.

"We'll schedule you guys in for a secondary ultrasound just to make sure everything is on track, but so far, so good. Congratulations. Dr. Fetters will be in to speak with both of you shortly." The tech gathered up her things, the squeal of her shoes on the linoleum floor echoing as she made her way to the door and closed it behind her.

Sunny glanced at me, a bashful smile on her face, but I could see the same fear swimming in her eyes. I reached over and took her free hand, intertwining our fingers. "We got this, right?"

"Yeah we do. You said if I wanted a thousand, right?" Sunny nervously chuckled. I laughed too but I felt it die in my chest, the weight of it sinking in and becoming real. Twice the risk, twice the pain. "Two times as much joy, Carter," she said, as if she could read my mind.

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I helped her sit up and I hugged her tightly. When Dr. Feters walked into the room, I pulled away from her and we both faced him. He was a short man, round belly, balding head. He reminded me that life went on for most of the world, hundreds of women every day in this city gave birth successfully, thousands of children attended school without incident—two things my therapist told me to focus on if I felt overwhelmed.

“How are you two doing? I hear twins are on the way! Congratulations.” He thrust his hand out toward me and I shook it. Sunny pinched his fingers daintily, and he sat on the stool across the room.

“It’s a little shocking,” Sunny told him. She held me tighter, causing me to drift out of my self-isolation inside my own head and remember that she was experiencing this for the first time.

“Twins happen every day, Sunny. You will just need extra nutritional support, more rest, and probably twice as many diapers.” His joke landed with her, but I was already drumming up a million questions for him.

“Dr. Feters, I know duplicate pregnancies are higher risk. Should Sunny take some time off work? And how do you feel about sex during pregnancy? Will we have to stop that until after she gives birth? What about?”

“Whoa there, Junior Detective,” he chuckled, pointing a sausage-like finger at me. “I didn’t say you’re in any imminent danger, just slightly more precautionary than usual. With fraternal twins rarely do we run into any major issues besides maybe Sunny here needing an epidural instead of laboring au natural.”

She swatted at my arm and chuckled. “You’ll have to forgive him. He’s very protective of me.” Her arm around my waist eased more of my concern.

“Sunny will be able to work and exercise like normal. We don’t get worried about things unless she shows signs of distress. Duplicates are very common, Dr. Price, as you are well aware I’m sure. When she gets closer to term, we will put her on light duty to rest more, but only because growing one baby is hard enough. Growing two can be exhausting. I suggest cutting work hours back when you start to feel too tired.” He looked at Sunny and continued. “And we’ll do monthly sonograms until thirty weeks, after which we’ll do them twice monthly to ensure the babies are growing well.”

“Thank you, Dr. Fetters.” She clung to me, but her voice was strong.

“I’ll have Audree set up the next sonogram, and in the meantime, Carter, if you have any other concerns, feel free to call.” Dr. Fetters dismissed us and we headed out. I didn’t release Sunny until we were back in the car, where she pressed a kiss to my cheek as I started the engine.

I held her hand as I pulled out of the parking lot and headed toward Malibu. Everything inside me was jumbled up and tossed, but somehow I knew it would be alright. Sunny had a confident joy about her that glowed, seeping into me like a warm summer sunshine that told me everything would work out just fine.

Now to tell Rick and Melanie the news and hope they thought it was good news, not the tragedy Rick would probably think it was.

I gripped Carter's hand a little tighter as we walked up the stone path to my parents' front door. The warm glow of the porch light illuminated the entryway, casting long shadows across the lawn. The house was as pristine as ever, but tonight it felt different—like a stage set for an uncomfortable confrontation rather than a family dinner. My chest was heavy.

I took a deep breath, steeling myself. The last time I was here, my father and I had barely spoken. The tension between us had become suffocating, settling into every pause in conversation, every sideways glance. And now, after everything that had happened, after Carter and I had become something more than just a reckless fling—I wasn't sure how this night would go. Dad's last remarks to me were so hurtful; I couldn't shake the way he looked at me.

Carter must've sensed my hesitation. He squeezed my hand and murmured, "We've got this."

I nodded, but my stomach twisted into knots anyway. It wasn't just Dad I was worried about. My mom, Luna—how would they react to the news? That I planned to stay here in LA to be with Carter, and would their reactions have any sway over what Dad thought about the whole thing?

Before I could dwell on it any longer, the door swung open, and my mother's bright smile greeted us. "Sunny, Carter...Come in, come in." She gestured as we stepped across the threshold, and my stomach felt like a brick.

Her voice was cheerful, but I saw the flicker of something else in her eyes when she looked at me—concern, maybe even sympathy.

As we stepped inside, the house was exactly as I expected—immaculate, quiet except for the low murmur of conversation coming from the dining room. The air carried the familiar scent of home, a blend of expensive candles and something faintly floral, like



the arrangements my mom always had the maid refresh before guests arrived. Everything was carefully curated, designed to be inviting yet controlled. I was used to this; what I wasn't used to was the ache in my chest, the fear of the unknown.

Luna was the first to notice us. She glanced up from her phone, her lips curving into a smirk as she pushed back from her chair and made her way over.

“Well, well,” she teased, giving me a quick hug before turning her attention to Carter. “You actually showed up.”

Carter chuckled, unfazed. “Wouldn't miss it.” His grip on me tightened slightly, as if he could read my emotions and knew I needed that added boost.

Luna arched an eyebrow. “Brave man.” Her snicker brought a warm chuckle from Carter which vibrated my chest as his fingers dug into my hip, but something overpowered it.

I felt it—that heavy presence that had been waiting for me since the second I walked through the door. My sixth sense kicked in—dread.

Dad sat at the head of the table, his posture straight, his gaze unreadable as he took us in. His eyes flickered to Carter first, assessing him the way he did with everything, overly critical and looking for weaknesses. I glanced at Carter who seemed collected. Then his attention settled on me.

“Sunny.” His voice was even, measured.

I forced a small smile, paused, nodded slowly. “Hey, Dad.”

“Come in,” he said finally. “We're all waiting.”

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Carter, to his credit, didn't hesitate. He pulled out a chair for me first before taking the seat beside me. Dad watched the small act with mild interest, his expression unreadable, but I could feel his disapproval hovering beneath the surface.

Luna slid into her seat across from me, a knowing look on her face as she watched the three of us settle in. "So," she said, drawing out the word, her tone intentionally casual, "are we going to pretend this isn't weird, or should we just get it out of the way now?"

Mom sighed, already exasperated. "Luna."

"What? I'm just saying." She shrugged, then shot Carter a mischievous grin. "Dad looks like he's trying not to break something."

Carter smiled, but my father didn't.

"I don't break things," Dad said coolly. He snapped his napkin a little more violently than necessary, and Mom scowled at him. She sat as the maid walked around serving our dinner to us. Any other night, Mom would've done it. Nights like tonight weren't normal. It meant Mom wanted to be present for the entire thing, which meant she probably thought there would be trouble.

"Only our will to live," Luna joked, which drew a deep scowl from Dad, but he calmed and turned to me.

"How are you feeling, Soleil?"

Compassion for him bubbled up as I realized, as a father, he was probably worried about me after days of not hearing from me. Motherhood had already started changing my heart, and I'd barely found out about the twins.

I reached for my water glass, mostly to buy myself a moment. Dad's question had been simple enough, but I knew him well enough to recognize the layers beneath it. He was searching, dissecting my every movement, my tone, my hesitation.

"I'm fine," I said, keeping my voice even. "Still adjusting, I guess."

Dad nodded slowly, leaning back in his chair. "Adjusting," he repeated, like he was turning the word over in his mind, deciding whether or not to challenge it.

Carter's hand brushed my knee under the table, a silent reassurance. I glanced at him briefly before looking back at my father. "I know this probably isn't what you wanted," I admitted, my voice softer now, "but I am happy."

Mom exhaled, setting her fork down gently. She folded her hands together, steeling herself, and then, in the bravest move I'd seen from her all evening, she spoke.

"I think what your father means," she began, her voice measured but firm, "is that we're trying to understand. You and Carter—this happened so fast, and we haven't really had a chance to talk about it." Her gaze flickered between us, searching, hesitant. "So, how are you two doing?"

I felt Carter straighten beside me, his hand steady on his own glass. I knew he was ready for this conversation, prepared in a way that I wasn't sure I was.

I swallowed, then met my mother's eyes. "We're good. We're...really good."

Carter set his glass down, his fingers tapping against the rim for a second before he

spoke. “I know this isn’t what you expected,” he said, his voice calm but sure. “And I know the age difference probably makes this harder to accept. But I care about Sunny. A lot.” He paused for a beat, glancing at me before looking back at my dad. “I love her.”

My heart gave a small, unexpected squeeze at the way he said it—casual but not wavering, like it was just a fact. Because it was.

I turned to Dad, speaking before he had the chance to. “I love him too,” I said, keeping my voice even. “This isn’t some phase, or some bad decision I’m going to regret later. I know exactly what I’m doing.”

Dad let out a sharp breath, dragging a hand down his face. “Jesus, Soleil.” His tone wasn’t angry, but it was edged with frustration. “Fifteen years of an age difference. You don’t think that’s a lot?”

“I mean, yeah, it’s a lot,” I admitted with a small shrug, feeling blood tinge my cheeks pink. “But it doesn’t feel like it. It’s not like I don’t know my own mind, Dad.”

He shook his head, muttering under his breath before taking a sip of his drink. “You’re twenty-eight,” he said finally, his eyes flicking between me and Carter. “You’ve still got a whole lot of life ahead of you. He’s—” He stopped, exhaled through his nose, and shook his head again. “Hell, Carter, you’re in your forties.”

Carter didn’t react, just nodded like he understood where Dad was coming from. “Yeah. And?”

Dad frowned. “And in ten years, she’s gonna be at a totally different stage of life than you. You don’t think that’s gonna matter?”

Carter's expression stayed neutral, but I could feel him tense slightly beside me. "Look, I get the concern. I really do. But I don't see Sunny as someone who's just passing through my life. And I don't think she sees me that way either."

I nodded. "I don't."

Dad sighed, rubbing a hand over his temple. "I just..." He trailed off, his brows drawn together, clearly struggling with how to say what he wanted to. Finally, he settled on, "I just want you to be happy."

I softened a little, some of my defensiveness melting away. "I am happy."

He didn't look convinced, but he also didn't look like he was gearing up for a fight. Which, for now, I'd take as a small win. The difficult part of this conversation had gone over like a storm cloud, but it was out of the way and we could move on to happier things, though I knew Dad would revisit this again later, probably to nag me about making sure I was doing the right thing.

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I shifted in my seat, resting my hand over my stomach as the conversation started to settle. The tension in the room had eased—at least a little—and now felt like the right time. I glanced at Carter, who gave me a small nod like he knew exactly what I was about to say.

“So,” I said casually, looking between my parents and Luna. “I had my first big ultrasound the other day.”

Mom’s eyes flicked up from her plate, her expression brightening. “Oh? How did it go?” Her warm smile was so welcoming. I’d missed that for so long. It felt like things were back to normal now.

“Good,” I said, suppressing a smile. “Really good. The doctor says everything is looking great. Heartbeats are strong, measurements are right on track.”

Luna sipped her drink, nodding along. “That’s good,” she said, clearly waiting for me to get to the point.

I smirked. “Both heartbeats.”

There was a brief pause. The soda in Luna’s straw froze halfway to her mouth. Mom’s eyes narrowed slightly, like she was trying to process what I’d just said. She looked at me with confusion as my smile grew brighter.

Then Dad spoke. “Both?”

I nodded. “Yes. There are two.”

Luna nearly choked on her drink. “Wait.What?”

“Twins,” I said, this time letting the full smile break through. “I’m having twins.”

Mom blinked, then exhaled a small laugh. “Oh, Sunny.”

Dad set his fork down and just shook his head. “Well,” he muttered, rubbing a hand over his face, “that’s...something.” I was certain that wasn’t what he wanted to say because he looked like he was controlling himself. I guess Mom really had reined him in.

Luna, of course, was the loudest. “You’re telling me you went in expecting one and came out with two? That’s insane. That’s what you’ve been keeping from us?”

I chuckled. “It wasn’t exactly intentional.”

Carter just leaned back in his chair, amused. “Surprised us too.”

And just like that, the tension snapped. I was no longer the black sheep and Dad didn’t hate me anymore. He started asking questions about the babies and how we’d manage. Carter and Dad fell into relaxed best-friend type conversation while Mom and Luna daydreamed about each having an infant to be their favorite, and I felt the growing sense of warmth that Carter had been right all along.

A little time to process was all my parents needed, and they were already growing more comfortable with the idea of me and Carter, and I was glad. I planned to keep him around for a very long time.

## EPILOGUE: CARTER

The photo album rested on my lap, the leather cover soft from years of handling. It

was one of the few things I still kept out in the open, even after all this time. Some days, I could flip through it easily, smiling at the pictures, remembering the joy. Other days, like today, it hit a little differently.

Sunny sat beside me, her swollen belly pressing into my side, one hand absentmindedly rubbing at it as she turned the pages. She was quiet, absorbed in the pictures.

“She was so little,” she murmured, her fingers tracing the image of Hope in my lap, barely a few months, looking up at me like I’d hung the moon.

“She was,” I said, swallowing the familiar tightness in my throat. “Not even six months when...” I let the sentence trail off. It wasn’t something I needed to say out loud.

Sunny turned her head, pressing a soft kiss to my shoulder. “She looks just like you,” she said, her voice warm but careful.

I let out a quiet chuckle. “She had my smile. But she had her mom’s nose, and her stubborn streak.” I smirked. “I don’t care what anyone says, that was all Misty.”

Sunny laughed, leaning into me. “I don’t know, Carter. I think you’ve got a pretty stubborn streak yourself.”

“Maybe,” I admitted, resting my chin against the top of her head.

She flipped another page, this one showing Hope clutching a stuffed rabbit, her tiny fingers wrapped around its worn ears. I exhaled slowly. “I just hope I do better this time.”

Sunny squeezed my hand. “You will.”



I wanted to believe her. But fatherhood wasn't just about love—it was about fear too.

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I closed the album and set it on the coffee table, shifting slightly so I could look at Sunny properly. “You know,” I said, keeping my voice light, “you’ve been staying at the Malibu house for months now. At what point are you going to admit you basically live there?”

She smirked, resting a hand on her belly. “I know, but it’s different. It’s still my dad’s house. I don’t want to be under his roof forever.”

“That’s exactly my point,” I said, giving her hand a squeeze. “You do need to move. So why not here?”

She let out a slow breath, tilting her head back against the couch. “Carter...”

I leaned closer, pressing a kiss to her fingers. “Sunny, come on. You’re about to have twins. I want to be with you every second I can, and I don’t want to drive back and forth between here and Malibu just to see you. I want us to be together, in the same house, under the same roof. I want to be there when they wake up in the middle of the night, not rushing over like a visitor.”

Her expression softened as she looked at me. “I know. And I want that too.” She sighed, running her fingers through the ends of her hair. “I guess I’ve been holding on to the idea of being independent, making sure I could do this on my own if I had to.”

“You don’t have to.” I smiled, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “You’re not losing your independence, Sunny. You’re just letting me be in this with you.”

She studied me for a moment before letting out a small chuckle. “You’re really not

going to drop this, are you?”

“Not a chance.”

Her lips twitched, but then she sighed, shaking her head with a playful eye roll. Relief and excitement surged through me as I assumed what she was about to say, and I was about to celebrate when I felt her grip on my wrist tighten. I looked at her in question, but she wasn’t smiling anymore. Her eyes had gone wide, and her other hand flew to her belly.

“It’s time,” she said, and I narrowed my eyes on her.

“Are you saying you’ll move in...?”

“I mean, it’s time,” she gasped. I followed her gaze down and saw the spreading damp spot on her slacks.

My heart kicked into high gear. “Oh God.”

For a second, I just stood there like an idiot. Then Sunny gripped my wrist and groaned, and that snapped me into action.

“Alright, okay—we’re going!” I grabbed her hospital bag, threw my keys in my pocket, and helped her to her feet.

“Carter, breathe,” she said, even as she winced through another contraction. “We have time.”

“Right. Time. But not too much time.”

I got her settled in the car, tossed the bag in the backseat, and handed her my phone. “Call your parents. I’ll call Luna and Jackson.”

Sunny let out a slow breath as she dialed. “Dad’s gonna freak out.”

“Good thing we’re not there to see it,” I muttered, pulling onto the highway.

The drive to the hospital was a blur of deep breathing (mostly from Sunny), me gripping the wheel like we were in the Indy500, and phone calls filled with rushed explanations. By the time we got to the hospital, Sunny was wheeled inside while I scrambled to follow.

Everything moved fast. Too fast. I barely had time to process before I was in scrubs, holding her hand as the doctors prepped for the cesarean we had planned on weeks ago. She looked excited but scared, and I was terrified.

The moment they placed the first baby in my arms, however, my entire world shifted. She was so small, wrapped in a soft hospital blanket, her tiny face scrunched as she let out a tired whimper. I barely breathed, afraid even the rise and fall of my chest might disturb her.

Then, a nurse handed Sunny the second baby—a perfect little boy, just as tiny, just as impossibly real. She cradled him close, brushing her fingers gently over his cheek. He settled against her instantly, his soft breath barely a whisper.

I looked down at my daughter, completely awestruck. “She’s so...” I couldn’t even find the words.

Sunny glanced over at me, a tired but knowing smile on her lips. “I know,” she whispered.

I swallowed hard, shifting just enough so I could look between them both. Our babies. Our family. My chest felt too full, like my heart had expanded past what my body could hold. I had known this moment was coming, but nothing could have prepared me for the way it hit me all at once.

I met Sunny's gaze, and without even thinking—without planning or worrying or hesitating—I blurted, “Marry me.”

Her brows lifted in surprise, then amusement flickered in her tired eyes. “Carter...”

“I mean it.” I turned fully to her, still holding our daughter, still feeling like my entire world had just been rebuilt. “I love you. I love them. And I don't want another second of my life to go by without making it official. I want to marry you.”

Sunny laughed softly, shaking her head, but there was no rejection in her expression. Instead, her lips curved into a playful smirk. “You know you're going to have to ask my dad first, right?”

I groaned, leaning my head back against the chair, though I was grinning. “Oh, great. That'll go well.”

Her laughter was quiet, but it was real, and in that moment—holding our daughter, watching Sunny cradle our son—I knew everything had changed for the better.

Rick would probably make me jump through a few hoops before he gave his blessing, but for once, I didn't mind. Because no matter what happened next, I already had everything I could ever want, right here in my arms.