



# Hudson

**Author:** *Samantha Skye*

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**Description:** I've never sought a savior, especially not a billionaire. But when a charming, single dad returns to my small town, memories stir of our shared past and our future feels increasingly intertwined. As the town's new Doctor, Hudson Hamilton is hard to ignore. Not only is he now in charge of my moms medical needs, but he is also best friends with my boss.

His good looks and excellent bedside manner do little to tame the heat that swirls. But fantasizing never served me well and my life is chaotic, with one hurdle after another. No time to date, no time to daydream.

But he bonds with my mom, I bond with his son, and despite my hesitation, his caring ways start to break down my walls. But just like everything in my life, it doesn't come easy. Sinister things are at play. Danger is lurking and it is coming from those closest to us.

**Total Pages (Source):** 82

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LACY JONES

My back aches. Is that normal for a twenty-three-year-old woman?

“What’s wrong?” My mother’s voice is terse as she assesses me from where she sits in the living room. Perched up in her large, worn-out armchair, I’ve already fluffed her pillow, refreshed her water, and made sure she has her book and phone nearby.

“Nothing,” I tell her, my smile small and a little forced as I continue wiping down the kitchen counters and cleaning up from breakfast. I feel like I’m forgetting something as I run through the mental checklist in my mind over and over again. I need to triple-check Mom’s medication for today and make sure her phone is charged. The washing machine beeps, indicating the end of the cycle, so I also need to hang the laundry before I go. No time to stop, no time to slow down.

“You’re tired, Lacy,” Mom says and I catch her still looking at me. She’s right. I’m exhausted. But I have a lot on my plate, and being exhausted during the day is my only antidote to trying to stave off the nightmares that come for me in the darkness. Sometimes it works, but most of the time, it doesn’t.

“Don’t worry about me,” I tell her, trying to placate her worry as I make my way over to where she sits in the living room. I grab the small blanket nearby and place it over her knee. As I do, I notice it getting a little threadbare, and I add another mental note to go to the cute homewares store in town and see if I can find another one for her.

“Stop your fussing. I’m doing well. I can walk around and get my own things,” she snaps at me, and I jolt upright at her bark.

“I just want to make sure you’re settled before I go to work,” I explain, for what feels like the hundredth time, while my eyes flick to her dwindling library book stash next to her. I frown, trying to remember what the opening hours are at the library, knowing I need to get there before she runs out of books this week.

“Honey, you need to relax. I’m more than capable.” Her voice changes to that low, caring octave she sometimes gives me. The one that makes me pause and swallow hard. She’s right. She is good. And while we are not out of the woods yet, this is the healthiest she’s been in years.

“I know.” I continue to fluff her blanket some more, needing to do something with my hands. Mom is capable. At the moment. Signs are good, but her health ebbs and flows. Sure, some days are better than others. Some weeks are great, others abysmal, but I’m all she has, and I need to take care of her. That’s why I can’t stop, I can’t slow down. I need to be on top of things, I can’t let anything slip.

“You work too hard looking after me. You work too hard at the distillery. You should be young and free and dating, meeting men, and living life,” she says whimsically, obviously reminiscing on her own past. I snort. Dating, what is that?

“I’m fine right where I am, Mom.” Most young people itch to leave the small towns they grew up in, but I feel content being home. Happier still because I landed the job of my dreams right here in Whispers, and I get to care for her in her times of need.

“Sure you are, but if you are not careful, honey, life will completely pass you by. You need to slow down, smell the roses.”

I look at her and sigh. She’s right, of course. Always is. But there is no one else here

to manage things, and if I slow down, then I might forget something or make a mistake and with Mom's health, I can't afford to make that kind of mistake.

"How is work going at the distillery?" she asks, watching me carefully.

"It's busy, but I love it." My answer obviously appeases her because she smiles.

"You do, don't you?" she asks, her tone one of relief. She looks good today. Lots of color in her cheeks and her eyes sparkle.

"I do. I mean, it's everything I could ever want and everything that I've been aiming for," I admit. "None of my friends from college have had the opportunities I have." Never in my dreams did I think this job was remotely possible, especially here in our small town. But here I am, the marketing manager for Whiteman's Whiskey, working on bringing the whiskey brand to life. I'm new to the role, so while the salary is good, it's still a little bit tight some weeks. I have the two of us to look after. I have medical bills, home expenses, not to mention the basic living expenses like food and medicine. There is always something to be paid.

"I feel bad for bringing you back here. I still don't know why you left college early to come home. That was your ticket out of here, and now I've pulled you away from that dream," she says, a little melancholy. A shiver runs through me. College is almost a distant memory, which is where I want to keep it.

"It was easy to just do my final six months remotely from here. That way, I could be here with you and finish my degree at the same time." I tell her the same story I always have. She doesn't need to know anything different. "Besides, it's turning out alright, Mom. You and me always, right?" I say our little slogan, and I see it eases her concerns. "We're a team. Nothing but blue skies for us." Feeling the need to instill some positivity into this conversation, I leave everything else buried, if for no other reason than to see her smile. There's too much to unpack, and now isn't the time. She

needs to focus on healing, not on me.

“Speaking of jobs, I need to get going. I’m working with Connor on the next new release today. Bottle samples are supposed to arrive.” I find it hard to contain my excitement as I triple-check all her pills and vitamins to make sure they are in order for her to take today.

“Don’t forget, I have an appointment at the hospital this afternoon,” Mom says, and I pause midway between her and the laundry to sort it out before I go. I had forgotten about her appointment. My brow crumples, wondering how I forgot something like that. I’m usually on top of all her appointments. “Susan’s taking me,” she adds quickly.

“Susan?” I question. It makes sense. Susan Hamilton is one of Mom’s oldest friends and is always popping over to help, which has been a godsend for me, really. But I usually take Mom to all her medical appointments. I feel bad that I didn’t have today’s appointment written in my schedule, and even worse about the fact that it wasn’t on my radar at all. The familiar feeling of failure creeps up my spine, making my stomach curl.

“You need to stop trying to look after me all on your own. We have a good community here, and lots of friends. It’s just a checkup, and I’ll be saying goodbye to the doctor. I didn’t tell you because I thought it might give you a break,” she says, fixing her blanket with a proud smile on her face.

“Goodbye?” My brow furrows deeper as I wonder what else I have missed. Hell, where has my brain been at that I seem to be missing so much lately? I think briefly to my nightmare last night, knowing exactly where my mind now lives. The smell of gasoline is still one I can’t stomach.

“He is finally retiring. Going traveling before settling down in Florida, where his

grandchildren are.” Mom saying the information only adds to my confusion. The washing machine beeps again, reminding me that I need to tend to it.

“What? When did that happen? Why didn’t I know...” I start to say, my chest feeling tight. Sure, he’s at retirement age, but I didn’t know he was leaving so soon. “What will happen with your care?” I ask, concerned, my body starting to tingle with panic. I need to speak to the doctor. I need to sort out Mom’s medical care moving forward. If we need to travel farther to appointments, then I’ll need to pencil that in, move things around in my work schedule.

“Lacy. With everything that’s going on at work for you, not to mention, you are working through your own things, I just didn’t need you to worry about me too.”

There goes my stomach. Feeling heavy like it’s weighing me down, yet simultaneously wanting to empty. I quickly look at the bathroom, like I might need to dash.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:50 am*

“I’m fine, Mom.” I feel like my words are on repeat as my shoulders tighten, and I try to tamp down my insides.

“I know. You’re doing so well with your therapy, and I’m so proud of you. But I’m okay too. Susan will take good care of me today. Besides, she was keen to see the hospital one last time before Hudson comes back. Apparently, he wants to make lots of changes once he is here,” Mom says, and just at the sound of his name, I’m on high alert, my heart back to racing.

“Hudson?” I ask cautiously. I feel like the dots are starting to connect in my brain. Hudson Hamilton is Susan’s son and a billionaire doctor from the city, a man who screams wealth, who grew up here, and is bestfriends with my boss. He is also the man who rescued me from certain death six months ago. Held me close and promised to keep me safe, and I believed him. Pity my panic attacks prove otherwise.

“Hudson is coming home. He’s going to run the hospital. Susan is so glad to have him and her grandson coming to live in Whispers, she is beside herself. It’s all she has been talking about for weeks.” Mom huffs with a small smile dancing on her lips, filling me in on the local gossip.

I swallow harshly. I knew my boss, Tanner Whiteman, was trying to get Hudson to come back to manage the hospital, and even though Tanner runs this town and is good friends with Hudson, I never thought he would accept the offer. Hudson lives in LA and is one of the country's best doctors. Having invented some unique medical testing equipment while he was in med school, he earned his billions from selling his prototype to the country’s larger medical company, and even though he could retire young and live a life floating around the Mediterranean, he doesn’t.

If Hudson is, in fact, coming back, our billionaire count in Whispers will rise again. Our little quiet patch of the country already has many, Hudson's brother Huxley also living here part-time. I'm quiet for a beat. Shocked, really. I first met Hudson months ago when he came to Whispers to spend a few weeks at the hospital to try it out. I remember his eyes following me around the bar in town when I worked the night shift and whenever he would come past the distillery to see Tanner. We shared smiles, a few harmless flirtatious moments. They were brief, yet butterflies swirled every time he was near. But after the incident, he left pretty quickly. He sent me text messages almost every week for a month before they stopped—probably because I never responded. I was healing, both physically and mentally, and he's a billionaire dad, who lives in LA, so far removed from my day-to-day that my dreams of being swept off my feet are well and truly just that. Dreams. I never thought I would ever see him again. I guess I was wrong.

“Lacy. Lacy?” Mom says, grabbing my attention, and I shake my head.

“Yes, Mom?” I ask, just as the washing machine beeps for a third time, making my shoulders inch upward to my ears.

“You need to get to work. You will be late, honey.”

With that, I shove Hudson to the back of my mind and run to the laundry, pulling out the wet clothes and throwing them into the dryer, the outside breeze not one I have time to utilize today before I quickly gather my things.

Mom is right. I'm busy. Busy with my new role, busy being her primary caretaker, busy trying to sort myself out, manage the house, manage our finances. It leaves little time for anything else.

Men and dating included.



## HUDSON HAMILTON

My son runs around the empty house, arms spread out wide, pretending to be an airplane. His fascination with planes started when we took a trip in the jet back to Whispers a few months ago. Now he can't get enough of them.

"It looks so big!" he exclaims as he zooms past me, my smile wide as I watch his delight.

"He's right. This house is so empty, our voices almost echo," my friend, Sutton, says as he takes a swig of his morning take-away coffee. I look around. The walls that were once covered with my multimillion-dollar art collection are now bare. My Dali and Picasso are now in safe storage. The polished marble flooring makes the house feel cold and uninviting, instead of warm and welcoming. Family photos that lined the wall up the stairs are all packed away, as are all our other things. The time has now come.

"Your place echoes," I huff to him, knowing his Hollywood Hills mansion is decorated well, but has no life. Like me, he works too hard, although instead of a busy city hospital, he's always off on a movie set somewhere.

"True. Maybe I need a new decorator?" he murmurs, obviously bored already and needing something new to focus on. Perhaps his new leading lady is yet to make an appearance. While I played the field in my youth, that side of me is long over. However, Sutton Silvers puts us all to shame. He has a different woman on his arm at every event.

"You need to enjoy life and stop working so hard. If anything, these past few years have taught me that," I try to explain and ignore the small empathetic smile he gives

me. I prefer his wide Hollywood grin, the one where his teeth are so white they are almost blinding.

“Well, I won’t keep you. I need to head to Cannes for the film festival this afternoon. I think my jet is parked near yours at the airport, actually. Tell Sawyer I said hello.” Then my best friend surprises me, pulling me close and slapping my back as we hug. His brother Sawyer spends a lot of time in Whispers these days due to his work with Tanner Whiteman, owner of the local distillery, quasi-mayor of the town, and one of my best friends.

Not much happens in Whispers without Tanner's hand, including me being placed as their new full-time resident doctor. It was always in the cards. I don’t work for the money anymore, but the deep-seated need to continue to help people through medicine runs through my veins and is what pushed me through my medical degree. After selling my prototype for new medical testing equipment years ago, my life is all financed, as is that of my son and grandchildren, should I have them. With money not an issue, I can do life on my terms, and for a long while, that was city living and working to help people in the busy city hospital. Now my pace in life has changed and back home in Whispers, closer to friends and family, is where I want to be.

“I will see you across socials, no doubt. Come visit, yeah?” I ask him, and he gives me a cheeky grin.

“I heard the country girls are nice?” he says slyly, wiggling his eyebrows as he starts to walk backward toward the door. I swallow roughly as I think about my small town and the one woman I think about often. Lacy and I shared a significant night. And she hasn’t left my thoughts, even though she hasn’t responded to any of my text messages. Just the knowledge that I’ll be seeing her again has me both nervous and hopeful.

“I won't be telling you a thing,” I say, smiling devilishly. I’ve been single for the past

few years, preferring to keep my life without strings attached, trying to balance single parenting with work and not really succeeding very well. I need a fresh start and can't wait to get to Whispers just to breathe.

"Hudson, so glad I caught you," my sister-in-law, Melody, says breathily as she sweeps through the open front door, interrupting us. She acts like she has run from the car, yet nothing about her is out of place. Just like my late wife Amanda, she is prim, proper, blond, blue-eyed, plumped and primped and boringly perfect.

"That's my cue," Sutton says, giving me a jovial salute and walking past my new guest, giving her a wink.

"Bye, champ." Sutton fist-bumps my son before he picks him up off the floor and squeezes him tight.

"Bye, Uncle Sutton." Harvey giggles uncontrollably as Sutton tickles him and then places him back on his feet and waltzes out the door. It must be nice to not have a care in the world. I can't remember those days.

"I keep forgetting your best friend is a movie star," Melody mumbles as she watches him go.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:50 am*

“What’s up?” I ask, giving her a small smile. She is a doctor herself. A cancer specialist. The two of us worked day and night to treat my wife of the terrible disease she suffered, but to no avail. Her cancer was a shock and aggressive and, in the end, untreatable.

“Hi, Aunt Melody,” Harvey says, and I smile at his manners.

“Hi, Harvey. All set?” she asks, eyebrows raised expectantly.

“I can’t wait!” Harvey’s barely able to contain his excitement as he jumps from foot to foot; his little legs can’t stay still for long.

Even though moving to Whispers was always in the cards, taking Harvey away from his mother’s side of the family is a battle I wasn’t sure I could master. But my former in-laws are both professionals who never had much time for their daughters, and that ended up being the same story when it came to their grandson. Since Amanda’s funeral, I’ve hardly seen them these past few years. My former father-in-law, especially, as he’s a man whom I don’t really enjoy being around for no other reason than he is just a pompous asshole who thinks he is better than everyone else.

“Yes, well, I would prefer you both to stay here,” I hear her murmur, and I give her a soft smile. I know she is sad to see us go, but Whispers is amazing. Fresh air, open fields, small, yes, but also quaint.

“We are both excited,” I confirm, and she gives me a tight smile. “What can I do for you?” I ask, wondering why she’s here. I see her around the hospital on rare occasions, but she’s been coming by to see me more and more since I told her of our

decision to move.

“I just wanted to say goodbye.” She looks at me with a face full of hope that I will change my mind.

“We said goodbye yesterday...” Harvey and I spent the day with her and her mother, having lunch together. I wanted to do the right thing.

“I know, but that was so... impersonal.”

“Impersonal?” I frown, unsure what she means.

“It’s just. Mom and Dad are still in mourning...”

I take a deep breath because I don’t believe that for a second. It’s true the death of my wife hit everyone hard. Her diagnosis during pregnancy, then starting treatment after birth meant that she didn’t get onto the disease straight away, and after a long year of battle, it finally won. But it has been years now and we all need to move forward. Her parents are more about appearances than anything real.

“And well, we went through so much together.” Her own eyes glass over with tears. This is why I have to leave. I loved my wife. We met just as I was finishing my residency and sold my medical testing solution, dated for a short amount of time, then fell pregnant unexpectedly. I did the right thing and put a ring on her finger, and we had a shotgun wedding. It all happened so fast, including losing her. I have officially been a widower longer than we even knew each other, but if I’m to have any chance of moving on, then I need to leave here.

“We all need to start moving forward. It’s what she would have wanted,” I tell her sister, resting my hand on her shoulder to give her some comfort. I try to be empathetic. The two of them were close. But with both Harvey and me to look after, I

have little left of me to give her. I just want to laugh again. I just want the heaviness in my chest to disappear.

“I know. Of course. Just don’t be a stranger,” she says, reaching out and grabbing my hand. She gives it a squeeze. I appreciate the gesture.

“We won’t. But we do need to go.” My family jet is waiting at the airport, my driver and town car parked outside, packed with our things, ready and waiting for us. I just need to get the box of books that are at my feet and then Harvey and myself out of this house.

“Well, call me when you land,” she says, and I nod.

“Bye, Harvey.” She looks at her only nephew and he gives her a wave, now totally engrossed in a book about planes from my brother, Huxley, and his wife, whom I know he is also excited to spend more time with.

“Bye, Melody,” I say, walking to the door and holding it open for her. As soon as she leaves, my shoulders lower, my stress levels settle, and Harvey comes back to my side.

“Have we got everything?” I ask him, my smile now growing. Being a single dad has been one of the hardest yet most rewarding parts of my life, and I can’t wait to spend more quality time with Harvey.

“Yes! I can’t wait to see Grandma!” Harvey says excitedly.

“Oh, she can’t wait to see you either, buddy,” I tell him, ruffling his hair. LA stifles him. It stifles both of us. The city where I have spent my entire medical career feels almost claustrophobic. It has for me for years.

Like she can hear us, my cell rings, and I see my mom's name light up the screen.

"Hey, Grandma," I say, loud enough for Harvey to hear, and he giggles.

"Just checking in. Have you left yet?" she asks, trying to contain her excitement.

"Left? God, woman, how many times do you need to call him!" I hear my dad tell her in the background, and the fact that he is also close to the phone is enough to tell me that they are both ready for our arrival.

"Just about. We are locking up the door now." I grab my keys and take another quick look around.

"Okay, I have a pot roast on. It will be ready for you both when you arrive," she says, and my mouth waters. Mom's pot roasts are the best thing I have ever eaten.

"Sounds great, Mom. We will see you in a few hours," I tell her, smiling at my son, who is just as excited as his grandparents.

## Page 7

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“She is too young for me,” I state, not denying it, but trying to push them off the topic, and he huffs. It’s true, though, and something I have thought about. Keeping her at arm’s length is the sensible thing to do.

“Not really,” he murmurs. “Victoria is about twenty years my junior.” He disproves my point instantly. I’m in my late thirties, and I know Lacy is mid-twenties, at best. So there are at least fifteen years between us.

“I have a kid.” Harvey is my everything, and for anyone who comes into my life, they need to get along with my son and actually want children in their life. Otherwise, I can’t commit.

“So do I,” Tanner says, side-eyeing his adult son, and I roll my eyes.

“Not the same.” I take another sip. Clearly, Connor is an adult, and even older than Victoria.

“What? I love my new mom!” Connor jests, laughing, and Tanner smacks him in the arm.

“Seriously. None of that can hold you back. I thought something might have happened before you left last time,” Tanner says in question, eyeing me over the rim of his glass as he takes a sip.

“You did leave pretty quickly,” Connor adds. It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell him that I had to. I had to leave so I could come back quicker. I had to leave because seeing Lacy in that hospital bed brought back searing emotions from seeing my late



wife in a similar position, and it hit me then how short life really is. But I saved Lacy, and she gripped on to me like she never wanted to let me go as I did the same to her. I can't explain it. Not really. The feelings between us were intense, even though it was merely one night and too much for me to fully process. Leaving and getting things sorted to come back gave me the time to think through things, it made things clearer, and in the end, coming back here to Whispers was what I really wanted to do.

"Nothing happened. We turned up, I pulled her from the ropes, traveled with her to the hospital, and took care of her medical needs, just like any doctor would," I say honestly.

"I know. I'm not saying you did anything unprofessional," Tanner says.

"It was an emotional night," I tell him, shrugging, and he just nods, knowing exactly what I mean. "And now I need to focus on the hospital and my son." Taking in a deep breath, I square my shoulders. But as we sit here, I hear another laugh from across the room, and I don't need to look to know who it came from.

It feels good to be back.

5

LACY

I squeeze my eyes shut, the pain in my head searing.

"Help!" I try to scream, but my head feels like it's in a tornado. I gulp in air, the fright in my body paralyzing.

"Help!" I scream again, the skin on my legs burning, my body full of pain.

“Help!” The familiar smell of dirt, animals, and gasoline infiltrates my nostrils.

Nausea swirls in my stomach and makes me lightheaded, as my hands are yanked over my head. The pain in my wrists is instant, and I blink hard a few times, my vision blurry.

“Somebody! Please!” I yell, but my voice sounds muffled. I’m confined, constricted. I can’t move, my arms aching from being tied together. Fear crawls up my chest, my heart races, and sheer panic starts to take over. I thrash around, but I can’t get free.

“Help me! Somebody, help me!” My shoulders feel like they are going to rip from my body, my wrists numb like they aren’t even connected to me anymore.

“Help me!” I scream and sit up with a start. My eyes open wide, my panting breath labored, and I look around my bedroom in fear, clutching the sheets to my chest.

Another nightmare. Just a nightmare. My heart is beating out of my chest, the vibrations making me tremble. I rub my eyes, willing the fear to dissipate, grateful for the small lamp I left on last night, bringing the reality of life to my eyes immediately.

I’m in bed. I’m safe.

I try to unfurl the sheets tangled around my body, my skin hot, slick with sweat as my head starts to thump, the nightly headache now approaching.

Throwing the sheets off, I turn and sit on the edge of the bed, placing my feet flat on the floor. Grounding. That’s what my therapist calls it. I look around the room and voice three things I can see.

“Pillows. Mirror,” I say before I turn to look out the window, taking in the sparkles that decorate the sky. “The stars.”

I take a deep breath in and verbalize the three things I can smell.

“Shampoo.” I take in another breath, my now damp with sweat hair intensifying the wash I gave it earlier. “My perfume... and the half-empty herbal tea.” I look at the cup on my bedside. Half-empty with chamomile tea I made myself, thinking it might help me sleep.

News flash. It didn't.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:50 am*

I grab my cell. It's 4:33 a.m. Too early to get up. Too late to go back to sleep. So I pull on a robe and walk out of my room, needing some fresh cool country air.

Opening my bedroom door tentatively, I tiptoe past Mom's bedroom, the creaks of the floor sounding too loud in the quiet house. I quicken my pace down the hall to the screen door and walk outside.

The cool air hits me instantly, and I take in another deep breath, my body still convulsing involuntarily at the fear that consumed me only moments ago. I sit on the Adirondack chair on the porch and look up. The stars are beautiful tonight. Inhaling and exhaling deep breaths, I count them out slowly until my heart settles, my head is clear, and I feel normal. Whatever normal is.

I look at my cell and bring up the messages, searching for the ones that I need to see. Scrolling down, I eventually find it. Hudson. It's been months since the last one, but I kept it. I kept them all.

Just seeing his name makes me feel better, and I wonder why my nightmares never resolve themselves with what happened in reality. With him rushing in and rescuing me. With him grabbing on to me and freeing me from the ropes. With him telling me that he's got me and that he will never let me go.

Instead, they relay the dark parts. Where I'm confined, head throbbing, and smell gasoline, in complete terror and fear for my life. They always skip the rescue.

I click on the text and read it. It's a benign message, asking how I've been. I sigh. Time has now passed. The town has moved on, life kept going, and me?

I now suffer in silence.

I sit with Victoria at the distillery, the two of us just finishing a meeting about our new spa interiors she put together. She has such a great eye for interiors, and even though the build isn't complete, her plans for the interior are amazing, and we have pulled together a strategy for how to launch and what media we need.

"How's your mom doing?" she asks me as we grab a coffee from the distillery restaurant during our five-minute break. It's late afternoon and midweek so no one is around, just the two of us and a few other waitstaff preparing the room for the dinner rush. I love it here, the smell of whiskey, the smiles from our visitors. I'm not a big drinker, but I can appreciate a whiskey.

"She's doing well. She has finished her treatments for a while. More testing will follow in the coming weeks, but at this stage, she is stable," I say, remembering all the appointments and treatment plans we have and I try not to get too excited as my best friend beams at me. I stifle the yawn that threatens. Lack of sleep, coupled with too much on my mind, has me feeling dead on my feet.

"Well, would you look at that," she says, looking out the large windows to the parking lot. I follow her gaze and spot Tanner leaning against his truck. Victoria's face literally blooms whenever she sees him. It's good to see and a pang of jealousy hits me that I don't have the same thing. I grab my cup before my eyes dart to who Tanner is with, and when I see our new doctor, my heart stutters. I watch them for a beat, taking in his smile that has my own lips curling.

"Sugar?" I ask Victoria as I stir a little sweetener into my hot drink, avoiding looking at the men while I try to tame the jitters that now flick around my body just from seeing him.

"I'm so happy Hudson came back," Victoria says absentmindedly, and my eyes

betray me to look back out the window. Hudson is in his signature suit, hair swept back, his handsome features highlighted even more in the afternoon sun that shines down on his frame. As he stands tall, confident, in control, I look down his body, wondering what it would feel like under that distinguished suit.

“Yeah, the town needs a good doctor.” I take a sip of my coffee, my eyes remaining glued to the man standing outside. My gaze only moves when the steam from my drink hits my nose and fogs up my glasses, the ones I wear thanks to the increasing dizzy spells I have been getting every time I look at my computer screen.

“That we do,” she says slowly, looking at me, but I get us moving, walking back to my office. I need the space to take a deep breath and roll my shoulders, because just seeing Hudson makes me nervous. As we walk, my cell vibrates, and I look at it quickly, waiting on an email I don’t want to miss. But my stomach sinks immediately.

Summer School Sessions are open for enrollment. I believe this would be a perfect opportunity for you to enhance your online learning on campus. I’m taking a special intensive class that I would love to see you participate in...

I don’t read the rest of the very long-winded message before I delete it and block it instantly. My skin crawls and I take another sip of my coffee to dampen the nausea that creeps up my throat.

“Have you two talked yet?” Victoria asks, and I blink a few times, thinking about what we were talking about as she takes a seat on the small sofa in my office. I join her, slumping in the armchair, needing all the caffeine today.

“He was around to see Mom the other day,” I tell her as I try to stifle another yawn.

“No, I mean, really talked. About the fire. About him rescuing you and then leaving

town immediately after. The therapist said it was good to talk about it.”

“No. There isn’t anything to say. He rescued me. He treated me as a medical professional would...” I start to tell her before she interjects.

“A medical professional doesn’t sleep at your bedside all night, holding your hand,” she adds, and my eyes flick to her in warning. I told her that in complete confidence. “Don’t worry, your secret’s safe with me.”

“It was a traumatic night, with a lot of emotions for everyone. He’s a doctor, he helped you, he helped Tanner, and he helped me. The rest is just nothing,” I tell her, sick of thinking about that night. Thinking about the small glances we took of each other in the bar the weeks prior, the small smiles we shared. It was the closest I’ve come to being flirty since college. The closest I’ve come to having a man take some sort of interest in me in a long time. It felt nice. But we aren’t anything. We can’t be. He’s just a new face in town, and I have too much to do to even consider getting to know him better.

“You two really should talk. Maybe go out?” Victoria presses. “The way he was looking at you at the bar last week, I would say that he is keen on you.”

“I think you need my glasses because you’re seeing things. A guy like Hudson Hamilton wouldn’t be interested in a girl like me.” Waving my hand in the air, I try to act disinterested, even though the idea of it all has my pulse racing.

“Ahh, but are you interested in a guy like him?” she teases as she sips her coffee, already knowing that he’s caught my eye. She leaves a bright-pink lipstick mark on the cup, her signature look.

“There is at least a fifteen-year age gap.” I roll my eyes.

“So? Tanner and I are twenty years apart...” She smirks, like she has a checkmate on me.

“I’m fresh out of college, I have a sick mom to look after, I’m trying to build my career...” I have a stalker problem, I think to myself as I look back at my cell and thank the stars I don’t have another message. “I don’t have a lot to offer a man like Hudson, and I sure as hell don’t have the time to play around.”



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Plus, history tells me that older men aren't really an area I should be exploring.

"You're being ridiculous. You're amazing, caring for your mom. You just got a promotion with the best whiskey distillery in the country. You are an extreme professional. This strategy we worked on this morning is out of this world, and I can't believe you already know all these media personalities and journalists. You're so beautiful, I can hardly stand it, and every time I look at you, I want to puke because I need your long thick hair more than I need to breathe sometimes."

"Oh, stop." I pretend to scold her as I get up and move around my office. I feel fidgety or nervous, like I need to keep busy. It always happens to me when the topic is on me or something I have done. But I hear her words, and I know she is right. I'm smart, capable, and resilient. "He's a widower. Probably still in love with his late wife. Besides, I went to sleep with him by my side, holding my hand, and when I woke up, he was gone. He saw me at my most vulnerable, then left. I'm kind of embarrassed. I was a mess. Shit, I still am a mess," I say, feeling my cheeks heat and rubbing my temples. I can be honest with her, and while I don't tell her everything, she knows more than most.

"Are you still having nightmares?" she asks quietly, and I stop. Swallowing, I look at her before I sit again.

"Yeah." I sigh. "Are you?"

"Sometimes," she says, and I nod in understanding. I know she does, but she has Tanner to curl up with, to soothe her night terrors. I just grip the cold sheets and try to breathe through the fear, feeling like a child who can't get her shit together. Another

reason Hudson can't come close... I'm too damaged.

"Are they getting better?" I ask, feeling hopeful.

"Less and less, thank God," she says with a small smile of encouragement.

"Good." I'm looking forward to the day when mine start to ease.

"I think going back to Marie's Place helps." Lifting her eyebrows, she looks at me accusingly.

"I've been back. I drive past there every day to come to work," I tell her, although she is right. I have only been back a few times, and each time, I feel better. Maybe I need to go back again. Walk around the new shed, have a coffee in the new kitchen. Just be still in my thoughts.

"Yes, but you know as well as I do that sometimes the best therapy is facing demons head-on. I go to Marie's Place all the time. At first, it was hard, but now I refuse to let that woman take away the one place that I truly made mine. I put my heart and soul into that place; I'll be damned if I'm not going to enjoy it now." Hell, if Victoria can do it, I sure can.

"Fine. I will try and go some more."

"Maybe have your next therapy session there. That helped me," she offers, and I nod. I might take her up on that.

"Well, should we talk about the spa?" Sitting forward, she grabs her laptop, and I grin. We both can't wait for the day when a health spa is installed here at the distillery.

It's something the two of us will make very good use of.

6

HUDSON

With my phone stuck to my ear, I walk down the street, my smile wide as I watch my son skipping ahead of me.

"We just miss him all the time," Melody says, her voice pitching. I smile as Bob from the hardware store passes by swiftly. I offer him a small wave, to which he responds with the standard male greeting of a head nod, walking around us, and heading inside the nearby diner.

"It's only been a few weeks, Melody," I tell her, knowing it won't ease her melancholy. But we left the city merely weeks ago, and I've barely had time to get myself organized and Harvey in school and she is already calling. She has called me a few times, and each time, I've been unable to answer, busy with patients or Harvey. But today, as I walk down the main street of Whispers, I thought it would be a good time to answer.

"I know, I still can't believe you're gone. Especially so far away in Whispers." She huffs. My in-laws generally haven't poked their heads into mine and Harvey's business since Amanda died. But as soon as I told them we were moving, they weren't pleased. But I know Melody loves him, so I do expect her to have an adjustment period. He is the closest thing she has left of her sister.

"Harvey loves it." I come to a pause on the sidewalk, seeing him stop at the window of Tony's Toy World, the small toy store we have in town. He peers inside, his eyes wide. When he was born, I missed so many firsts. His first step was seen by our nanny. His first tooth was also something she highlighted to me. I was so busy trying

to save his mother and then pushing through when she died, and before I knew it, he was already an energetic toddler.

“I’m glad, I really am. I just miss him.” Melody sighs. She visited Whispers once, when I flew her and her sister out to see the ranch and the town. The two of them hated it. It was too quiet, too boring, too dirty, and the horses stunk. They grew up in the city, with money and prestige, and they had no appreciation for the small town at all, but I know the country lifestyle isn’t for everyone.

I should tell Harvey to come to the phone to speak with her, but I think he would prefer to keep wandering down the street, discovering all the new things. And the bit of distance he has from the city now is doing him good. Mom and Dad have been helping me out with him a lot, and it’s such a relief. The saying that it takes a village to raise a child is true, and while the nannies I had in the city were great, the fact that my parents get to dote on and look after him after school while I work is amazing for everyone.

“You know, I can see him outside near the horses, but I can’t get his attention. How about I call you next weekend. He can chat with you then,” I suggest, pretending we are at home on the ranch, instead of me watching my son laugh and smile in town, pointing to a toy he has found in the window display. Seeing him with so much glee on his face, I feel regret for waiting this long to move back. But coming back home here to Whispers, I now understand that this is exactly what we both needed.

“Ahhh, those smelly horses. Don’t let him get too close,” she says with distaste, and I sigh. I look across the street and notice the old florist shop now empty, newspapers stuck in the windows, and I pause my stroll to look at it. I haven’t heard what is happening with it, but I’m not surprised it’s closed now. No one needs that reminder.

“Alright, speak later,” I say, and she says a quick goodbye before the call ends. As a doctor in the city, Melody is just as busy as I was, and I know she has a million other

things to do.

“Hey, Dad, look at this!” Harvey yells, just as I reach where he is standing. He pokes his finger to the window. I peer inside and see a small kids’ paradise. Sure, I’ve taken him to toy stores before, but this quaint little store is so colorful and has so many old-school toys, even I want to go in. As I look to where he is pointing, I smile.

“A model airplane...” I murmur, wondering if he is a bit young for such a thing.

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“I love it...” he whispers in awe, and I look at him, both hands on the glass, his palms flat, his nose squashed against the window, his eyes staring at the box.

“You love planes, don’t you, buddy?”

“I want to fly one myself one day.” He pulls back to look at me, his grin bright, highlighting the small gap from where he lost his tooth this week. His first. One first I didn’t miss.

“Well, maybe you can fly our jet. Be our own personal pilot?” I say, smiling.

“Really?” he says excitedly, his eyes widening in disbelief like I just gave him the world.

“Sure, why not.” I shrug and laugh. Huxley and I share a jet. He lives on the East Coast and regularly visits Whispers, whereas I was on the West Coast. So we purchased a private jet together to ensure we could get where we needed to go. Whispers’ airport is small, yet full of jets, just like ours; such is the lifestyle Whispers brings these days.

“Can I start lessons today?” he asks me, his eyes sparkling, obviously ready to go.

“Not today, buddy. I think you need to be a little older before you can start, but let’s talk to Uncle Huxe about it. I’m sure he won’t mind when you are older,” I tell him, ruffling his hair. I love my son and would do anything for him. I think about maybe taking him to an air museum or something, so he can see other planes up close. It might be a nice trip to take together.

Whispers' town center is busy on a Saturday, people milling around, in and out of shops. I worked this morning and then wanted to spend the afternoon with Harvey, exploring some more. As I look around at the clean sidewalks, the graffiti-free shop fronts, the friendly greetings of people walking by, and the flowers blooming in the garden beds, I drink it all in like I have been thirsty for it for years.

There's a low hum about the place, no one rushing and pushing; the air is clean and the sky is clear. I feel relaxed until I spot someone running across the street and my breath gets caught in my chest. While Harvey is preoccupied, I take a moment to look at her. She seems to know everyone; each person she passes gets her bright smile or a hello, taking great joy in seeing her. Her hair is down, blowing a little in the small breeze we have today, and she's wearing jeans and a green sweater that flatter her beautiful curves.

"Let's walk down a bit farther, buddy," I suggest to Harvey, and we step away from the window and walk down the sidewalk.

"Lacy!" Harvey suddenly yells excitedly, spotting her and running in her direction. My steps falter in surprise as I see Lacy's head shoot up, looking right at us, a smile immediately coming to her face as she watches my son sprint toward her.

"Hey, Harvey!" she says, her smile widening as her arms do the same, and I watch, confused, as my son runs straight into her arms for a hug.

"Ahh, you two know each other?" I ask as I step toward them both as they pull apart.

"Oh, we go way back, don't we, champ?" Lacy says, winking at him, and I smile at her candor. My body feels light; just seeing her makes me feel completely different. I feel fresh, new, energized, and like a fucking schoolboy again, crushing on the cute girl in town.

“Lacy taught me how to make paper airplanes,” Harvey says, and my head tilts in question.

“You both came into the distillery once, and when you were busy with Tanner, I spent time with Harvey,” Lacy explains. “Oh, and your mom brought him over a few times when she came to see my mom last time you were home.” I nod. His love of airplanes is now starting to make a little more sense, since it was here where he picked up the new fascination.

“Old friends, then?” I say, smiling.

“Something like that.” She laughs a little, her cheeks tinting a soft pink, making her even more breathtaking. In the afternoon sun, her skin glows, a natural beauty. That’s because she is fifteen years your junior, and you were dating before she was even born, asshole.

“What are you up to today, Harvey?” she asks my son, giving him all her attention, leaving me bereft.

“I just found a model airplane in the toy store,” he says, his words moving so fast they tumble out of him.

“I saw that last week, the red one? Your favorite color, right?” Lacy asks, and my eyebrows rise. She sure seems to know Harvey well, and my chest warms as I watch the two of them interact.

“Yes, that's the one. And Dad said I can fly his jet later,” he says excitedly, and Lacy looks at me, eyes wide.

“Wow, really?” she says, looking between us.



“Maybe in another ten or so years, buddy. What are you up to?” I ask her, keen to know how she spends her free time.

“I’m just heading into the diner,” Lacy says, just as the diner door swings open with others coming out and going in.

“Dad, can we go to the diner with Lacy? Pleeeaaassee!” Harvey asks, looking up at me with his big brown eyes.

I flick my gaze to Lacy, who looks taken aback. “I don’t think Lacy would want us tagging along, buddy.”

“I don’t mind,” she says quickly, and my eyes rest on hers to ensure she’s okay with it. Her face is flawless and a little flushed. Her big brown eyes widen, the color of them brought out more by the green of her sweater. She wears minimal makeup and minimal jewelry, like none of the heavily made-up women in the city, yet more breathtakingly beautiful than all of them combined. She is one of the most attractive women I have ever met.

“See, Dad, she said we can. Pleeeaaassee?” my son begs, grabbing on to my sleeve and tugging, jolting me from my stare.

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I see his face visibly soften. He watches me, his eyes warm. I wait to see the sympathy in them like everyone else gives me in this town, but I don't get it. Instead, his eyes hold something more akin to understanding and admiration, and I appreciate it.

"How is Marie's Place going?" he asks, and my eyes flick to Harvey, who is busy trying to read the food specials on offer, but I dare say most likely looking at the images instead. "Have you been back?" he prods, and my eyes shoot back to meet his.

"It's fine. All new and renovated. They have a few visitors stay from time to time. I don't go there much, but I have been back. Faced my demons, you could say." After my conversation with Victoria during the week, I know I need to go back more often. It has obviously helped her, and at this point, I will try anything to help alleviate my nighttime terrors. Hudson's jaw tics, and he goes to say something else, but we get interrupted.

"So what will it be, folks?" Rochelle asks, stepping up to our table with a small notepad in hand.

"My usual. Thanks, Rochelle." I smile, and she nods, not even needing to write my choice down.

"Your usual?" Hudson asks, his eyebrow lifted in question, a small smile dancing on his face.

"Oh, Lacy here comes in every Saturday afternoon at this time like clockwork. Has

for years,” Rochelle says with a chuckle. I feel my cheeks get even hotter, and I want to slide underneath the table and let the floor open up and take me.

“What do you order?” Hudson asks, sitting back, looking at me with intrigue. Shoulders sitting high, his hands clasp together on the table in front of him, a smirk quirking his lips. Might as well get this over with. It’s not like it matters anyway. He’s just the town doctor, no big deal.

“The special sundae,” I tell him, waiting to see a look of horror on his face that I’m ordering a child’s meal, asundae no less. Now with him sitting opposite me in this booth, I wonder what got into me that I offered for them to join me today. I see a lot of Tanner’s rich friends come into the distillery. I talk to all of them. Even Hudson’s brother, Huxley, is a friend and we have friendly banter, but I never feel this nervous around them. Hudson has my insides so coiled, I wonder if the ice cream in my stomach will curdle once I start eating.

“Sundae?” he questions, but the look I was expecting from Hudson doesn’t come. Instead, his eyebrows rise a little more in surprise before his mouth twitches.

“It’s delicious,” I murmur my defense.

“Hmmmm. A special sundae for a special woman... Sounds like a good choice,” he says, grinning, his flirty nature coming back as he watches me, and my heart rate escalates. I look over his shoulder at the defibrillator on the wall, glad that I’m sitting near a doctor, and he will know exactly how to work it if I have a heart attack.

“I also have a fantastic chocolate brownie with ice cream and chocolate syrup.” Rochelle looks at Harvey, who smiles cheekily, like he is getting the inside information.

“He will get the brownie,” Hudson answers for him, and Rochelle nods.

“What about you, Doc?” she asks, and he looks back at me, then to Harvey before replying.

“Maybe bring an extra spoon. I don't think Harvey will be able to finish it on his own.”

“Good to see you out and about, Doc,” she says to him as she surveys the three of us at the booth. “And good to see you with company, Lacy,” she adds, and I want to groan in equal parts extreme embarrassment and annoyance, but then I would really come across like a sulky teenager.

“We are glad to be here. It's nice to be back in town,” he tells her, and I ignore her comment and breathe a sigh of relief when she leaves, called to help out the back.

“So things are going well, then? At the hospital?” I ask him.

“So far. There is a lot I want to do with it,” he admits, his eyes locking on mine.

“Well, I'm sure you're the perfect person for the job,” I say, still a little jittery. It feels like a first date, with the butterflies swirling in my stomach, but it obviously isn't. His son is right next to us, and pretty much the whole town is in here, stealing not-so-subtle glances.

“How's the distillery going? Tanner working you hard, I bet?” he asks me, and my body stiffens at having the attention back on me. I take a deep breath and look at the man sitting across from me, barely resisting checking him out all over again.

“It's great. I'm currently working with Connor on a new release,” I tell him proudly. I do love my job. I'm building strategies, working with the owners. I hit the jackpot with working at Whiteman's, and I'm not going to take it for granted.

“I think they mentioned that the other night at the bar. Tell me about it,” he prompts, just as Rochelle pops back over and fills two coffee cups and slides a juice to Harvey.

“On the house.” She winks to the little boy, who grabs the straw and sucks like his life depends on it, and Rochelle lets out a small chuckle as she leaves again.

“It came as a surprise. We had an accident in the barrel room, lost a lot of product, and weren’t sure what to do with the small amount we had left. I suggested to Tanner that we make it a small, exclusive batch.” I shrug, like my idea was no big deal, but in reality, it was not only the catalyst for me getting a promotion, but the label itself is now highly sought after by the wealthy around the country. “Together, Connor and I came up with the name, Whiteman’s Next Door, the whiskey you enjoy with your neighbor,” I tell him, and he laughs, catching on that next door to the distillery is Marie’s Place, where Tanner’s now girlfriend Victoria was living at the time.

“Very clever. So you are managing that brand now? That’s a big responsibility.” His attention is fully on me, and he seems interested in every word that drops from my mouth as he sits back and enjoys his coffee, his eyes not leaving mine.

“Yeah. With Connor,” I add quickly. While I came up with the idea and Tanner put me in charge, I’m learning a lot from Connor and taking it all in like a sponge, wanting to remember everything and not make any mistakes.

“I’ll need to get my hands on a bottle, add it to my whiskey collection. I guess you are also organizing this event Tanner has planned?” His eyebrow quirks with curiosity, and there goes my stomach flipping again for no damn reason because he makes me nervous, he makes me flirt, he makes me feel things that I haven’t felt before.

“Yeah. Are you looking forward to it? It should be fun.” I sit back and take a sip of coffee, thinking through the long list of to-dos I must tick off before the welcome

party for Hudson that Tanner is having at the distillery. I want to make it perfect. I want it to be special for him.

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“If you’re organizing it, I’m sure it will be great. I mean, it will be a good way to meet everyone from town again. Some of Tanner’s other network is coming, plus Huxley will be there.”

I nod, having seen all the names on the guest list already.

“Hopefully, I’ll have the distillery sparkling for you,” I tell him, smiling.

“If you are there, it will be radiant.” His lowered voice turns a little gravelly, and I forget to breathe. We stare at each other for a beat. His smile is small as he watches me, and I lick my lips. I don’t miss the way his eyes catch the movement. Something about that has me relaxing in the weirdest way.

“You think too highly of me, Dr. Hamilton,” I tease, feeling my feminine energy come through. My body relaxes a little, and I begin to feel like I’m the young woman flirting with him from before the incident happened.

“Hmmm. I think a lot of things about you, Lacy,” he says, and his eyes are pure fire as they stare into mine. I swallow roughly before clearing my throat. Is it getting hot in here?

“So you have a whiskey collection?” I ask, getting us back on track. Our flirty banter feels too good and with little ears nearby, I need to be careful.

“Mostly Whiteman’s, but I have a few exclusives from Japan, of course some Scottish, and a few boutique ones from Australia that I picked up when I visited a few years ago.”

Suddenly, that familiar feeling of insignificance barrels back into me. Of course this man is worldly and has traveled all around the globe. Of course he has a whiskey collection that's probably worth more than my house. I was lucky enough to go to college on a scholarship and survived by working two part-time jobs, plus a third casual cash-in-hand weekend job in promotions, and almost every cent I've ever had has served the purpose of survival. No overseas trips to sightsee or a whiskey collection or a shiny Rolex, like the one on Hudson's wrist.

"Australian whiskeys are pretty special. I tasted a few at an event in New York that Connor and I went to a month or so ago," I say, remembering the week-long trip I had. It was great for my career and networking, but I had anxiety every day for leaving Mom that long. Thank God for her friends and our neighbors.

"You like whiskey?" he asks, surprised.

"It's a bit hard not to when you work at a distillery. It's growing on me. I like single malts," I add, and he nods in appreciation.

"I spent some time in Scotland, traveled the highlands and tried some of their famous whiskey for a few weeks. I highly recommend that if you are interested in learning how they go about making their batches."

"Hmm, sounds like a dream trip." I wonder if I could do it as part of a work research trip or something.

"So aside from New York, have you traveled much?" he asks, basically reading my mind, and I sigh.

"No. I would like to, but life just doesn't offer that to me at the moment," I say honestly. I'm not going to try to be someone I'm not. Traveling is absolutely out of the question for me and will be for a long time, even though I yearn to see something



different.

“Where would you like to go? What is the first place you would visit?” he asks, sitting forward, looking interested and not at all dismissive as I assumed he might be.

“Rovaniemi,” I tell him, my mind already wandering.

“Rovaniemi?” he asks, frowning. “Where’s that?”

“Finland. Arctic Circle. It looks like such a magical place.”

He looks stumped, clearly not familiar with it.

“It’s supposed to be one of the best places to stargaze in the world. They have these glass igloos that you can stay in, so you are surrounded by snow, but you are warm in bed, just falling asleep under the stars,” I say, sitting forward, resting my hands near his on the table, my voice turning whimsical as I dream about it in my head.

“An igloo?” Harvey pipes up, and I nod, giving him a wide smile.

“Plus, it’s where Santa’s village is, and I would really like to see that,” I tell him excitedly, and his mouth drops open.

“That would be so cool...” he says in awe, making me smile.

“Very cool.” Even though I’m an adult, Christmas is my favorite holiday.

“Sounds like fun. So you like astronomy?” Hudson’s handsome features make me breathless, and my mouth moves before my mind catches on. I like this. Our conversation is light, nothing too deep, while still getting to know each other.

“I just like stargazing. There’s something settling about it. I like looking up and seeing the different stars in the night sky.”

“So you like the stars?” he says, smiling, looking content. Like he is happy with what he is uncovering about me.

“I wish on one every night,” I whisper to him, our gazes locked for another moment. My chest feels like it is pulling me to him and I sense the same feelings from him as his eyes look deep into my soul. Our hands are near each other’s on the table and I feel his touch and look down quickly, seeing his finger tap mine before it curls around it, like a little secret finger hold. I take in a deep breath and look back at him before Rochelle comes back.

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“Here we are. One chocolate brownie, and your usual, Lacy darlin’,” she says, sliding the dishes on the table and I pull my hand back, away from Hudson and to make room for the dishes. “And an extra spoon for the doc.” She passes a spoon to Hudson, whose eyes are wide, looking between the sundae and brownie. Both portions are huge.

“Thanks, Rochelle,” I tell her, and she smiles.

“Always a pleasure for you, honey.” When she gives my shoulders a squeeze, my heart drops again at the sympathetic look she gives me before she leaves us to it. Everything felt normal, if just for a few minutes.

“This is yum...” Harvey is barely audible over his full mouth, chocolate sauce already dripping from his lips.

“That does look yummy,” I tell him, chuckling, and he nods, clearly enjoying it.

I look at my sundae. Ice cream, chocolate syrup, cream, nuts, and sprinkles, with a big red cherry on top. Nothing could be more delicious.

“Do you want to try?” I say to Hudson, who is eyeing it like he wants to devour it all himself.

“I can’t say no to that offer.” He laughs, and I smile as I push the dish toward him to taste test. As he does, I grab the cherry from the top, my favorite part, popping it in my mouth and enjoying the sweetness before twirling the stem and making a knot with my tongue. Yet another thing I do. Every Saturday. Alone at this diner. It’s

always the first thing I do before I dig in. As I take the stem out of my mouth and place it on my napkin, the knot perfectly tied in the middle, I look back at Hudson, whose lips are parted, watching me, his spoon halfway from my dish and his mouth.

“Ahh, you okay?” I ask, confused, as I take a spoonful of ice cream, and he clears his throat.

“Yeah, just... you like cherries, huh?” he asks, eating his spoonful quickly.

“Oh, yeah... College trick,” I tell him, my cherry habit happening so automatically that I totally forgot about how it might look to someone witnessing it. I take a spoonful of ice cream to cool down my flush.

“Can I try?” Harvey asks, his spoon already digging into my ice cream.

“Delicious, right?” I ask him, seeing him nod in approval.

“Here, try mine!” Harvey says, pushing his chocolate brownie toward me.

I take a spoonful and bring it to my mouth, the warm chocolate cake hitting my tongue, and I hum in approval as I close my eyes and savor it.

“Mmmmmmm... So good,” I murmur, opening my eyes, again seeing Hudson watching me, his eyes barely blinking.

“You, ahhh... you’ve got a bit of syrup,” he says, rubbing his lip.

“Ohhh.” I grab a napkin, my cheeks heating all over again.

“No, just here...” His eyes are hooked on my face as he points to a spot on his lower lip. I swipe my finger across my lower lip, following his instructions, and feel the

syrup gathering on my finger before sucking it from my skin. He swallows as his eyes watch the movement, his stare almost burning into me, pupils dilating as my heart beats out of my chest.

“Thanks,” I whisper, not confident in my own breath as his stare continues to heat my insides.

“Anytime,” he murmurs. With his eyes on me, a silent feeling bounces around us, both overwhelming and intense.

“How about we try them together? They are both good, but things are always better together,” Harvey says, startling us from our intense gaze as he scoops up a little brownie, then dunks it in my ice cream, his spoon now full of both before he shoves it in his mouth. I watch him devour the sweet treat as I wonder what the hell just happened. The sizzling tension between Hudson and me is something I haven’t experienced before. I take a deep breath in and count it out in my mind. It doesn’t take long for my nerves to settle as Hudson and Harvey both smile and laugh, and we all eat up our treats, chatting some more and enjoying the afternoon together. It’s the best Saturday sundae I’ve had in forever.

8

## HUDSON

I stand with Connor, surveying the room. Tanner has put on a welcome party for me, with some people from the town, his whiskey flowing, and his distillery lit up with flowers, fairy lights, and a blues band playing soulful tunes in the corner.

“Good turnout,” Connor says to me as we look at everyone. I’ve worked the room, talking to more people tonight than I have in a long time. I’ve caught up with some old friends, met new ones. Everyone is welcoming and happy to have me in town as

their new medical professional. Tanner and Connor also have a few of their whiskey contacts here, always trying to mix a bit of business with pleasure when they can.

Throughout it all, though, my gaze hasn't wandered too far from the brunette in the red dress across the room. Lacy looks stunning, breathtaking, really, and my heart clenches just like when I spotted her in town outside the diner last weekend. I wasn't sure if it was the right thing to do when Harvey invited us along to her afternoon tea for one at the diner, but the minute she sat opposite me and I got to learn more about her, see her smile and laugh, then watch as she curled that fucking cherry stem with her tongue, I was glad we did.

Tonight, everyone in the room seems to know her and want her attention. She has been working the room too, as well as running around, organizing everyone and everything. She does it so effortlessly and with grace, yet she hasn't had a break at all, and from what I've seen, she hasn't even had anything to eat. I know because I've been watching her all night. She gives everyone time, speaking, smiling, and as I look at her, I admire her outfit, the dress fitting too well, her hair curled just right and shining, her brown eyes drawing me in.

"She went to an Ivy League, you know. Top of her class," Tanner says, stepping up beside me. He's obviously proud that he managed to not only hire an intelligent, highly skilled person for his team, but also that she's local and from the same small town he has called home all his years.

"Who?" I ask him, playing dumb, my eyes not wavering from the vision in red across the room.

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“My wife loves me very much,” he quips.

“I always thought she was intelligent... but now I’m having my doubts.”

“Well, at least I went for what I wanted. Be careful, brother. You wait too long on someone as good as Lacy, and you might miss out.” He nods over my shoulder again before he walks away. I look back to where the girls were and still see Lacy, but the other girls have gone, and she’s talking to Connor. The two of them laugh, Connor standing way too close to her, and I make up my mind then and there. I’m going to ask her out. Because even though he’s my best friend, there’s no way Connor is going to get the girl.

9

LACY

I have a rare opportunity of being alone, so I walk to the side of the room, needing to get some air in the distillery garden. I push through the door and step down the path, my cheeks hurting from smiling so much and my head starting to thump from that familiar headache.

I have been running around all night, trying to be the perfect hostess, ensuring everything is happening on schedule. Making sure the band turned up, our catering is ready, and that we have enough bottles of whiskey to suit the crowd. I’ve talked to so many people that my throat is a little sore, not having time to grab a drink. Then, just as I was going to sneak away for a moment, Connor came up to me, panicking. He forgot to put on deodorant and then stepped closer to me, wanting me to check if he

smelled because he saw some hot girl on the other side of the room he wanted to chat with. I don't have any siblings, but Connor is what I imagine an older brother to be like, totally annoying and completely self-absorbed.

Now as I take a big breath of fresh cool air, I stand among the lavender in the garden. Exhaustion nips at my shoulders, and I long to take off my heels. It's nice to get dressed up, as it doesn't happen often, but my fluffy socks and a warm cup of tea at home beckon me. At least it's peaceful in the garden. I enjoy the quiet and look up at the night sky. It always comforts me. I love seeing it clear of clouds and bright with stars.

"Hey." A voice startles me, and I jump a little, looking around. Hudson.

"Hey. Shouldn't you be inside? This is your welcome party, after all," I ask, smiling as I feel butterflies fluttering in my stomach as he looks right at me as he walks down the garden path. He was warmly welcomed tonight. Tanner is obviously proud and happy to have him home, and the two of them worked the room all night. Talking, mingling, smiling, owning the space like only billionaires can, with people staring at them, all jostling to speak to them. He steps up beside me, so close our arms brush, and I take in another breath, my shoulders lowering as my body temperature rises at his proximity.

"I needed a minute. All the formalities are done, so I thought I would just take a break. You?" he asks.

"Same. I just needed a bit of air. It's been a busy night," I tell him honestly. He looks so good. He's wearing a sharp suit, obviously expensive from the way it sits on his frame like it was made just for him. His shirt is white and crisp, and his tie is red, the color almost matching my dress. The strapless gown now helps me cool off outside, but I shiver as a slight breeze ghosts across my bare shoulders.



“Here,” he says, shrugging off his suit jacket.

“Oh, it’s fine. I’m okay,” I say quickly, not able to help another shiver that runs through my body.

“Take it, Lacy. You’re cold. It’s just a jacket.” He smiles as he places it around my shoulders. His movement is careful and considered, so I don’t miss the way his fingers trail on my bare shoulders, my skin prickling at his touch, the feeling traveling down my body as I struggle to breathe. I try to pull myself together. It’s been a long time since I had a man touch me and I wanted him to. Even longer since they touched my bare skin.

“Thank you,” I say, succumbing to his kind gesture. I don’t usually like to take people’s help. I prefer to look after myself, but I guess it’s just a jacket. I stand quietly for a moment, not confident in my ability to talk right now. We had a nice afternoon at the diner, but we had Harvey there as a buffer. My dating history is sparse and all from college since our small-town high school didn’t have a lot of options. Not that college was full of potential boyfriends for me either. I shiver again just thinking about that time.

The few college boys I dated were extremely underwhelming in all aspects. I lost my virginity in my dormitory during my sophomore year. The guy I was seeing took me on a few dates, and I liked him, but after a few weeks together, he moved on. There was another boy who showered me with affection and swept me off my feet, but again, after we had sex, he seemed to cool off on the idea of being with me. By the time I hit my senior year, between work and study, my time at college was different than most kids. Parties and boyfriends were not something I indulged in because, when I wasn’t studying, I was working to pay my way and helping to support Mom. Then everything happened, and I couldn’t get away from college fast enough.

I grab the lapels of Hudson’s jacket, pulling them around me as a small breeze flows

through, appreciating the warmth it now provides as I'm enveloped by his scent.

"The stars look nice and bright tonight." He looks up at the midnight-blue sky. I lift my gaze upward and take in the evening.

"That one there..." I point to a bright star in the sky. "It's called Sirius, also known as the Dog Star. It's the brightest star in the night sky," I tell him.

"It sparkles bright. What about that one?" he asks, pointing upward, and I smile at his interest.

"I think that one is called Canopus. It's actually a giant star, ten times as big as the sun. It's much farther away than Sirius, but exactly how far away remains a mystery." I love the stars. It's always so peaceful to take them in. Life almost stops at night when I stare up at the sky.

"What about that one?" He points again, testing me now, his body and mine joined at the side. Warmth runs down my arm as it brushes against his.

"That is the Coma Star Cluster. It doesn't look like it, but it's a group of fifty or so stars," I say, enjoying myself. I don't get to take time out like this very often. Sure, I catch up with Victoria when I can, but that's different. Usually, our conversation is about work or the town.

"You know so much about astronomy. Did you take a class in college or something?" he asks, sounding intrigued.

"No. I just spend a lot of time looking up." I suddenly feel a little silly about it all.

"You can't really see too many stars in the city. I forgot how beautiful it was here," he says quietly, and I look over at him, catching him staring at me. My heart thuds

harder before I swallow and pull myself together.

“So did you have a nice night tonight?” I ask him, steering the conversation back to him.

“It was great. Thank you. I know you and Victoria organized it all. I appreciate it.”

I give him a small smile. Sure, I helped organize it, but that is my job.

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“What about you? Did you have time to relax? Enjoy the evening?” He turns his body to face me as he pockets his hands in his trousers, looking at me intensely like my answer matters to him.

“It was great. It’s always nice to get together like this. But...”

“But what?” he prompts me to continue, frowning.

“But Rochelle forgot to drop off my favorite chocolate cookies that I had ordered for the dessert table, and now I’m craving them,” I say with a broad smile, even though I feel a little lightheaded. My stomach is empty, as I didn’t have time to eat today at all with all the preparations for tonight taking priority. I’m so hungry I could eat for days.

“Hmmm... I’m starting to think you have a bit of a sweet tooth?” he says cheekily.

“Guilty as charged. Life is too short not to enjoy all the things that bring us joy,” I tell him, knowing he understands.

He watches me for a moment, a look of awe on his face. “You are such a breath of fresh air, you know that?”

“Is that a good or a bad thing?” I ask, laughing, hoping for the former.

“Good. Definitely good,” he says, stepping back to my side, and we continue looking up. “What’s that one?” He points upward.

“That’s Betelgeuse, it has a red color to it.” I don’t know what it is about Hudson, but I feel nervous every time he’s around me. I don’t have that with any of my bosses, other friends, or any previous doctors that we have seen. Although none of them have his looks, his confidence, or his openness.

“Like the movie?” Hudson asks, and I turn to look at him and freeze. I didn’t realize how close we were. We’re mere inches apart, his body now giving me more warmth than his jacket does. My heart rate spikes, my throat becoming drier.

“Movie?” I ask, breathless and confused. He’s looking down at me, and I can feel his warm breath hit my skin. His eyes gaze into mine, and I swear my heart thuds so hard he can hear it.

“LikeBeetlejuice? The movie with the guy in the black-and-white striped suit? You know, say his name three times and he appears?”

I frown, having no idea what he is talking about, my brain suddenly misfiring and not connecting because I’m caught up in his eyes, his warmth, his scent.

“Are you telling me you have never seenBeetlejuice?” His words are low, like a hum, almost teasing me as his eyes trace over my face, taking in every inch. His eyebrows rise a little, and his lips turn up into a small smirk. He’s enjoying himself, and I realize that I am too.

“Never. I have no idea what you are talking about.” I shake my head, smiling.

“Shit, I’m older that I thought,” he murmurs, and I laugh.

“You’re not that old… maybe a little gray…” I tease. He has a small sprinkle of gray at his temple; otherwise, his hair is as black as the sky tonight.

“Hopefully, wise as well... Maybe we should go sometime?” Hudson asks, and I clear my throat before I speak.

“Go?” I ask.

“Go out together. I can take you to the movies to see *Beetlejuice*. It’s a classic.” Is Hudson Hamilton, billionaire from the city, one of the country’s leading doctors, asking me on a date?

“Like a date?” I ask and immediately regret it, but Hudson smiles so wide it’s almost blinding.

“Yeah, Lacy, like a date,” he confirms, and I feel his hand grab mine from where they dangle between us.

“Ohh...” I exhale, shaking my head, because the whole thing is ridiculous.

“I don’t date.” I know I need to say it, even though the words feel bitter on my tongue, and instant regret settles in my stomach. I want to go out with him. I really do.

“You don’t date?” he questions slowly, his face puzzled, a small smile still on his lips as he tries to understand what I’m saying. I take a deep breath to bring me back to my senses. I need to wrap things up here and head home. I need to get a load of washing on, prepare Mom’s meds for tomorrow, eat a little something before collapsing into bed.

“I can’t date,” I say again, my mouth shooting off entirely on its own as I take a step away from him. It’s for the best. Nothing can happen. I shuffle a bit, wondering how he will take the rejection. Anxiety crawls up my spine, thinking about how another older man treated my denial. I want to go out with him; I know Hudson is different.

The way we talk, the way we are together. It's all different.

"You can't date?" he clarifies, looking even more puzzled.

"No. I can't." I give him a small nod, glad he understands.

"Not date generally or not date me?" He tilts his head, his eyes locked on mine.

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“Not date. Anyone. It isn’t just you. I mean, you are...” I trail off as I wave my hand over his frame. “Well, you... and I am... busy,” I tell him and he continues to watch me, his smile small, almost like he’s trying to hold in laughter.

“So what if you had some time? Would you be open to a date then?”

I’m surprised about his perseverance. He isn’t pushy, isn’t violent. He’s a bit coy, flirtatious, funny. Yes is on the tip of my tongue. If my life was different, if I didn’t have to manage so much, then yes. That’s what I want to say.

“But I don’t,” I say quickly, really needing to pull myself together. “Have time, I mean.”

“I haven’t dated in a long time, Lacy, but I can wait.”

I think about his words. He is a widower, and I’m sure probably still madly in love with his late wife.

“Wait?” I ask, confused.

“Until you’re... not busy.” He smirks, and my eyebrow rises, a small smile toying at my lips.

“Unless you have some special magic potion that can free up my life...” I start to say, trying to figure out exactly what is happening and failing.

“Challenge accepted.” He grins wider now before he lifts my hand to his lips and



kisses the top of my knuckles, and I almost gasp. His lips are soft, the feeling of them tender on my skin, the buzz trickling around my body. It's almost as if time is standing still as I stare at him, and he stares at me.

"Hudson!"

We both startle at the sudden voice that breaks through our conversation. I take a deep breath and pull Hudson's jacket tighter, shaking my head, trying to get my thoughts in order.

Hudson clears his throat and runs his hand through his hair.

"Coming!" he shouts, sounding frustrated, and I take the seconds to compose myself. Shit, Hudson Hamilton wants to date me.

"I need to go. I swear my brother always knows where to find me," he says, smiling, starting to step away.

"Oh, your jacket." I move to pull it from my shoulders.

"Keep it. Stay warm. I will grab it from you tomorrow. Good night, Lacy." He gives me a wink before turning and walking back up the path, his strides long and strong.

"Good night," I say quietly. As I watch him retreat, I wonder for the briefest moment what it would be like to be kissed by a man like Hudson. Would it be soft, slow, hard, or fast? Then I remember who he is and who I am and start to feel deflated. My shoulders sink, and my heart feels heavy. We can be friends. Acquaintances. Maybe even share a sundae at Rochelle's from time to time. But we can't date. We can't be anything. I don't have time. I can't go out and have a great time and leave Mom at home. What kind of daughter would do that? Leave their sick mother at home while she was getting wine and dined by a billionaire night after night.

I push my selfish feelings down and take a deep breath to lower my racing heart. As I stand in the peacefulness of the night, I look back up at the sky. I can't see it yet, but I look at where the Heart Nebula is usually positioned—the small galaxy that is in the shape of a heart. I have only ever seen it a couple of times, but as my own heart pounds, I search harder, needing to see it. I finally spot it and release a heavy breath. It's faint, but it's there.

A little like my own heart, I suppose.

I smell smoke. Gasoline fumes burn my nostrils. I wriggle around and try to move but feel trapped.

Help! I yell, but my voice sounds muffled, the material around my mouth tight.

I see Jasmine. I see the shed. I see Hudson. Hudson.

"Hudson!" I jolt upright, panting. My room is dark, the house quiet, my labored breathing the only noise.

"Shit," I say, scrubbing my face, my skin clammy. My bedsheets are rumpled around my body. I look at my phone on the bedside table. Two a.m.

"Great," I mumble before I lie back down, my body involuntarily shivering, my hands tightly gripping on to the sheets as I try to take deep breaths. One, two, three, four. My eyes look toward the small armchair in my room where Hudson's jacket is draped neatly. I hesitate, but my body is jittery, and there's no way I'll be able to rest. So I jump up and grab it, taking it back to bed with me. Draping it over my torso, I bring it up to my neck and take in a deep breath.

The slow intake of air helps my pounding pulse, my muscles to stop twitching, and the tension to ease from my body. I close my eyes and see him. I see Hudson. But not

from that night anymore. From tonight. His smile wide, looking handsome in his suit, his hand holding mine, and I calm myself and keep my eyes closed, thinking of him.

And for the first time in a long time, I don't open them again until morning.

10

HUDSON

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I finish off an email to a doctor friend in the city and sort out my files for the day. It's early, but I left Harvey with Mom to drop at school while I came in to get a few things sorted. The stark white of my office looks sanitized but not overly welcoming and the coffee is doing little to get me going this morning.

"Good morning. Hope I'm not interrupting?" the sweetest voice I have ever heard says, and I look up, seeing a vision in my doorway, her mother by her side.

"Morning," I say, standing up from my desk. I'm unable to help the large grin that comes to my face at seeing Lacy standing before me.

"We were just heading to the pharmacy next door, and I wanted to drop off your suit jacket. I wasn't sure if you needed it for today." She takes a few steps into my office, my designer jacket looking freshly pressed in her hand. I don't need it. I have many suits—too many, probably. My wardrobe is full of them. So much so, my brother teases me about it, and Tanner takes great pleasure intelling me my wardrobe now needs to change since I'm back in Whispers. Suits don't really fit in with the lifestyle here.

"Thank you. That was quick," I say to her as we step toward each other. I move forward to grab the jacket hanging from her fingers, bumping her hand, enjoying the contact almost as much as I did standing with her last night, looking at the stars. She smiles at me, the light blush to her cheeks fucking adorable, and I can't move this stupid grin from my face.

I had a feeling she might turn down my offer of a date last night. I know it isn't because she doesn't want to. The chemistry between us is undeniable. But I

understand her life is busy and stressful, so I plan to find a way to take her out. Give her some time to be just Lacy for a little while.

“Oh, Lacy doesn't like owing people things. She likes to make sure things are returned promptly.” Her mother laughs, and at the sound of her mom's voice, Lacy drops my fingers like they burn her. I frown, but nod to her mom in understanding. I can see that about Lacy. Never wanting to ask for help, never wanting to take anything from people. Preferring to handle things herself. Hell, she didn't even want to take my jacket at first, even though she was shivering.

“Well, I'm glad to see you, both of you, actually, because I wanted to talk to you about something,” I say to them, getting back into professional mode and gesturing for them to take a seat. They do, and I take the jacket to hang it on the back of my door, trying not to look at Lacy too much, which is hard because she's wearing black highheels and a black corporate dress that follows her curves a little too well. Her hair is down and her lips glossy; she is clearly on her way to work after this visit. She looks just how she did in my dreams last night, and my mouth suddenly dries.

“What's up?” Lacy asks, eyeing me inquisitively. She gets these little wrinkles near her eyes, not dissimilar to how she looked last night while staring at the stars, and I like her looking at me like this. Like she's seeing something deeper in me, listening intently and giving me all of her attention. It's new. Even my late wife didn't really look at me that way. Any female attention I've received since hasn't either. My status as a doctor and my bank balance are seemingly the key things women look at when they notice me. But not Lacy. I don't see that in her gaze at all. My eyes flick to her glossy lips, and I can't help but think of the way her tongue tangled that cherry stem at the diner last week. I clear my throat and shuffle some paperwork on my desk, trying to get my mind out of the gutter.

“I'm introducing a new initiative to Whispers to improve patient medical outcomes,” I say, looking at them both as they eye me, wanting more information. This is

something I have thought about for a while, and I would be lying if I said that Lacy and her mom were not the catalyst for this new program.

“Okay. What does that mean?” Lacy asks, sounding tentative, almost like she is ready and waiting for an onslaught of some sort. I give her a smile. I like that she’s protective of her mother, but she’s tense, too stressed, and I want to put her at ease.

“I’m thinking of introducing a visitation schedule, where I can fly specialists into the hospital and have them see the people who need specialist treatment, so it’s the doctor who travels, not the patient,” I say, looking at her mom, who’s nodding. This is a special program I want to develop, something I have been thinking about for a while. One I know Tanner will be very supportive of. Bringing more people to the town, offering the town residents more medical attention than they have ever had before.

“So how does it work exactly?” Lacy asks me, she and her mom now holding hands. I know they are close; they are all the other has. A program like this would alleviate Lacy’s burden, reduce the need for so much travel to Williamstown, and get them immense insight and new treatment ideas from some of the country’s best doctors. All right here in Whispers.

“In your example, I would fly in a cancer specialist who can not only look at your file and assess your condition from the test results we’ve done, but someone who can meet you, see you face-to-face, talk about your symptoms and lifestyle, and take a whole of person approach. Williamstown is great, but some of the things the researchers and doctors in the city can do and have access to is immeasurable, and I want to bring that to Whispers.”

I watch Lacy, and I see her swallow. She’s unsure but open to it, I think.

“It wouldn’t just be a cancer specialist for the town to utilize, but I would start with

that. I know your prognosis now, Veronica, is good, but I think another opinion on things is always helpful. I also hope to bring in trauma support, elderly care, and pediatrics. There's so much that small towns miss out on that I can bring here to really make a difference for the people of Whispers. I have a lot of contacts; I know most of the top specialists. They could give one week every few months and touch base, provide insights to both me and the patient, as well as bring others with them."

"It all sounds good to me. I'm happy to be a guinea pig," Veronica says, seemingly positive about the opportunity to be my case study, and Lacy looks at her sharply.

"Are you sure? I mean, I don't think our insurance will cover something like that." Lacy's frown is visible, but even when she's unhappy, she's beautiful.

"To be clear, you still need to approve everything. As I said, you are doing really well, Veronica, so you will not just be given new medication or treatment plans without thorough consultation or anything like that, and I will be here, still overseeing it. And because it's new, experimental, you could say, the cost will be covered. You don't need to worry about any of that," I tell her, adamant that if I have to pay for it personally, I will. Lacy looks at me, the pride she has showing through the stare she is giving me, not happy about taking something for free, but then she glances at her mom and her hardness melts.

"If Mom wants to do it, we can do it," she says quietly, and my chest thuds so hard I need to rub it. Lacy's mom has had so many medical interventions over the years. Clearly, she's happy to try anything to help her, and I know that's what has kept her with us all these years. But cancer is not curable, and while she has good days and bad ones, at some point, the bad ones are going to start outweighing the good. I want to ensure that we try absolutely everything.

"There is a doctor from LA who is a cancer specialist. She's who I'm thinking of for you. Full disclosure, she is my sister-in-law. Or my former sister-in-law," I say,

taking a breath. Melody is brilliant at her profession.

“We are sorry for your loss,” Lacy says quietly.

“Thank you. It was a few years ago now,” I tell her, a silent look shared between us, hoping she understands my past is in my past.

“Sometimes it’s hard to move on from such a loss, and we appreciate you being here in Whispers, helping us,” Veronica says. Lacy remains tight-lipped. This conversation feels heavier than I was wanting, especially for this time of the morning.

“She had breast cancer. We didn’t catch it early, and she chose to delay treatment. It was aggressive. It was a perfect storm and one we couldn’t weather,” I tell them honestly.

“Well, she lives on through little Harvey,” Veronica says with a small smile, squeezing Lacy’s hand.

“She does,” I say, nodding and returning her smile. Lacy takes a deep breath, looking uncomfortable. I pause briefly, wanting to move on. “So from here, I will make a few calls, see what I can arrange. If all goes to plan, then hopefully we can have our first consultation with her next week remotely and then get her out here in a few weeks.”

“Thanks, Doctor Hudson,” Veronica says, sighing. “It’s so good to have you here. Lacy, I just want to speak to Patti at reception. I’ll meet you at the car,” she tells her daughter, and Lacy and I stand in my office, watching her mom walk away.

I turn and look at Lacy. “Your mom is doing great.”

“Yeah, she is a fighter,” she says, a small smile on her face.



“Like her daughter.”

Lacy huffs a laugh like I’m ridiculous.

“Are you sleeping okay?” I ask, because as beautiful as she is, she does seem a little weary at times.

“Yes. Great. Never better,” she says all too quickly, and I frown.

“Are you feeling well?” I prod, taking in how she also looks a little pale.

“Of course.” She hardly looks at me, and I can tell she’s lying.

“You know if you need anything, help with your mom or—”

“I’m fine, Hudson. Really,” she cuts me off, but I see the way her shoulders rise, tensing. She isn’t happy.

“What do you do to relax?” I ask, trying a different tactic.

“Like last night, I go outside and look at the stars,” she says, blowing out a breath like she is forcing herself to relax in my presence. My fingers twitch, wanting to reach out and grab her hand, but right now, here in my office, with her mother just out the front, I need to remain professional.

“And wish on one every night...” I say quietly, her words to me at the diner last week coming back.

“Yeah. It is usually so peaceful; it’s calming looking at the stars.”

My heart feels like it is stretching out of my chest to get to her.

“You know I still remember that night vividly,” I tell her. What happened to her, to us, months ago, is still at the forefront of my mind, so I know it must be for her as well.

“You do?” she asks with a furrowed brow.

“I don’t think I will ever forget seeing you in that shed, Lacy.” Giving in, I reach out and grab her hands, our fingers merging together like magnets.

“Doctor Hamilton, I just need— Oh sorry, I thought you were finished,” Patti, my receptionist, walks into my office, and Lacy jumps at her intrusion. Her hands drop mine, and I run a hand through my hair, trying to pull myself together.

“Hey, Patti, we are just finished. Perfect timing,” Lacy says, a big smile plastered on her face, hiding her true feelings well.

“Thanks, Doctor, and thank you for the jacket.”

I watch her leave, Patti moving along quickly behind her. Stepping to the door, I pull the jacket from the hook. I’m not sure why, but I feel the need to assess it, see if it smells like her. I run my hands over it and am about to hang it back, when my hand hits something hard in the pocket, and I pull it out. It’s a pocket-sized book, *Stargazing for Beginners*, and I huff a laugh as I flick through it, seeing her pages tagged and annotated. It’s one she has used a lot, if the creases on the cover are anything to go by, as well as her remarks and comments about some of the galaxies and such.

I smile, my body feeling like it's defrosting. With thirty minutes left until my first appointment for the day, I take a seat at my desk and start reading. I want to be prepared for our next outing. I already know where Lacy goes to breathe, and under a night sky might be where she has some time. For me.

11

LACY

I have felt a little off all day. It could be the nightmares that woke me in the early hours, or the fact that I took Victoria's advice and booked a session with my therapist at Marie's Place which I had earlier today. I was also out of sorts last night at the party after Hudson and I shared a moment in the garden.

My focus for years has been solid. Get Mom well, help her through it all, and make money to run our household and pay her medical bills. But my usual steadfast approach to life has hit a bump in the road when Hudson whirled into town like a storm blowing in a fresh breeze.

This morning with my mom at his office, when he spoke about his wife, the feeling in my gut was a mix of sympathy for his loss, raw emotion because of my mother's health, and jealousy of a dead woman, which I immediately felt bad about. I knew, of course. Mom was always talking to Susan about it, whenever I was home from college, but at the time, I had little investment in the information.

I also feel off because he is clearly offering us medical support, which will be expensive, and I can't afford it. I don't like being in someone's debt.

I shake my head of the thoughts and look back at my emails. I'm waiting on an email from a supplier, so I'm trying to keep on top of them. I scroll to the top and see a new one sitting there, and my body stills.

Statistics Summer Camp is the subject line, and I swallow quickly as my pulse races. It's professional, the college logo on clear display as it is in all his correspondence, but I understand the tone. My old Professor has been contacting me relentlessly for months. My eyes skim the words. A summer term back at college to complete a statistics unit face-to-face. I huff my anger down because he knows I completed it remotely, but he still acts like he is in control, using phrases such as direct personal tutoring and one-on-one personal assessments. I feel sick and delete the message, like I have all the others. I never want to see him ever again. His contact has increased lately, and I'm not sure why. But with a myriad of other things going on in my life, my infatuated former professor is the least of my problems.

"A penny for your thoughts?" Connor asks, waltzing into my office through the open door.

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“I was just wondering if your beard could get any longer,” I murmur, teasing him, coming up with the lie quickly. We didn’t get along at first. He didn’t like the idea of working with someone new whom he had to train, but now we are almost like siblings, teasing each other and pushing each other professionally almost daily. We get along well, and I’m so grateful.

“What’s wrong with it?” he asks, running his hand down his beard, looking affronted.

“Could do with a trim...” I murmur, sorting out my files. It doesn’t; he looks fine, if the lumberjack look is one you go for.

“The ladies love it.” He shrugs, plopping down in the small armchair on the other side of my desk.

“Which ones? The ones who see your shiny shoes, your expensive watch, and your fat bank account in the city?” I tease some more, knowing that Connor is a ladies’ man and is always having dinner with a different woman in the city.

“Touché...” he admits in defeat, knowing that all the women he spends time with can smell his millions miles away. None of that matters to me.

“So what’s up?” I ask him, leaning back in my chair, feeling exhausted.

“We need to go to the city,” he tells me, and my eyebrow rises. Connor is often at our city office, but I have only ever been once.

“Really? When? Why?” I try to ignore the slight panic that tightens my chest. I love

going to our city office, and spending time in New York is amazing. But I hate leaving my mother. When I left last time, I put together a roster of people who could come to see her and ensure she was looked after, and Susan stayed the night with her. It was fine, but a lot of work. Mom is much better and more capable now, but she is my responsibility, no one else's, and I hate asking for their help.

“We need to start researching spas, therapists, products, treatments... Or rather, you do,” he says, looking less than pleased about it all.

“So you're telling me that you're going to pay me to fly in your private jet to New York, spend a week there, going to all the different luxury spas for treatments so I can come back and tell you which ones we need to incorporate here at the new spa we are building?” I ask, sitting forward, already liking this prospect.

“Perhaps take Victoria with you. Dad will hate to have her gone, but I'm sure she will love it.”

“And why is it that you don't want to be pampered in mud and scrubbed from head to toe?” I tease, knowing that Connor is the last person you will ever catch at a spa. He's the definition of masculine.

“Sounds like a thing for women, not really my idea of relaxation,” he grumbles.

“Oh, what is your idea of relaxation?” I ask, laughing.

“Corporate box at the Jets, with my whiskey in one hand and a beautiful blonde in the other.” He smirks, and I roll my eyes. Typical.

“Hey, folks, sorry to interrupt.” I look up and see Rochelle at my door.

“Hey, Rochelle,” I greet her, and Connor and I both stand.

“Sorry, no one was at reception. I just need to deliver these,” she says, and Connor takes the box from her.

“Oh, is it something for Dad?” he asks, looking at the box.

“No, it’s for Lacy.” Rochelle looks like the cat that got the canary. My eyebrows rise, not expecting a delivery. I hadn’t ordered any catering for us today.

“I need to run. Have fun, you two,” She offers a small wave and a cheeky grin, walking back out the door.

“Here, there’s a note.” Connor passes the box to me, seemingly just as confused as I am.

I put the box on the desk and grab the note, opening it.

Lacy,

I didn’t want you to miss out on the cookies you like so much. Also, did you know that there are over nine thousand stars visible to the naked eye in the entire night sky?

Hudson.

“Oh.” My cheeks heat immediately, and I huff a small laugh. I’m in my head so much, I don’t even see Connor looking at the note over my shoulder.

“Hudson, ayyy...” he jibes, and I fold the note back. Giving him a scowl, I open the lid and see twelve of Rochelle’s chocolate cookies staring back at me, so fresh they are still warm.

“Yum, my favorite,” Connor says as his hand dives in and grabs one quickly, taking a

bite as he sits back down.



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“Hey! Hands off my goods,” I scold him as I grab one myself and sit down, my stomach doing flip-flops so fast I’m not sure I will be able to eat it.

“Sooooo, getting cookie deliveries from Hudson...” He and Hudson are best friends, and he looks at me now with a shit-eating grin on his face like he knows everything.

“He is just being nice because of Mom.” I brush off his remark, needing time to process this gift. I mean, they are just cookies, but they are my favorite cookies. I told him about them just last night, and he remembered, ordered them, and had them delivered to me at work today. I swallow the gooey goodness, my head now whirling.

“How is your mom doing?” Connor asks, having already finished one cookie and diving in for another. I don’t mind, they are delicious, and I can’t eat all twelve by myself.

“Good. Great, actually. Hudson has plans for some fancy doctor to fly to Whispers to see her, just for another opinion and as a case study for a new program he wants to implement. His former sister-in-law or something?” I watch Connor closely, and his eyebrows rise in surprise.

“What?” I ask skeptically, waiting for the information.

“Well, you do know how hard it is to get fancy doctors to small towns. It isn’t something those doctors do lightly. They hate to travel and are usually so busy at their own clinics, they can’t spare the time. Hudson must be pulling some strings for you. Either that, or he wants his sister-in-law closer to him and Harvey. It makes sense; she was really close with his wife. The two of them looked almost identical,

from what I remember,” he says, finishing the second cookie in one bite.

I balk. The cookie is sitting heavy in my stomach. When Hudson mentioned it this morning, I thought it was a whole program, something he was implementing for the town and Mom being ill would be one of many people who benefitted. But what Connor says makes sense. Maybe he does want his sister-in-law closer. Maybe he misses his wife. Maybe he wants to go on a date with me just to get over her? But it has been a few years now, so it’s hard to know.

I take a sip of water, needing the moisture, my throat now dry. It doesn’t matter. He is just Mom’s doctor. There can be no more daydreaming about what it would be like to date a man like Hudson. The stars, our friendly banter, his sexy-as-sin smile. It all needs to stop.

“When are we going to the city?” I ask, suddenly feeling the urge to get to New York on this research trip.

“Chat with your mom, let me know about your schedule, and we can lock it in then. I’ve gotta go. I’ve got a meeting with Sawyer,” Connor says, jumping up and walking out of my office, but not before he grabs another handful of cookies, giving me an annoying smirk in the process.

12

HUDSON

I pull up to the distillery late in the day, seeing the parking lot almost empty. I’m meeting Tanner to go over some thoughts I have about the hospital and the new program. Something he’s all on board with and he’s keen to look at the financial implications to see where he can help.

I see his truck parked at the end of the lot in his usual spot, alongside Lacy's small hatchback. I didn't realize she would still be here so I'm smiling as I jump out of my truck and start walking inside.

"I just need to run next door to grab a few things. Go inside, Lacy is in her office," Tanner says as he runs down the office stairs toward me.

"No problem," I tell him, as he jogs to his truck and I race up the stairs, straight inside before he has even left the lot.

The office is quiet, the receptionist already gone for the day, and I make my way down the hall where I know Lacy's office is.

Seeing her office light on, like a moth to a flame, I stop at her open door. She hasn't seen me, so I watch her for a moment. Sitting behind the desk, looking over some paperwork, she has glasses on that I didn't realize she wears, giving her a sexy librarian kind of vibe that I instantly appreciate. She has a pen in one hand that she chews, her hair falling into her face a little, her brow furrowed in deep concentration.

"Working late?" I murmur and hear her gasp as her head shoots up in surprise.

"Hudson?"

"Sorry, didn't mean to startle you," I say, taking a few steps inside as she stands.

"No. It's fine," she says with a smile, closing the folder of documents and removing her glasses.

"I have a meeting with Tanner to talk about hospital funding," I tell her, putting my things down on her side table and pocketing my hands as I walk over to her.

“I was just finishing up for the day,” she says, coming to the front of her desk. As she walks around, I get to admire her work outfit again. She looks just as fresh as she did this morning.

“So, did you eat all the cookies?” I ask, spotting the empty box nearby. She smiles a little, a soft-pink tint coloring her cheeks.

“Had to. They are Connor’s favorites as well, so we had a fight over the box. Plus, Tanner stole a few this afternoon too. Thank you, it was a lovely gift.” She shakes her head with a soft laugh, and I frown.

“Connor needs to get his own cookies,” I grumble, obviously needing to talk to my best friend. The jealousy I feel that he might like Lacy too, still swirls in my stomach.

“Yeah, but he offered me a good work project this afternoon, so I couldn’t say no.” Her smile is small but glowing.

“A new project?” I watch her carefully, trying to gauge her reaction, and I relax as I see her smile widening.

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“I need to do some research on day spas. We are opening one up at the distillery, which I’m sure you know. Connor oversees that project, but he isn’t really the pamper kind of guy.”

“Connor is the last person you would catch at a spa.” I almost bark a laugh. Connor is a man who’s the epitome of masculine. Lacy giggles, and I feel like I almost puff out my chest at hearing her laugh at something I said.

“Which is why he’s so eager to send me to New York for a week to trial a few research treatments and products. Victoria is coming as well to look at design and aesthetics,” she says, and my eyebrows rise.

“Sounds like a great project and one I think you well deserve,” I tell her, knowing that a break like that is not only good for business but will also be good for Lacy.

“Yeah,” she says with a sigh, sitting on the edge of her desk. “It should be fun.”

“So why are you looking worried?” I ask, stepping closer to her, seeing stress written all over her face.

“It’s just hard to leave Mom for a week. That’s all.” As she rubs her face, I see her exhaustion.

“Have you ever thought about some caretaker support?” I ask her, and she looks at me, confused.

“Caretaker support?” she questions, and a bright idea comes to me.

“Someone who can come in, make some meals, visit your mom, do house chores, that kind of thing. That way, you can work knowing that everything at home is taken care of.” I see her mind ticking over.

“I don’t even know where to find someone. I don’t think there is anyone here in Whispers.”

“Leave it with me. Let me look into it for you,” I say, wanting to do this for her.

“You don’t have to...” Standing, she looks ready to deny she needs the help.

“As your mother’s physician, it’s something I would look into anyway. Having help at home while you are not there is not only beneficial to you but also for your mom.” While the statement is correct, I know using her mom is the only way she might come around to the idea.

“Okay, maybe.” She gives me a small nod of approval, and I smile before I notice her cradling her hand.

“What happened?” I ask, my frown deepening as I automatically walk closer to her.

“Oh, nothing. It’s nothing.” She tries to act casual, but I see her wince. I stand before her and grab her hand, lifting it into the light.

“What is that?” I ask, seeing a small piece of something stuck in the side of her finger.

“Just a thorn,” she says, and I look up at her, surprised.

“Thorn?” I clarify as my hand cups hers carefully.

“I was out in the garden this morning... I just picked a few roses for my office... It was a small prick,” she says, and I look to see the vase of fresh roses on her desk before I try to grab the thorn with my fingers for her. My tweezers from work would be extremely handy right now.

“This morning? This has been in your skin all day?” I question, seeing the skin around it is irritated. While I’m sure the pain is minimal, it would be extremely annoying.

“It’s in my right hand, and my left hand isn’t that coordinated to grab it out. I was just going to get Mom to try to remove it when I got home. It feels a bit stuck.” She says, dropping her hand a little.

I look at her, and my lips thin. She doesn’t even like asking anyone for help here at work. She is so stubborn.

“Give it to me,” I tell her, putting my hand out to her, palm up, waiting for her to place her hand back in mine.

“It’s fine,” she says, shrugging it off, trying to minimize the issue.

“Give me your hand, Lacy,” I say in a tone that is a little more demanding, and she huffs before she does exactly what I ask, lifting her hand and placing it softly in mine. I smile, liking that she does what I ask, and I take a closer look at it and then look back at her.

“I don’t have tweezers, but sometimes teeth are better,” I tell her quickly before I lift her hand to my mouth. My eyes meet hers as I hear a small gasp of surprise pass her lips. I move slowly and gently as I put my lips to her skin, and with my eyes firmly on hers. I used to do this all the time around the ranch when I was younger, and even more recently on Harvey. But none of those times did I get a hint of a sweet rose

scent. It's familiar and not from the flowers in the room, but from her fragrance on the inside of her wrist.

Her eyes widen at the contact, her chest rising and falling, mouth agape as I rest my lips against her skin. I get the thorn in between my teeth and remove it, feeling her fingers from where I hold her palm resting against my jaw, her hand almost cupping my cheek. Lowering her hand, I pull the thorn from my teeth and place it on the edge of her desk.

We stand facing each other, me still holding her hand, and I hear her breathing. It's rapid and my eyes haven't left hers as tension wraps around us that has my heart pounding in my ears. She's fucking breathtaking. I swallow roughly, and my eyes flick to her lips, the gloss reflecting the overhead lights. My body moves on instinct.



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“Veronica told me today that you’re getting her a specialist from the city?” my mom prods, and I need to be careful because I can’t discuss my patients with my mom.

“I was thinking Melody could help her out. Offer a second opinion,” I explain, and my mom nods.

“It couldn’t hurt. Veronica has been sick for a long time. She was sick before Lacy went to college. That poor girl has had to look after her mom twenty-four seven since she was a child. She never gets a break.” My mom clicks her tongue, clearly not happy about the situation, which makes two of us.

“Actually, I wanted to talk to you about that...” I say, rubbing my chin. The late afternoon sun is starting to set, and there is little to no wind. Dusk in Whispers is my favorite time of day.

“Go on.” She nudges my elbow.

“Well, I was hoping to take Lacy out, actually...” I say, not able to help the smile that comes to my face just thinking about her. “So I was wondering if you could visit her mom while I did that.” I know Lacy will never leave her mom alone. I also now know her mom and my mom have been friends for years. I look from my son, who I see dancing down below, my father appearing to teach him how to skim rocks at the small pond, to my mom, and catch her watching me, a smile on her face.

“I was wondering how long it would take you,” she says, and my eyebrows pinch.

“For what?” I ask, trying to gauge where she is going with this.

“To ask Lacy out. She is a catch, you know. Pretty, of course, mature for her age. She has a lot of responsibilities but handles them well. Resilient because, well, she has come through her own demons too. Not to mention, she’s smart. Did you know she was top of her class at college?” my mom asks, and I smile at her because I did know that.

“Yes. But you need to wipe that smile from your face. It’s just a date.” I try to downplay it, seeing my mom getting excited that I am taking her best friend's daughter out.

“I know, but honey, it will be one of your first ones... you know... since Amanda,” she says tentatively, looking at me with empathy. It isn’t my first date since my wife died. I’ve been on a few, had many one-night stands, but this is the first date that I actually really want to go on.

“Amanda has been gone for years now, Mom.” Running my hand through my hair, I wait for that feeling of heaviness in my stomach that usually comes when I speak about my late wife, but it doesn’t feel as strong today. In fact, I haven’t felt it much at all since I moved back.

“I know, but so have you,” my mom says, and my eyes flick to meet hers. I sit with her words for a moment.

“I’ve been busy... Harvey...” I tell her my usual reasoning for not dating seriously, and her smile falters.

“You have drowned yourself in work and Harvey, but I’m glad to see you coming to life again,” Mom says delicately.

“I didn’t do it purposefully. I just...” I sigh, thinking about it all. This is the first real conversation we’ve had about it, and I’m not sure why I waited so long. It feels good

to get some things out.

“Felt guilty,” my mom finishes for me. I remain silent so she continues.

“You felt guilty because you didn’t love her like you thought you should. You felt guilty because she was sick and you’re a doctor and you couldn’t save her. You felt guilty because she died and doesn’t get to see her son grow up like you do.” Like all moms, she knows exactly what’s going on.

“Yeah...” I sigh with my confession. “I feel guilty.”

“Amanda was wonderful. But I know that if you hadn’t fallen pregnant with Harvey so quickly after you started dating, you wouldn’t have married her.” She’s right. I wouldn’t have. Amanda and I got along in many ways, but I knew she wasn’t my forever, and deep down, I think Amanda felt the same.

“I had to do the right thing. She wanted to keep the baby, and I wasn’t going to be an absent father. Then when she got sick, everything just snowballed,” I say, finally feeling like I have come out the other side. That doesn’t mean I don’t still grieve, but I’m slowly letting go of the guilt as well.

“Amanda will always live on in Harvey, but now it’s time for you. You need to start living again.” I can see the look in her eyes. The one mixed with fear about me and excitement about what this could mean. It is a turning point; we both can feel it. “It’s good to see you smiling again, son. And I hope you only get happier following your heart.”

I nod, smiling to myself as my mom watches me with interest, before my cell rings in my hand, and I see Melody’s name on my screen.

“Melody. How are you?” I ask, my voice straight into professional mode.

“Hi, Hudson. I have a message here that you called earlier. Is everything alright?” she asks, and I take a breath. I did call her this afternoon to chat with her about a visiting position at the hospital.

“Thanks for calling back, I know how busy you are,” I tell her, because she is. Head of her specialty at the LA hospital where we both worked.

“Always have time for you. What’s up? Harvey okay?” she asks, and my eyes flick down to my son again, playing with Dad still, my mom now walking toward them to give me some privacy.

“Yeah, fine, loving it. I wanted to speak to you about work,” I broach the subject.

“Sure, what’s up?” she asks, her voice higher pitched and laced with excitement.

“I wanted to introduce a visiting schedule for specialist doctors to come to Whispers for regular consults, to help the people of the region with their advanced medical needs. I have a cancer patient here who could really benefit from your expertise as a second opinion. Plus, I feel that since she’s a family friend, I might be a bit too close to the situation, and I would appreciate you stepping in.”

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I sigh, close my eyes, and take another deep breath, lowering my shoulders. I'm tired, cranky, and stressed.

"That's better," she says. "So are you thinking about Hudson?"

My eyes ping open and I look at her, seeing a wide grin on her face, and my shoulders are now back up near my ears.

"How did you know?" I mumble, somewhat surprised, but I might as well indulge her since she has mentioned him to me a few times already.

She scoffs. "Bit hard not to, honey. The man has been in town for only a month, been out here to the house, gave you his jacket to keep warm, which you so lovingly pressed for him the next morning. He's bringing me specialist medical attention from the city, which is happening rather quickly, and Rochelle told me today that he got you your favorite cookies," she says, raising an eyebrow. Damn Rochelle. This town talks more than parrots on speed.

"We are just friends." I chop the lettuce like it has done me dirty. I'm tense all over again. Hudson cares, I know he does, but we can't be anything. That's why I stopped it. His lips were so soft, so demanding, and I wanted to lean into it more, but I can't.

"He is a good man..." Mom says, and while I'm not looking at her, I can feel her gaze burn into my face. "I will forever be indebted to him..."

"What do you mean?" I ask her, my brow furrowed as I slice the lettuce, the knife slipping a little in my wet hand.

“He saved you that night, Lacy. He was the one who got you back for me.” Her eyes water as her voice cracks. My breath pauses momentarily before I clear my throat and already want to remove the heaviness of the conversation.

“There’s a lot to consider, Mom. He’s an older, wealthy widower, who also happens to be a dad,” I point out to her as I rub my eyes, the dizziness tonight worse than ever, and talking about all this isn’t helping.

“Oh, little Harvey is such a delight. Susan talks about him constantly,” Mom says, now smiling again. She brushed right over my other concerns, probably knowing I’m grasping at straws here. I can’t help but smile too, though, because his son really is such a special kid.

“Harvey is great. They joined me at the diner the other week...” I tell her, trying to act like none of it matters when, deep down, I’m feeling a mixture of emotions.

“Hmmm... Rochelle told me that as well,” Mom murmurs.

“Why does everyone in this town talk so much?” I snap, and it’s clear my mom doesn’t like my tone by the look she gives me. I’m tired, the water on the lettuce is annoying me, New York is on my mind, and my hand keeps slipping as I chop harder.

“Are you okay, Lacy, really?” Her tone softens, and I pause. I don’t need her worrying about me and some stupid schoolgirl crush I seem to have developed.

“Fine, Mom,” I say, a little calmer. I wish the local community center had yoga or something, not that I would have time to go. But I’m just. So. Tired.

“So... Hudson?” she teases again, and I roll my eyes just as the knife slips from my hand and clatters to the floor.

“This stupid knife,” I grumble, bending over and swiping it from the floor, the water on my hands making me miss the handle, and my hand sliding straight down, my palm slicing on the blade.

“Shit!” I curse, pulling up with a jolt, the pain instant. I squeeze my eyes closed, trying to breathe through the pain.

“Lacy!” my mom scolds with an angry frown at my language before her eyes rest on my hand, my white t-shirt now not only see-through but getting coated in red and her face morphs into shock.

“I’ll call the doctor,” she says, grabbing her cell next to her as she panics. I snatch the kitchen towel from the counter and wrap my hand, holding it tightly to my chest for comfort as the burning pain sears through my skin. It’s all I can do to nod to her in agreement as I start to feel even more lightheaded.

I can hear Susan and Mom chatting in the living room as Hudson and I sit at the kitchen table.

“It’s a pretty clean cut. Is there anything you’re not perfect at?” he asks, grinning, his smile making my heart skip a beat. His doctor's bag lays open at our feet, my table now no longer set for dinner but as a makeshift hospital trolley with bandages, antiseptic, and thread.

“I like to ensure everything I do is done to the best of my ability,” I say sarcastically, wondering why this is happening to me. He looks good, as always. His smile is warm, his hands gentle. He’s slightly more casual than I’ve seen him before, but still very well put together. Everything just seems to match or work well on him. Me, on the other hand... I have my oldest threadbare jeans on, my white t-shirt now pink from the blood and slightly see-through from the water. Dried blood smears up my arm, my hair is haphazardly pulled back, and while I haven’t looked at myself, I’m

one hundred percent certain that my mascara is all smudged.

“Admirable. Although apparently texting people back isn’t one of the things you do?” Hudson says, looking at me with a raised eyebrow, and I nearly wince with guilt.

“I was just busy,” I murmur my poor excuse, and he grins.

“Hmmmm, does it take you that long to get back to everyone who texts you or just me?” He doesn’t seem upset, still smiling, almost like he is enjoying teasing me about it.

I go with the truth. “Just you,” I tell him, my lips curving into a smile as his widens.

“Well, one thing you should know about me, Lacy, is that when I want something, I’m persistent.”

My breath catches as his smile gives way to a look that almost burns down my entire facade. As he looks at me like he wants nothing more than to pick me up and make a meal out of me right here on this kitchen table, my heart pounds, stomach flips, and I will my mouth to move.



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“Good to know,” I whisper to him as he removes his gaze from me and focuses back on my hand.

“Now, I hope that you can refrain from any further accidents with sharp objects. Not that I mind mending you. You are my favorite patient,” he says, looking at me with a sexy-as-sin smirk before giving me a wink as he starts his final stitch.

“Can’t promise anything,” I tease, and he chuckles. It’s contagious. It feels nice to smile. These small snippets of what life could be like make me ache with longing. I love them and despise them in equal parts.

“There,” he says with finality, looking at his handiwork. “Those stitches will need to stay in for about a week. I will bandage it for you, but you need to keep it clean and dry for a good few days.” He cups my hand, inspecting where he stitched. My hand is small in his, his embrace warm, and my whole body flushes at the contact.

“I will do my best,” I tell him to get my mind back on the issue. I can’t lie. I have washing to do, dishes too, so it’s bound to get wet.

“I hope that you do. Maybe I should do daily house calls? Make sure you are doing what you are told?” he murmurs, looking at me under his brow, already knowing I won’t rest it and will continue to use it in every way he is telling me not to. My hand still rests in his. I haven’t moved and neither has he, and I don’t miss the way his thumb strums along my palm as he contemplates.

“Do you not trust me?” I tease, a smile dancing on my lips.

“Ohhhh, I do. I trust you wholeheartedly. But I know you don’t put yourself first, so that might be something I step in and do. I kinda like the idea of taking care of you,” he says, and I swallow as I take a shaky breath. I’ve never had anyone take care of me. I wouldn’t even know what that felt like.

“Thank you, Hudson,” I say seriously, appreciating him coming and putting me back together. The pain is now almost gone due to a light numbing cream he used on my hand. I would like to tell him he didn’t have to come, but as the town doctor, he kind of did. “I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

“The cream should help tonight. I think your thumbs will still work to text me, you know, in case you ever want to get back to my messages.”

I bite my lip and smile. Him calling me out for ignoring his messages feels like our own little inside joke. It’s nice to have something between us. I look up at him, and his eyes don’t leave mine. He moves his leg then, his knee brushing against my own, and my breath quickens at our closeness.

“Dinner is ruined,” I comment with a sigh, looking over my shoulder at the kitchen behind me. His mother rushed in with him tonight, and while Hudson took me to the table to address my injury, Susan helped my mom who was in a flustered panic, before she kindly cleaned up the shredded lettuce and other ingredients that were either on the counter or the floor. I feel a deep pang of guilt looking at the sparkling clean kitchen, knowing I didn’t do it and had guests in my home who did it for me. I now need to order Susan some flowers to say thank you, or maybe get her a little gift from the distillery and mentally add that to my never-ending to-do list. Victoria and Annabelle are working on some goat milk soaps at the moment, so that might be nice for her. My mind then flicks to the fact that I still need to scrounge around in the kitchen to put something else together before Mom gets too hungry. My own stomach now growls, it demanding food too.

“Don’t worry about that. I handled it,” he says, and my head whips back around so fast I almost stumble in my seat.

“What? What do you mean, handled it?” I ask in confusion, having no idea what he is talking about.

“When we got here and I saw everything, I called Rochelle. Asked her to bring something over for dinner and something you can just heat up for tomorrow night as well. I could see that you needed something and it should be here soon,” he says casually, like it is the most natural thing in the world for someone to do as he looks at the time on his Rolex that shimmers under my dining room lights.

“You didn’t have to do that.” I’m equal parts appreciative and tentative. “How much was it? Let me get my purse.” I move, about to stand, but his hold on my hand tightens, stopping me. I look at him, noticing his jaw pop.

“You need to eat, and I knew I didn’t want you using this hand again tonight, so I took care of it.” His hand comes to my face and pushes a hair from my cheek, curling it around my ear. Took care of it. I have no words, no idea what to say. I’ve never been in this position before. Guilt at not doing what I need to do for Mom, mixed in with a sprinkling of gratitude and uncertainty, makes a mess of my stomach as it sinks a little.

“Speak of the devil, here she is,” Hudson says, standing at the sight of car lights shooting through the already darkening sky. My mind whirls, struggling to keep up with exactly what is happening as I watch Hudson go to my door. Opening it like he lives here, he meets Rochelle and grabs the bags before she makes a quick exit. The smell of her delicious homemade chicken soup encases my home and my mouth waters. He takes the bags to the kitchen and starts unpacking them, and I fidget, my nerves dancing. I can’t let him help me like this, but before I can jump up, his mom rushes in.

“Let me get that ready for you all,” Susan says with a broad smile and gets busy in the kitchen as Hudson sits back next to me, grabbing a bandage out of his bag. My body tenses. I don’t like this. Susan is a guest; she shouldn’t be in my kitchen, putting together our dinner. She’s already done too much with the cleanup. Hudson shouldn’t have ordered it, and I feel nauseous because I don’t want to be in debt to anyone. This town talks. Toomuch. The last thing I need is people discussing my finances now as well.

“Relax. It’s just chicken soup. It’s already hot so it will take her two minutes to put some in bowls for you and your mom,” Hudson says as he gently wraps the bandage around my hand. Clearly, I’m an open book because he knew exactly what I was thinking, and I can’t move because he has my hand hostage.

“She doesn’t need to worry. I could have done it,” I tell him, not wanting to sound ungrateful, but feeling really uncomfortable having all the attention and assistance.

“Not with this hand, you can’t. Besides, I’m pretty sure she’s going to make you a week’s worth of pot roast once we leave here.” He grins, knowing that I hate all this help, yet my mouth waters slightly, because Susan makes the best pot roast I’ve ever eaten. I look down and see the bandage nice and thick around my hand and frown.

“I’m not going to be able to do anything with this,” I say to him, my hand now firmly wrapped.

“That is my plan.” With a smirk, he finishes off the bandage as his mom delivers a bowl of soup over to us before taking one to my mother in the living room and leaving us to it again. My stomach rumbles at the smell. Rochelle is the best cook in town and her chicken soup is no exception.

“Hungry?” Hudson asks with a small smile, clearly hearing my stomach.

“No, I’m fine,” I lie through my teeth as my stomach rumbles embarrassingly loudly.

“Liar,” he says with a chuckle, clearly enjoying himself. “Here, let me help you.” He moves the bowl closer. I go to grab the spoon and stop. The hand I hurt is my right one, the hand I use for everything, and there’s absolutely no way I will be able to grip a spoon and feed myself soup with this bandaged hand. I go to grab the spoon in my left hand instead, but that feels so uncoordinated I already know that I will miss my mouth more times than I will meet it. Spilling soup on my already mess of a top in front of Hudson is about as enticing as slicing my hand on that blade again.

“I... I can’t...” I stutter, frustrated, hungry, yet stubborn enough to keep trying.

“Let me feed you,” Hudson says, sweeping up the spoon and dunking it into the bowl. I suck in a sharp breath and feel a little dizzy again.

“No. It’s fine. I can do it.” But it’s too late, the spoon is filled with soup and lifted to my face, waiting for me.

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“Be a good girl and open your mouth, Lacy,” he says in a deep tone, and my eyes snap to his. Heat swirls between us. His overt flirting takes on a new level of seduction, and my mouth waters, wanting to take anything he serves. We watch each other closely for a moment, my insides taking flight as my heart rate increases before I do exactly what he says. I open my mouth, and he serves me the spoon. I move deliberately, my eyes hooked on his, swallowing the warm, tasty soup. His lips part with both appreciation and admiration, his eyes now hooked on my mouth as he takes back the spoon.

I lick my lips, running my tongue along my bottom lip slowly, and see his jaw clench. The air around us has shifted. The tension is thick, and he’s silent as he fills the spoon again and repeats the motion.

“That’s my girl,” he soothes, his voice deep, almost a growl. My body reacts to him immediately, my heart thudding, my skin buzzing. The pleasure I feel from doing what he tells me is somewhat relaxing in a life where I usually need to make all the decisions and must carry the load myself. I’ve never been anyone’s girl, but right now, I really want to be his.

The soup hits my tongue, and I hum at the flavors. “This is the best soup I have ever had,” I murmur before I open my eyes and see him staring back at me. Heat swirls in his gaze, and his intense stare has my pussy pulsing in time with my heartbeat right here at the dinner table.

His eyes don’t move from mine as he fills the spoon again, bringing it to my lips.

“Good girl,” he drawls. “Nearly done.”

“You are enjoying this, aren’t you?” I ask him, my tone much breathier than I intended.

“I am. Very much. I could watch you swallow all day. The way your throat moves. Your neck is so delicate...” he says, continuing to feed me while I flush at his words.

“I like you feeding me,” I whisper, and it feels like the tension has spiked one hundred degrees as his nostrils flare and his gaze fills with wanting.

“Be a good girl and finish this soup, and I might do it again sometime.”

We continue, sitting at the table in silence. I finish the soup, him watching me, being gentle, his movements purposeful and ensuring I eat all of it. Just as he asked me to.

“Thank you,” I say as he pushes the empty bowl to the side. Then he grabs my hand again, running his fingers up and down the inside of my wrist.

“What are you doing Thursday night?” Hudson asks, and I balk a little, not expecting that question. I sit, shocked for a moment, as it dawns on me that he’s asking me out.

“Ummm...” I think out loud, caught off guard, my body and mind clearly still on the soup experience, and as he sits smirking at me, I realize that was his intention all along. Catching me by surprise so I couldn’t make an excuse. Cooking, cleaning, helping Mom, working, they all flow through my head at a rapid pace.

“I’m busy,” I say with vigor, because I want to go out with him, but I just can’t say the words. They feel too foreign on my tongue, and after what I just experienced at my dining table, I’m not sure how we could keep our hands to ourselves for a one-on-one date. I’m clearly losing my mind, and I need to tame my feelings; otherwise, I will be complete putty in his hands.

“You are. With me,” he says, nodding, almost challenging me to disagree. I bite my bottom lip, really wanting to say yes before my eyes flick to the living room, thinking about my mother, and my body sinks again.

“I told you, I don’t date,” I say, pleased with my strength to reject him. Again. Even though everything in my body is pushing me to do the opposite.

“I will pick you up at seven.” He continues like he didn’t hear me.

“I can’t, I have to—”

“I will bring my mom over to sit with yours, so you don’t have to worry about her,” he says, and my body hums. I took care of it. His words from earlier sneak back into my brain.

“But...” I start to say, although it is futile.

“I have already booked it.” Now I am intrigued.

“Booked it?” I ask tentatively, a smile coming to my lips, and he smirks. He knows that I’m all in. I think he knew all along.

“Beetlejuice at the theater in town,” he says, his hand still holding mine, his fingers strumming up the inside of my wrist, almost like he is trying to calm me, scared that I’ll bolt.

“Beetlejuice?” I question, the conversation moving too quickly for me to really grasp.

“I’ll be here at seven.” He nods, then stands and looks down at me. The action makes me mimic him, my head nodding in agreement almost automatically, and his smile widens. Did I just agree to a date with Hudson Hamilton?



“Good girl. That wasn’t so hard, was it?” he murmurs as his hand cups my jaw gently, clearly knowing that I struggle with putting myself first. I look up at him from where I remain sitting, wide-eyed, and his gaze doesn’t falter from mine. In this position, looking up at him, I want to do whatever he tells me to, just so I can hear him call me a good girl again. Makes me crave another kiss from him.

“I’m not sure yet. Ask me Thursday night,” I grumble, feeling like a brat, but with a smile on my face and my head spinning. His thumb runs over my jaw gently before he lets go.

“I look forward to it. Now no more using this hand for a day or two. Keep it dry.” He starts to pack up his medical gear.

“I need to drive,” I say to him, leaning back in my chair, because there’s no way I can remain at home doing nothing.

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“Well, I also got my favorite cookies delivered, so there’s that,” she says, a cheeky smile coming to her face.

“Hmmm, that Connor ate,” I grumble, hating the fact that he sat in her office with her, eating her favorite cookies. Jealousy coils, the feeling entirely new and never having appeared before I stepped foot back here in Whispers.

“He has a sweet tooth too. But the distillery restaurant is trialing a new dessert menu this week, so I know he’ll be busy with the chef taste testing until his heart's content for days.”

“I think Harvey’s class is coming to the distillery for a tour?” I tell her, remembering, as the two of us continue shuffling into the row and take our seats right in the middle, a completely unobstructed view.

“Yes. School tours are so much fun. I’ll be there. Connor and I both usually do question time with the kids that come through.”

“Harvey has been to the distillery a lot before, so he might get bored. But at least he will have some familiar faces with you and Connor.”

“Is he doing okay? Are you concerned?” Lacy asks, seemingly perceptive.

“I’m not concerned. I think he’s fine. It’s just a big move to come here where he needs to make new friends, and I think he is doing okay, but it’s hard to know for sure,” I tell her honestly.

“I’ll keep an eye on him. See how he is with his classmates,” she offers.

I nod, appreciating the offer.

“You do realize... that the fact you hired out the entire complex tonight will fuel the rumor mill for weeks, right?” She side-eyes me, her grin contagious. I look at her, taking in her face up this close. Her natural pout, her big brown eyes, pink cheeks, hair pulled into a ponytail. She seems more relaxed now, knowing her mom is fine, and the two of us only have to worry about each other. My eyes travel down her body and back up. She’s stunning, and I’m royally fucked.

“I don’t care that people know we are together tonight, but I prefer them not to stare at us all night while we try to watch a movie.” I continue to admire her next to me, our arms touching as I put the popcorn in the middle to share.

“They wouldn’t stare,” Lacy says, looking at me with a knowing little grin that makes me want to do really dirty things to her.

“When I start feeding you your popcorn, they might,” I say, and her eyes widen slightly, which has my dick jumping in my pants. The idea of feeding her is now front and center, a new kink clearly unlocked for me.

“My hand is fine now,” she says, and she’s right. I took the bandage off and checked it before we left. She still has the stitches in, but it almost has full movement back, the cut healing perfectly.

“I like feeding you.” I pinch a piece of popcorn from the box and bring it to her lips. She pauses, looking up at me with intrigue, before she opens her pouty lips. The salt dusts her lower lip before she opens wider, her tongue darting out, and I push it in farther for her lips to close around it, my fingers getting caught. I swallow as I watch her taste the buttery salt left on her lips. Her eyes are wide as I put my fingers to my

lips and suck the salty remains into my own mouth. I see her chest rise and fall rapidly, and a deep growl rumbles in my chest in approval.

“Good girl,” I murmur. The praise comes to me quickly, as does my satisfied smile, and her body seems to relax even further at my words.

“They will be looking at you, not me, if you are feeding me like that...” she says, a little breathy and with a slight sass in her tone that has me grinning even wider.

“You are too beautiful for them not to stare at.”

Our eyes don’t waver from each other’s as I lean toward her slowly.

“Hudson.” It’s barely a whisper from her lips, and I edge forward some more, wanting them on mine. She lifts her hand, running it up my arm, and I know we’re on the same page.

“I love it when you say my name like that, Lacy baby,” I tell her before my lips brush lightly against hers and the whole world ceases to exist. It’s chaste, a blink-and-miss-it kind of kiss, but it tells me everything I need to know about this woman, and that is I want more of her and she wants more of me. I move my lips slowly against hers tenderly, enjoying every second before I pull away and look at her. Our noses nearly touch, and when her lips quirk up in a small smile, my head almost explodes from my chest.

“You had a bit of salt,” I say, grinning, obviously lying as I give her a wink.

“Did you get it all or need to try again?” she teases me back, and I laugh. I love getting to know the real Lacy, and more and more of her personality comes through whenever she is with me.

“I admit, I do have a slight fascination with your lips.” I could seriously watch this woman eat and lick her lips all day. It’s a turn-on.

“Hmmm... is that something I need to be concerned about?” she asks, this teasing conversation making me feel so damn good.

“You don’t need to be concerned about anything with me. But...Beetlejuice, on the other hand...” I say, getting us back on track. While I want to sit here and kiss her all night, I know there is a guy up in the camera box waiting for my signal to start the movie.

“This better be good. You really talked it up,” she grumbles playfully, and I lift my hand up and give him a wave and then a thumbs-up, and with a giggle from my girl beside me, the lights go down, the movie starts, and my grin never leaves my face.

“Beetlejuice, Beetlejuice, Beetlejuice!” Lacy says, smiling and laughing as we make our way out of the movie theater into the night and back to my truck.

“Told you it was good. Classic films, I love them,” I tell her, walking beside her. It’s a little cool out so I wrap my arm around her middle and keep her close, feeling good as she leans into me, wanting my touch just as much.

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“I wonder if we can see it tonight,” she says, coming to a stop and looking up. I watch her. Her ponytail cascades down her back, the ends of it brushing my hand, which I have firmly around her waist, her eyes wide as she looks at the night sky.

“See what?” I ask, looking up, wondering what she is talking about.

“The Heart Nebula.”

I grin, knowing she’s looking for something amazing.

“Do you see that?” She points upward, and my eyes follow her hand.

“I see a bunch of stars...” I murmur, wishing I could see what she obviously does.

“Those stars there, they’re called the Ursa Major, also known as the Great Bear. It’s the third largest constellation in the sky and the largest in the northern hemisphere.”

I can’t see shit, but watching her take it all in with glee is worth it.

“A great bear, huh?” I say, looking back up, trying to see it. I can just make it out, but it takes a lot of creativity, and that is something I lack. “Tell me your favorite animal?” I ask her, wanting to know the small things and the big things, everything about this woman.

“Butterflies,” she says, and now I’m intrigued.

“Really? Why?” I ask her as we start to walk back to the truck again. Our steps are

slow, and I move my hand from her back and grab her hand, entwining her fingers with my own. The streets are deserted. The town is asleep. There is no one around at this time of night, so I take my time. Her dainty fingers wrap with mine just astight, and again, the stupid grin I've had all night doesn't waver.

"Because they start slow, like a caterpillar, and then they take flight. I feel like I was a caterpillar coming back after college, and now I feel like I'm in the cocoon, ready to take flight but still waiting." She's right. I feel like the more she lets me in, the more I get to see the real Lacy. From her quick wit, her little flirtatious moments, her complete honesty. I can see her blooming more and more right in front of me.

"How did you find college?" I ask her, waiting to hear all the juicy details of parties and maybe sorority gossip. But as I look over at her, her face falls before she masks it.

"It was fine. I just put my head down. Studied. Then came home early to be with Mom."

I don't know how I know, but I have a feeling college wasn't the experience that she was expecting it to be. For a student on a full scholarship, it can be hard, especially at an Ivy League. But there's something in what she isn't saying that has my senses on alert. I'm about to ask her some more about which college she went to and her experience, but she shifts the conversation.

"What about you? What animal is your favorite?" She turns to look at me, giving me her full attention, and I bask in it.

"Giraffe," I tell her, smiling, and she giggles. The sound zips around my body like an electrical current.

"Why?" Her eyes glisten. We are only talking about animals, but this is the most fun I

have had in a long time.

“They have a unique long neck so they are super tall and also very handsome,” I say in my most distinguished English accent voice as I stretch my neck up tall, and she stops walking to laugh harder. Her head flies back, her mouth wide, her eyes closed, and it’s the sweetest sight. My heart thuds, looking at her exposed neck, wanting to run my lips up and down her bare skin.

“You are so beautiful, Lacy.” The words leave me before I even realize what I’ve said, and her laughter fades. She looks a little unsure, and I notice her chest rising and falling more quickly.

“Hudson...” The way she says my name, I’m not sure if it’s in warning or wanting, but either way, I like my name on her lips.

“You are one of the most beautiful women I have ever met,” I tell her, stepping closer, and I hear her sharp intake of breath. Our toes are touching as I gaze down at her, my hands finding either side of her waist. I watch her swallow before I feel her hands coast up my forearms and rest near my elbows, staying close.

“They sleep standing up, you know,” she says quietly, and my brow crumples, confused.

“What does?” I ask. I lost concentration when my eyes landed on her lips, the perfect pout, the pretty pink.

“Giraffes.” The small grin on her face is playful, and I smile because, of course, she knows. Her intelligence is one of the things I’m learning more about.

“They do.” I nod, thinking I read something like that.



“They also have a big heart,” she adds, looking into my eyes.

“One of the biggest,” I agree. And for a moment, we stand there, only looking at each other in silence. Her with curiosity and me with a longing I’ve never experienced.

“Are you going to kiss me?” she whispers, almost teasingly, as the cool night air clouds from her lips. My heart stutters at that sweet question.

“Would that be alright with you?” I ask, trying to take things slow when all I want to do is the complete opposite.

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“Hey, buddy,” I say, giving him a quick cuddle in greeting. I try to ensure I give him my full attention whenever he is here with Hudson or at my place when Susan brings him over because being an only child is lonely. I know all too well.

“Hey, why didn’t I get a cuddle that big?” Connor asks him as he steps toward us.

“Because Lacy is my favorite,” Harvey says honestly as he stands close to me, and my eyebrows rise. Harvey looks at me. “Plus, you give me those yummy candies from your desk,” he whispers, and I laugh, remembering the last time he was here months ago, I did have a bowl of candy on my desk.

“So you just like me for my candy?” I tease him, and he shakes his head, laughing.

“Are you missing LA, or are you happy to be here with the cool kids in Whispers?” Connor asks him, scuffing his hair in the process.

“I love it here. I don’t ever want to go back,” Harvey says, and my eyebrows rise for a second time. It’s great that he loves it, but I thought it would take him a bit longer than a month or so to settle in.

“What about your friends back there? Your family back there?” Connor asks him, grinning.

“Aunt Melody is coming to town soon,” he says with a little shrug, and Connor and I look at each other over the top of his head.

“Oh yeah? Are you excited to see her?” Connor prods, clearly just as interested in the

response as I am.

“Not really.”

“Why not?” I ask him, now intrigued.

“She treats me like a little kid,” he mumbles, and Connor laughs.

“That’s because you are a little kid,” Connor says, scruffing his hair again.

“No, you’re not, you are a fine young man, and we love having you in Whispers with us,” I tell him. Even though we’re joking, little kids don’t always get the humor in our words, and I feel like Harvey needs to have some confidence instilled in him.

“Thanks, Lacy. I gotta go. I want to get to the front of the ice cream line,” he says, chirping up immediately before running back to his class.

“That was interesting,” Connor says to me as we both watch him, already chatting with another young boy in his class, the two of them laughing together, seemingly best friends.

“A box arrived for you, Lacy. I put it on your desk,” Tanner says as he walks into the room, his larger profile looking humorously giant against the small children.

“Thanks, boss,” I say to him, and he gives me the evil eye, hating me calling him boss, but that is what he is, and I like to humor him.

“Okay! Who’s ready for ice cream?” Tanner's voice booms into the room, and all the kids immediately squeal and laugh and run to him, following him into the restaurant where a large buffet of ice cream and syrups now wait.

“Coming?” Connor asks as he starts to follow the crowd.

“You go ahead. I will go and check what the delivery is. It might be those new bottle samples we are waiting on,” I tell him, and he nods.

“Let me know if it is, and I will come take a look,” he says, walking backward until he is out of sight, the big kid now going to join the little kids with their afternoon delight.

I head to my office, smiling, thinking of the kids and little Harvey, before I make a mental note to get more candy to keep here for when he comes back for a visit. I see the box on my desk Tanner left and frown, because it is too small to be bottle samples, and I don’t think I ordered anything else.

“Open me outside.” I read the label out loud before I pick up the box, the weight almost nonexistent. I walk out to the distillery garden, one of my favorite places here at work, knowing it’s quiet and peaceful today with everyone inside with the kids.

My interest piqued, I open the box, setting it on the garden seat next to me, and pull out another smaller white box from inside it. The white box feels cool, and I notice an ice pack in the bottom of the packing box.

“What is this?” I murmur to myself, having no idea what the hell I ordered or what this could be. I grab the smaller box and put it on my lap, opening it carefully, and see a small white envelope inside. Pulling it out, I gasp.

Two monarch butterflies.

I open the envelope and wait, seeing them start to wriggle and slowly flutter out. They are a little slow as they flutter around my head, and I watch in awe as they fly around my face. One lands on my nose for a few moments while the other sits on my

hand. I hold my breath, not wanting to move as my eyes start to sting in disbelief, happiness, and I feel somewhat overcome. They are the most beautiful things I have ever seen. I watch as they slowly fly toward the lavender plant nearby, and I grab the note from the box and open it.

You already have your wings, Lacy. Now all you need to do is fly.

Hudson.

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“Fine. A little itchy, a little tight. But otherwise, it feels normal,” she says, opening and closing her palm where it sits on mine between us. I take another quick look before my attention’s back on the road, my hold on hers remaining because I just don’t want to let go. She moves her hand, turning it to hold on to mine, our fingers gripping together with increasing familiarity that feels good.

“Good,” I tell her, trying to watch where I’m driving but finding it difficult.

“I bet Harvey loves running around this place,” she says, looking at me and smiling. I’m glad my son brings as much joy to her as he does me. Being a single dad is hard, but also my most cherished role so meeting a woman who respects that is important.

“He loves it. Literally falls into bed every night exhausted.” I laugh, thinking about my son who fell asleep not long after dinner last night with mud still on his face.

“Were you like that as a kid?” she asks.

“Yeah. Huxley, Connor, and I would always be running around and getting into trouble. Usually at Tanner’s distillery,” I tell her, and she smiles. “What about you? Get up to mischief growing up?”

“No.” She sighs. “I mean, when I was little, I was such a girly girl, so tea parties with my dolls was what I gravitated to. Fishing, camping, and outdoor activities weren’t really my thing. I got bullied a bit in school. I guess I was just different than the other kids. The older I got, the more responsibilities I had at home, and kids can be mean. Jolene, the woman from the diner, she was my main bully, something she still seems to carry until this day for some unknown reason. When the kids from school would

go swimming at the mineral springs or to the diner for milkshakes, I would be home with Mom,” she says, and I suck in air, realizing that this woman has been a caretaker for a long damn time. I know from my work that caring for a family member or friend can be challenging. Without the right support in place, those responsibilities can take over and start affecting caretakers’ health and well-being and limit their ability to participate in paid work, family life, and social and community activities. I’m seeing that firsthand with Lacy. It’s why I now broach what I have done this week.

“So, in regard to those responsibilities...” I start, pausing for a moment, not sure how she will react. “I have been doing some research this week on that caretaker option I was telling you about. There’s a woman I found in Williamstown. She is a home carer. Someone who comes into your home and helps with the basics to alleviate any responsibilities on the families.”

“Alleviate?” she questions, her tone more inquisitive than angry, so I continue.

“She is fully qualified, first aid trained and all that. Her name is Jennifer. Her primary role is to help around the house as an additional set of hands. So things like meal preparation, housework, grocery shopping, taking your mom out for shopping, walks, appointments, that kind of thing,” I tell her as I turn up the hill to our destination.

“I looked into that once a few years ago, but I could never find anyone.” No wonder she has been doing everything herself; she probably thought that this type of support wasn’t available to her. But a lot can happen in a few years and the nearby town of Williamstown continues to grow with people and with new sets of skills.

“She has been a home carer for about five years in Williamstown and has great qualifications. If you are open to it, I can have you meet her?” I ask, hopeful that she is willing. Support like this would be a game changer to Lacy; I’m sure of it.

“I think it will feel weird to have someone else in our home...” she says tentatively,

but I can tell she is thinking about it.

“It does no harm to meet her. Maybe have a coffee with her and then see how you feel? I think any support you can get at home is going to be beneficial, not just for you but for your mom too. I’m sure she would love someone new to talk to and get to know. She must feel isolated at times.” While it’s true, it’s probably a low blow. I know if anything gets Lacy over the line, it will be the help she can give her mom.

“Maybe you’re right... Okay. Thank you. I will meet her and see what happens.” She gives me a small smile, and I grin widely at her. The trust Lacy has put in me feels equal parts fantastic and terrifying, but she is starting to open up about life, and the fact that she’s open to receiving help goes to show exactly how exhausted she is.

“We’re here,” I say, pulling up and parking. It’s a small hill at the back of the ranch, and up here, you can see our entire property. Decades ago, this land wasn’t worth much, but my parents farmed it, and it was where my brother and I grew up. Now it sits at the start of what the locals call Billionaires Boulevard, a long road that winds through the back of Whispers, elevated with views of the town. The properties next to us are out of sight, as our land borders are marked with thick pines offering security, privacy, and protection from the elements.

“Wow, this is amazing,” Lacy says, sitting forward, looking out the windshield. The sun is setting, the orange-pink sky low on the horizon. I jump out of the truck and run around to her door.

“C’mon. Let me show you the property.” I take her hand, helping her out of the truck. She struggles a little so I wrap my arm around her waist. “Here,” I say, gliding her body down, me standing close enough that I can feel her curves pressing into the front of my chest. Her feet hit the ground and tiptoe with my own.

“Smooth moves, Doctor,” she teases, and I grin like a lovesick puppy.



“It’s just the beginning, Lacy baby.” My words have heat, and I see her pupils dilate as she bites her bottom lip. A move that almost makes me feral.

“I look forward to the rest, then,” she whispers, looking up at me under her eyelashes, her cheeks tinted pink.

“Hmmm, you’re killing me, looking at me like that,” I say, my voice hoarse. Stepping back, I give us some space and keep my hand in hers. I walk with her a few steps to the edge of the hill, just before the grass starts to slope down.

“So this is all yours?” she asks, stepping in front of me and looking out to the west. As she takes in the panoramic view of the property, I take the time to admire her a little. Her dark hair is down in soft waves, her makeup minimal, jeans, boots, and a sweater on. Simple. Easy. And sexy as hell.

“Over until the pines,” I say, standing next to her. My thumb continues to run over her hand, and I can’t stop. Touching her is all I want to do. I take a deep breath to pull myself together. It was never like this with Amanda. We had fun. Lots of fun. We were both independent and my work was busy. It was a no-strings relationship for months, until strings attached themselves to us permanently in the way of Harvey. I feel the fresh cool air hit my lungs, and this time, there is a small floral aroma mixed with it. Lacy’s fragrance. It smells nice.

“The river is down there.” I point, loosening my grip on her hand and smoothing my arm around her back instead, bringing her close to my side and guiding her on where to look. “It runs right around here to the east.”

“It’s really flowing today.”

I feel her body move into mine a little. It isn’t unlike how we stood, looking at the stars the other night. She fits against me perfectly. It feels right, she feels right. Like it

is meant to be.

“Lots of fish. A great spot for fishing,” I tell her, and she nods, looking over it all.

“Mom and Dad’s place is over there. Huxley and I live there.” I point to the large place across the way. Her eyebrows rise a little. It’s huge. Magnificent, really. All timber and glass, everything oversized. Vastly different from where she lives. I’ve noticed her house needs a bit of work. Something I might look into for her.

“What is that?” she asks, pointing to a flattened spot, large trees all around, a pool already dug out. My builder, Griffin, has just poured the concrete slab for the house.

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“That will be my new place,” I tell her, and her head whips around to look at me.

“New place?” she asks, and I smile at her shock.

“Huxley is spending more and more time here, and while the house is big enough for both of us, I kinda want my own place. Something just for Harvey and me,” I explain.

“Something more permanent.” I need her to know that I’m not going anywhere.

“It looks like it is going to be big?” she asks, looking back over at the concrete slab that is tucked away a little more, bordered by larger trees. The tranquility that space offers is in complete contrast to the city. I can’t wait to make it my new home.

“It is. I want a lot of space. It was something lacking for me in LA. Out here, I just feel so much better, more at ease.”

“I get that. That’s how I feel when I stargaze. Like everything is alright in the world.”

“Speaking of which, let’s get set up before it gets too dark,” I suggest as the sun is almost down.

The back of the truck is full of blankets, cushions, and a picnic basket. I pull it all down as I lay out a few blankets and as Lacy places the large cushions, I grab a few more blankets to cover us later.

“Don’t tell me... Rochelle?” she asks as she looks at the food that I pull out, the two of us now sitting on the ground, with a mix of cashmere and mohair blankets around us to keep us warm. The large cushions at our backs allow us to sit back and relax in

comfort.

“Yeah. I got a few of the cookies you like, as well as some different things. She has the best food in town. Probably even better than my mom’s, but don’t tell her I said that,” I say, which makes her laugh.

“So true. She has cooked for this town for years. It really is comfort food,” Lacy says, the two of us digging in.

“Wow, it’s so peaceful here...” Lacy says, staring out into the distance as we eat. She has a serene look on her face, and I’m glad I can bring some quiet to her world. I know her days are hectic, and I can visibly see her shoulders lower the longer we sit here. The night sky really is her peace.

“Whispers is a great part of the world.”

“What about Harvey? I know he loves Whispers, but a small town doesn’t offer kids the same things the city can, right?” Lacy watches me, waiting for my answer.

“Well, you and I both turned out okay and we grew up here,” I say, smiling, enjoying seeing her smile back. “I think Whispers offers him more than the city, actually. He can still get a great education, even better if you think about all the outdoor activities he now gets to do. Plus, he’ll join the Whispers baseball team and try other sports.”

She’s trying to sound me out, ensuring that I’m staying, not yet believing that I am.

“And, of course, we can’t forget that he is going to fly your jet,” she says playfully, and I chuckle.

“Hmmm, I feel like I already regret that conversation,” I tell her, finishing my sandwich, shaking my head at my son's antics.

“It’s a wonder he isn’t asking you about it every day,” she says through a giggle.

“Oh, believe me, he is. Let’s pack up. The sun will be totally gone in a few minutes, and I don’t want to miss the highly educational lesson I’m sure you are going to give me tonight.”

“There will be a test at the end,” she teases as we quickly pack up our picnic.

“I’m ready for it.” I’ve read and reread the book she gave me already, and while I am nowhere near an expert, I hope I can at least put the theory I’ve learned to good use. We get busy getting the blankets around us as the midnight-blue night sky takes over and the temperature drops a little.

“Come here,” I tell her, putting some large pillows behind us and lying down on my back, my arm stretched out, wanting her to lie next to me.

“It’s still a little too early. The stars are starting to show, but not in full brightness yet,” she says, tucking into my side, my arm under her head.

“So when did you discover a love for the stars?” Although I can’t see her face, I feel her smile.

“Mom has been sick since I was little. One night was a particularly bad night. She had to go into the hospital, and while everyone was busy attending to her, I slipped outside. I just needed to get away. The noise, the smells, the conversation. I was about twelve or thirteen, and I was panicking and just needed to escape. So I went outside and sat on a bench near the back door of the hospital,” she explains, and I nod, knowing where she is talking about. “It was so peaceful. Everything was still. The birds were asleep, no people, no cars, no noise. After a little while, I looked up. I got lost in the stars that night. I think I stayed there for about an hour before someone came and got me. From that night and pretty much every night since, I have stepped

outside and looked up.”

I lean over, placing my lips on her forehead, keeping her close.

“Everyone needs a stress reliever, time away, it’s good. Healthy,” I tell her, appreciating that she has this as a hobby of sorts.

“I looked at a lot of starry nights after what happened at Marie’s Place,” she admits, and my heart thuds.

“I had a lot of sleepless nights after that as well,” I tell her quietly, the conversation turning a little more serious.

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“I don’t think I have ever been so scared before in my life than I was that night.”

I look down at her, trying to see her expression.

“To be honest, me neither.”

“But you work in medicine, deal with life-or-death situations all the time?” she questions, looking up at me, confused.

“All true. I worked a few years in the emergency department, and that was full of different situations night after night, but seeing you tied in that shed will be burned into my brain for a long time.”

“I wasn’t scared for me that night...” she says, and I wait, listening, wanting her to talk about it.

“I was mostly scared for my mom.” She swallows roughly. I know this is hard for her to talk about.

“Your mom?” I question, my brow furrowed, wondering where her head is at.

“She only has me. If that night was my last, I was so worried about who would take care of her, look after her.” The one time that you would think she would be afraid for herself, and she still thinks of others. God, this woman is so fucking beautiful.

“Your mom is resilient, Lacy. She can do a lot of things without support. She has a good community around her. But I know what you mean, because I wasn’t scared for

me either that night.”

“No?” she asks, her eyes on mine, searching.

“I was so scared that I wouldn’t be able to save you. So scared that I couldn’t get you down from that rope quick enough.” It feels so good to talk about this, cathartic, like clearing the air.

“But you did,” she says, her smile small but there.

“I did. There was no way I was leaving you in there. You were getting out with me. That was something I knew for certain.”

“Look! A shooting star!” Lacy says quickly, and my head whips around, catching the last moment of it, looking amazing in the midnight-blue sky.

“What is your wish?” I ask her, her eyes now meeting mine.

“I can’t tell. Otherwise, it doesn’t come true,” she says cheekily, and I laugh as we go back to looking up at the sky, my body humming, wanting to know all her wishes so I can turn them into my to-do list.

21

LACY

There’s no breeze. The birds are asleep, and my body is cocooned in a soft cashmere makeshift bed. It should be hard lying here on the ground. I expected bugs or at least the calls of wild animals, but instead the ground is softened by a range of blankets and cushions, and Hudson's body is keeping my internal thermostat high and my heart racing.



I feel Hudson's cell phone vibrate, and he looks at it quickly.

"It's my mom," he says, and I'm immediately on edge.

"Is everything alright?" I ask, trying to sit up and he smiles.

"Everything is fine. She is just telling me that they started another show and have finished the chocolate chip ice cream already. Apparently, it's a series, and they want to binge-watch another one tonight, so we have a little bit more time together before you turn into a pumpkin," he says, grinning, and I huff out a laugh as the fight-or-flight stress I felt just now dissipates from my body. I lie back down, snuggling into his warm embrace once again.

Taking a deep breath, I look back up. My eyes connect with the myriad of bright stars we can see tonight in the midnight-blue sky. I try to think of a time when I didn't jolt when the phone rang unexpectedly or when I wasn't worried for my mom, but nothing comes to mind. I know she is safe, well looked after, and probably having the time of her life watching her old movies with one of her best friends, knowing that I'm out with Hudson. I run my hand along Hudson's chest, and he curls me into him. Swallowing roughly, I feel his ridges and his solid frame under his button-down before my gaze flicks back up to the sky.

"That one there. See how they connect? It's called the Big Dipper," I tell him, pointing up to the sky as my heart bounces around in my chest. We have been here for about an hour, talking and dissecting the stars.

"There's the Little Dipper, right?" he asks, pointing up as well, and I smile.

"You are right again, Doctor Hamilton," I tease. He already knows so much about the stars. "You have been reading a lot," I say, turning my head to look into his eyes. We are snuggled in close, so close our noses almost touch.

“Hmmm, I had a good teacher.” His playful voice deepens, his eyes searching my face. I see him look at my lips and back at me, and my nerves skyrocket as my stomach flip-flops onto itself.

“Kiss me.” The words leave me before I even realize I’m going to say them, and he doesn’t hesitate. He lowers his face an inch before his lips meet mine. He kisses me slowly at first, gently caressing my lips with his own in a sensual dance. I lean against him when I feel his hand cup my jaw, tilting my head up a little before his tongue sweeps across my lip and darts inside. My insides quiver, but I want him so badly. The more time I spend with him, the more I feel like me. Just Lacy. Just a regular woman. And right now, I just want Hudson.

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“Hudson!” I gasp at the contact, and his grip firms from where his hands are now laced around the backs of my upper thighs.

His responding hum vibrates around my center, and my body arches, my hips already moving against his mouth as he seals his lips to my clit.

“Oh God... Ohh, Hudson, right there.” My moans are uncontrollable. I had no idea how wound tight I was. With one hand, I grip on to the soft cashmere at my side, pulling the material into a white-knuckled grip as Hudson circles my clit with his tongue before sucking on it, the pattern repeating itself over and over, getting faster and faster with every swipe.

“You taste so good, Lacy,” he groans, licking a strip along my opening, and the compliment makes me bite my bottom lip. I feel amazing with his mouth on my body.

“Yes! Oh God, yes...” I moan, my body almost out of control as my hips grind against his face, and his hands grip on to me tighter. I wonder briefly if I’m suffocating him, but I’m too far gone to really care. My mind is complete mush, and all I can think about is chasing my high. My other hand drops to the back of his head, and I dig my fingers into his hair, which elicits a rumble from his chest as his movement quickens.

“That’s it, baby, take what you need,” he says quickly before his lips are back on me and sucking, flicking, and swirling on my clit some more. I grind against his face, squirming, my confidence increasing.

“Hudson... it feels so good... too good,” I say breathily, my eyes closed, my head feeling dizzy as my pussy pulsates under his tongue. He moves his hand then, and it sweeps across my thigh before he’s pushing a finger inside me.

“Oh my God, oh my God...” I pant. I haven’t really watched porn, but I have a feeling this is exactly what they sound like. With no other noise around us, the property in darkness and nature asleep, my moans and pants and whimpers are vibrant in the air, but I can’t stop them, and I don’t even want to.

“Come on my tongue. Let go for me,” Hudson tells me, as his tongue teases my clit again, his finger moving in and out with perfectly pressured thrusts as I push my head back into the soft blankets, feeling myself reach the peak.

“Oh God... oh God... oooooooh, Hudson!” I’m crying out within the next blink, letting out a little squeal, looking up at the stars as he provides me with my own. My body arches as Hudson’s head remains buried, sucking on my clit, and my entire body shudders in his hold as I come. I’m breathless, quivering as Hudson slows his movements and peppers kisses to my clit and upper thighs before crawling up my body. I feel like I have spent a month at a day spa with how relaxed I am now.

He is still in his opened jeans, his hardness bigger than before, and he hovers over me, waiting for me to look at him. My cheeks heat as I slowly open my eyes, my body completely liquid, as it dawns on me that was my first orgasm a man has ever given me.

“You alright?” he asks, watching me carefully, a small grin dancing on his face.

“I’m better than alright,” I whisper, my eyes hazy. As I look at him in a new light, a smile curls my lips. I run my hands through his hair, the softness in stark contrast to his hard body. “I want to feel you,” I say quietly as my hand trails down his cheek, his shoulder, his skin warm under my touch.

I no longer feel like the daughter of a sick woman or the girl who was tied up and left for dead. I feel like Lacy. A smart, independent woman who knows exactly what she wants. And what she wants is staring right back at her.

22

## HUDSON

I watch her closely, seeing a flickering of emotions cross her eyes. My heart is thudding, my body hot and my dick so hard in my jeans it could split wood. But I wait. I have no idea how experienced she is with men, but after that orgasm barreled through her and onto my lips, I feel like it has been a long time for her.

“I want to do that again,” she whispers so delicately it barely reaches me. As she smiles up at me, her whole face lights up, and I sink down to her and kiss her plush lips. I wasn’t sure of a lot of things coming here tonight. I wasn’t sure if she would open up to me; I wasn’t sure if she wanted me as much as I wanted her, but right here, right now, all hesitation flies completely out the window.

“Damn, Lacy baby, I could do that every day of the week,” I murmur, my nose nudging hers, and I see her biting her bottom lip, a dead giveaway she is thinking about something, so I pause for a moment. I watch her face; her eyes look a little glassy, and it’s almost like her stresses are melting away right before my eyes. Those beautiful butterfly wings are spreading, and I feel Lacy the woman starting to bloom even more.

“I want to taste you.” Her voice is so soft with her admission, even as my dick twitches in response, I need to make sure that’s really what she wants.

“You don’t have to,” I say, shaking my head. I don’t want her feeling like she has to repay me for anything.

“I want to,” she says, more firmly this time, answering my internal question. I look at her, seeing if I can see any hesitation in her face. There is nothing but wanting, which heats my body from the inside out.

“I have been dreaming of having your lips on me,” I admit, and her grin widens.

“Looks like we both get what we want, then.” Sitting up quickly, she forces me to move and roll over onto my back as she straddles me. In nothing but her underwear, under the navy inked sky, this is a sight that will live rent free in my head for years to come. Bathed in nothing but the full moonlight, in lace, looking so innocent and perfect.

“You are fucking phenomenal, you know that baby?” I tell her, the endearment falling with ease from my lips. Her slight blush and her small smile tell me my words resonate somewhere within her. I run my hands up her bare thighs, both to keep her warm and to touch her, not able to stop and loving how soft she is.

“You keep showering me with your words and your gifts, Hudson, and I’m going to be one very spoiled woman.” She runs her hands across my naked torso, and my skin prickles in the wake of her touch. She is right. I want to spoil her. Shower her with affection, lust, and gifts. I know she isn’t someone who has had a lot of any of that, and I want to be the man who gives it all to her.

I admire her now, seeing that the strength she shows so much in her everyday life comes out in her sexual prowess. And while I know she hasn’t had a boyfriend in a long time, thanks to the gossip I hear from my mother, I have a feeling Lacy is just as confident with herself in the bedroom as she is out of it.

“I want you to tell me about all this, but another time,” she says, eyeing my chest, the colors and patterns swirling on my skin. They’ve been my own private endeavor. The creativity, the pain, all of it has helped me over the past few years. Her hands

delicately move down my bare torso, her nails lightly scraping my skin, making me swallow a moan.

I push my jeans down as she lowers my underwear, and my dick is raging, popping straight out for her, and I revel in her sharp intake of breath. She bites her bottom lip again as her eyes remain glued to my cock, so I palm it, wrap my hand around myself, and pump. Having never been this hard before, I pray I don't come too soon.

“Isn’t that my job?” she says, looking at me with one eyebrow raised in a challenge, and I smirk.

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“Get to it then, baby. Wrap that pretty mouth around me and suck,” I tell her, the words a little tougher than my usual, but her eyes widen slightly in delight, her hips moving against my upper thighs, trying to grab some friction again already. I’ve noticed she likes me telling her what to do. I have a feeling she has had to make a lot of decisions in her life up until now, and having someone else take the reins for her is something she leans into.

She shuffles down and replaces my hand with her own, and my breath catches as she touches me for the first time. Her hand is small, soft, and delicate against me, and I watch her lower her head before her tongue darts out and licks across my tip.

“Shit,” I hiss, tensing my core, the anticipation of having her mouth on me pushing me to nearly my breaking point. One hand grips on to the blankets, the other resting behind my head.

“Mmmmm,” she moans as she takes another lick, her hand holding me like a fucking lollipop for her enjoyment.

I growl deep and low, my hips wanting to thrust up, the urge to fuck her face racing to the surface, but I remain steady. She is teasing me, so I let her.

“Are you playing with me, Lacy baby?” I ask her, my teeth grinding, holding in the ache I have for her.

“Maybe...” she purrs against my skin like a fucking sex kitten, dragging her lips down my length and back. Seeing her as a seductress like this is a new need unlocked. She is sultry and tantalizing, and I now crave her in an entirely different



way.

She leans over some more, taking the tip of me in her mouth, wrapping her lips around me so they are pouty on my cock and sucking. I groan at the feel of her warm, wet mouth. It's perfection, just like the rest of her.

"That's it..." I praise. I'm not classifying this as edging, but she's teasing me and is very close to the line. I'm trying very hard to keep it together in equal parts enjoyment and equal parts torture. Letting her lead, letting her set the pace.

"I like the way you taste," she says before taking me in a little deeper.

"Lacy, shit... baby..." I choke out. I should be ready for the feeling of her mouth on me, but I'm not. I love getting head. Most guys do. But the visual of Lacy in her underwear, out here under the stars, there isn't a time I could think of that has been better than this.

"Hudson," she moans, then takes me even deeper, and I lift my hips a little. Not able to hold on a moment longer, I hit the back of her throat.

"Fuck, baby..." As I watch her start to bob up and down on me, I'm a goner. Her long brown hair covers her face as she works me over, so I pull it up in my hand, holding it tightly at the back of her head.

"You look so pretty with my cock in your mouth." This feeling is overwhelming, and my dirty talk comes straight out. I see her wiggle her hips, again trying to find friction, and I smirk. She likes me talking to her like this.

She hums in appreciation on my cock, and it thickens even more as the vibrations wrap around my skin, prickling my balls.

“Fuck me,” I groan again, as my teeth clench harder. My stomach muscles are working overtime, my abs tight as she goes deeper with every motion, but I can’t avert my eyes from watching as I slide in and out of her mouth. She is tasting me thoroughly, moaning on my cock with eagerness, sucking, licking, and bobbing, her mouth a tool of magic.

All my senses have rushed to my cock as her hand slides over her curves and dips down her thighs.

“Jesus, baby, you are fucking amazing. Touch yourself, Lacy... Is your pussy wet for me? Is it throbbing?” I ask her, breathless, wanting my lips on hers again but unable to move. She feels too fucking good sucking on my dick.

“Mmm-hmm.” Nodding around me, her hips buckle, and I know she is touching herself.

“God, I want to taste you again already, your sweetness on my tongue...” I moan, my eyes almost rolling backward as I feel my balls tighten. “I’m going to come, baby... I’m going to come straight down your throat, and you are going to come on your fingers...” I warn her, and she doesn’t stop, pushing me closer to ecstasy.

Sweat has broken out against my forehead, and my eyes are glued to her mouth before I flick them to her hips, seeing her hips moving against her hand, faster and faster as her moans muffle around my cock. I know she is close too.

“Holy shit. Baby, I’m coming... Fuuuuuuck, fuck.” Matching the speed of her own hips, mine thrust up, and I let go, not able to hang on a moment longer.

“Lacy!” I roar into the night sky, just as I hear her choked scream, her mouth and throat opening wider as they relax with her orgasm, and I come down her throat with one last thrust.

I lie, panting, my eyes open, looking at the stars she loves so much, trying to calm my racing heart. Lacy slowly pulls off me with a pop, gasping for air as I let go of her hair. Her hands run up my chest, and she slowly falls against me. Her body seals to mine, our skin coated in a light sheen of sweat as we both come down from our highs.

“That was amazing...” I say on a heavy exhale, my hand coming to her head and stroking her hair, my body now liquid. “Good girl, Lacy baby,” I tell her, and she sits up to look at me. I kiss her a little, my hands immediately lowering down her back, finding her ass as I grip on to it tight, getting a handful of lace and muscle. Her legs fall on either side of me, and while we are sated for now, I have a feeling that our need for each other is going to grow and my hunger to have her again is going to be harder to tamp down. Trailing my hand up her bare back, she peppers kisses to my lips and jaw until she gets to my ear.

“I like you calling me that,” she whispers, like it is a secret, but there is no one around for miles, so it isn’t like anyone can hear.

“Lacy baby?” I ask her, grinning into her hair, her face still buried near my ear, thinking of her nickname.

“Your good girl...” she admits, and a contented growl rumbles in my chest.

This night couldn't be more perfect.

### HUDSON

“Maybe we need to stick this here?” Huxley says as we both look at the homemade poster that is Harvey’s school science project. Huxley arrived this morning for a few days, and I’m sure if he knew this was on this agenda for today, he would have the plane flying in a totally different direction.

“No! The moon needs to go here next to the Earth, Uncle Huxe; otherwise, it isn’t reeeaaal,” Harvey tells him adamantly, schooling Huxley as my brother’s eyes meet mine over the top of this solar system poster that we are trying to put together. Harvey drew and colored all the planets, so now all we need to do is stick them down in order from the sun. The gate intercom chimes, and Harvey runs to the small screen on the side wall to see who it is.

“Isn’t he too young to be doing this kind of shit? We didn’t do this until high school, I’m sure of it,” Huxley grumbles.

“Is it too early for whiskey? I feel like I need a fucking whiskey,” I say, scrubbing my face, wondering how in the world to get all these planets stuck down in the right order. I tried to search on my phone, but Harvey told me that was against the rules. He himself has no idea, so clearly he wasn’t paying enough attention in class.

“Where the fuck does Uranus go? Who even named a fucking planet Uranus?” Huxley hisses to himself, before he plunks down in the dining chair, leaving me alone to look at the poster until Harvey comes back over.

“Who was that, buddy?” I ask, assuming it was either Mom or Dad.

“Lacy,” he says, and my head whips up. It’s been a few days since our night under the stars, and I’ve thought of little else since. We’ve talked a few times, but it’s been rushed, between her meetings and my patients, but even now, I lick my lips, remembering the taste of her on my tongue.

“Lacy, huh?” Huxley says, now standing again, wiggling his eyebrows, and I roll my eyes at him and run my hands through my hair.

“I’ll go get her. You two figure out what we are doing here,” I say, stalking away from the dining table and heading to the front door. I try to walk normally, but my steps are rushed, as is the need to see her again.

I pull open the door, just as she steps from her car.

“Hey, you,” I say, my grin instant as I jog down the steps from the front door to greet her.

“Hudson, you didn’t have to, nor should you, be securing Jennifer for us,” she says firmly, and I take a breath.

She doesn’t look as angry as I was expecting, but hell, the two of them met the day after I told her about Jennifer and hit it off, so I had to act on it right away.

“She was in demand, and I know you mentioned that you all hit it off, so I wanted to secure her before anyone else did,” I say honestly as the woman I haven’t stopped thinking about stops right in front of me with her hands on her hips. I see her internal battle. The one that makes her slightly stubborn, not wanting my help, yet knowing that it’s what’s best.

“I don’t need you to pay for that service. I’m capable of—”

I cut her off with a kiss. My lips meet hers, and everything in the world settles. I feel her shoulders lower as her body melts into mine, and I stifle the growl that builds in my chest from wanting her so badly.

Her hands slide around my middle as I cup her face, threading my fingers through her hair, deepening the kiss that I've desperately craved since I last saw her. Our night under the stars was fucking phenomenal. She is fucking phenomenal. Slowly pulling away, I look into her eyes.

"I know you are more than capable, Lacy. But I also know you have a lot on your mind and a lot to do, so I took care of it," I tell her, wanting to take care of her every day of the week. But I know she's independent, and if the determination in her gaze is anything to go by, then I know she will want to pay me back. Of which I won't accept.

She takes a deep breath. "I don't want to appear ungrateful. I appreciate it, I really do. But Mom and her care are my responsibility. I don't need handouts," she says, and I nod. I can appreciate that.

"So maybe you can do something for me in return?" I ask, knowing just the thing.

"Sure, anything," she says eagerly, and I smile. A million things run through my mind, but I go with the G-rated option.

"Come inside. I'll show you." Grabbing her hand, I guide her through the door to the mess on my kitchen counter.

"You know the name Uranus means the Greek God of the Sky," Lacy says as Huxley and I sit back, watching her and Harvey complete the poster. I hear Huxley stifle a cackle, clearly still an adolescent.

I knew she had a thing for stars, but planets are a whole different ballgame. The facts she spouts are all fascinating to me, but to Harvey as well as he looks at her with hearts in his eyes.

“I know, son, I know,” I murmur to myself as I watch the two of them work together. It would’ve taken Lacy less than five minutes to have the cut-out planets in order for Harvey, but she took a seat next to him and the two of them have been talking about planets for almost an hour.

“You know, talking to yourself is the first sign of insanity,” Huxley murmurs as his eyes flick between his phone, me, and my visitor.

“Shut up,” I grumble, my eyes staying glued to Lacy and Harvey. The vision of them together does something to my chest that I haven’t felt before.

Lacy looks over and grins before she throws something at me, hitting me in the face with a ball of paper. Her eyes meet mine again briefly, and her cheeky smile is like an aphrodisiac as I bite my bottom lip, searing my gaze into hers before I unravel the paper to reveal a hidden message.

Stop looking at me like that, her scribble says, and I chuckle, looking back at her straightaway, my stare on her not wavering.

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“They sure have a good connection,” Huxley says quietly as I pocket the note.

“...so it’s really cold and windy there. There is no way anyone can land a rocket on that planet,” Lacy says to Harvey, and his eyes widen in wonder as he takes it all in.

“Fuck, I didn’t know that,” Huxley says, and I resist the urge to punch him in the arm.

“Do you know anything?” I tease him.

“Oh, I know my brother is in deep, deep, deep...” he singsongs, and I remain silent. I have no comeback because it’s true.

“What are you still even doing here? I thought you flew down to help Dad with some paperwork or something?” I ask, because now that Lacy is here, I prefer Huxley not to be.

“Looks like they are finished. I’ll take Harvey up to Mom and Dad’s, give you guys some space.” My brother says the most intelligent and helpful thing he has said all afternoon, as I see Lacy and Harvey start to pack up, and I give him a nod.

“Okay, so we’re all done. Harvey, why don’t you tell your dad what you learned today?” Lacy asks him, smiling.

Harvey grins at her like she hung the moon herself.

“The moon is shaped like a lemon. Venus spins backward, annnnndddd...” he says as



he thinks. “And Uranus is the coldest planet in the entire solar system.” He nods at me, and my eyebrows hit my hairline.

“You learned all that in an hour? I’m impressed.” I ruffle his hair and his cheeks pinken at the compliment. Lacy beams at him in pride, and I swear I feel my heart swell.

“Did you do astronomy at college, Lacy?” Huxley asks her, and she shakes her head.

“No. It’s just a hobby.”

“You went to an Ivy League, right? Willowstone?” Huxley asks. I knew she got a scholarship to a top college, but I had no idea she was in California, so close to me or at Willowstone. It’s one of the best universities in the country, probably the world. I even have a few connections there.

“Ahh, yeah...” Her smile is forced and her eyes cloud over a little. A movement so subtle, no one else notices. But I do. “I’m glad to be home now, though, with Mom.”

Huxley nods in understanding before looking at Harvey.

“Come on, bud. Let’s go raid Grandma’s kitchen. She said she was making your favorite cookies today,” he says to Harvey.

“Yes! Thanks, Lacy. Can you come over again tomorrow?” Harvey asks Lacy, and she looks a little like a deer stuck in the headlights for a second.

“I can’t tomorrow, but why don’t we meet up for Sundae Saturday this week?” she suggests, glancing between my son and me, the two of us grinning at her stupidly. I have a feeling that he and I would meet her anywhere.

“Yes! I forgot about Sundae Saturday.” Harvey fist-pumps the air before running out the door, my brother following him, looking confused, having no idea what any of it means.

“Harvey is really great. You must be so proud of him. He is so smart for his age,” Lacy says as I step up to her. Now that we are alone, I slip my hand around her waist and walk her back until her ass hits the kitchen counter. Her eyes widen, breath catching as I close in on her, sealing her to me.

“He is and I am. Thank you. I had no idea about the planets,” I say sheepishly as I brush the tip of my nose against hers. I hear her cell chime, and I watch as she digs it out from her bag on the counter. Her face turns a shade of white as she sees whatever’s on the screen, body turning rigid.

“Lacy? Everything alright?” I ask, wondering if something is wrong with her mom. Her head turns quickly in my direction, and she looks startled, like she forgot I was standing right in front of her.

“Oh...” She exhales, shaking her head like she is waking up from a bad dream.” Sorry. No, fine. Everything’s fine. It was just... um... just a work thing.” Shaking her head again, she puts her cell back in her bag, then faces me fully. Color returns to her face, and her grin is wide as she meets my eyes.

“Are you sure?” I ask her. For whatever reason, I can tell she is not being honest with me.

“Totally fine. So, we are still not even, Doctor Hamilton. Securing Jennifer was a big deal. More than just an hour of my time.” She’s back to teasing, and my body relaxes with hers. Lifting her head, she almost brushes her lips against mine, bringing them close, just not close enough. Thoughts of her call now move to the back of my mind. I can’t help it. I’m not sure if it’s just us being together, the date under the stars, or

seeing her with my son, or all three, but Lacy has been slowly relaxing more and more around me, her confidence building, and I can see a sparkle in her eye that wasn't there before.

"I can think of other ways we can even the score," I whisper playfully as I duck in, taking her lips with mine. Her hands loop around my neck, and I pull her close. Kissing this woman is a new addiction I never want to stop.

Our lips move, my hands roam, and she makes these cute little moans that have my jeans tightening every second she is in my arms.

"They might be back in a minute," she says between kisses. Our pace quickens, neither of us wanting to stop.

"They will be a little while. We have time," I tell her as my hands run down her sides and back up again. Cupping her breasts as her head falls back, my lips meet her neck.

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“Hudson,” she breathes out, lifting her head to look at me, her cheeks a little flushed, our breathing becoming rapid.

“I missed you, Lacy baby,” I tell her as I lean in to kiss those perfect lips once again.

“I missed you too...” Her hands run up the back of my head, digging into my hair, massaging my scalp, and I groan into her mouth as my tongue becomes more demanding.

“I want you so much it’s almost suffocating,” I murmur, my lips tracing down her jaw, kissing every inch of her skin I can reach.

“I know the feeling,” she moans as she moves her body a little, needing some friction, and I move my leg, positioning it between hers. “Anyone could walk in.”

“Hmmmm... let them...” I say, not wanting to stop kissing her as her hips roll on my thigh, and I feel her warmth, her neediness for me now apparent. I know my brother won’t be back in a hurry, and he and Harvey will probably eat all the cookies Mom cooks and not leave me even one. So I take my time, enjoying having Lacy in my arms.

“I really should get to work,” she murmurs, not making any move to leave or pause our makeout session, and I smile against her lips.

“Yeah, you should probably go,” I tell her, but her hands grip into my hair harder, and I pull her body tighter against mine.

Neither of us move. We stand in my kitchen, her pinned to the bench, her hips moving against mine, our lips tangling together, her body in my arms, and hell, she feels good. We don't stop kissing, but I let her relax in my arms, her head falling back again as I kiss her neck, smelling her sweet floral aroma. When I lick her skin teasingly, she giggles and squirms.

"Hmmm, ticklish?" I ask with a chuckle, moving my lips back across her jaw to her mouth.

"A little..." she says, her tone coy enough to have me wanting to find all her other ticklish spots. "But I like it... I like everything you do."

"Good to know." I put my lips to hers again as my stomach flutters, and we don't break, we don't waver, even though my dick strains against my zipper more and more with every grind of her delicious hips. This is the hottest makeout session I have had, and I'm in no hurry to finish.

This is perfect. She is perfect.

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LACY

The bottle samples have arrived, and they look great.

"Is this what you had in mind?" Connor asks, and I smile.

"This is exactly what I had in mind," I confirm, my grin not faltering. Everything in my life seems to be more enjoyable. I'm happier, work is amazing, Mom is doing good, and I haven't had a nightmare in over a week.

“Lacy. A delivery for you,” our receptionist says, walking in grinning with a large bouquet of flowers. Hudson and his gifts are now legendary in the office. As I stand to grab them from her, I see Connor smirking.

“Well, I will leave you to open your little love note from the doc. Good work on those bottles; they look amazing,” Connor says, standing and walking out, leaving me giddy. Hudson seems to like spoiling me. My fingers move fast as soon as Connor is out the door, eager to see the note, because while the gifts are amazing, his words are what lights me up inside.

I rip open the envelope, looking again at the large bouquet of white roses. He knows I like to pick the fresh roses from the distillery garden, so it is a little odd, but I appreciate it just the same.

As I slide the card out of the envelope, my smile is wide as I read his message, before I gasp and my hands start to shake.

Lacy

I have loved the thrill of the chase, but I’m not playing anymore. You will be mine and I’m coming for you.

These are not from Hudson. Fear consumes my body, my hands trembling harshly as the note falls from my grasp. My eyes water as my breathing escalates, and the room starts to spin. I close my eyes and start to count, trying to calm my frantic breaths, and I grip on to my desk so I don’t fall. It takes me a little while, but slowly it works, and my breathing regulates. As I open my eyes and look down at the flowers on my desk, I swallow the bile that rises, and with my sweaty palms, I grip on to the large heavy bouquet and walk quietly out of my office. No one is around, all of them in meetings, and my pace quickens as I run down the steps of the office and make my way to the back of the distillery to the large trash containers, the ones reserved for our

large rubbish items, where no one else will even look.

A feral growl sounds from deep within me as I throw the flowers into the air, tears falling down my cheeks. I pant as I watch the bouquet rise up almost in slow motion for a moment before the flowers fall, landing in the large bin with bits of old barrels and other random building materials, until all that is left is me.

A panting and shaking mess.

I jump from the car and dash inside, frazzled. I'm running late and have been all day. I've felt off ever since the flower delivery this morning. My senses are heightened, jumping at every noise. Usually, I can push his messages to the back of my mind, but there was something about the note that was different. More demanding, more threatening. Like he is getting agitated. He probably thought that I would buckle and come back to school immediately, doing everything he's asking of me. Maybe no one has ever told him no before.

"Oh, there you are, Lacy," Patti says from the reception desk at the hospital as I push my way inside.

"Sorry!" I cringe, feeling terrible but still not myself.

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“It’s fine. Melody is here and is already with your mom,” Patti says, standing, giving me that empathetic smile that I hate, and I walk swiftly to follow her down the hall.

Mom and Melody have had a few calls, and now I finally get to meet the doctor face-to-face. I’m trying to keep myself in check because the flutter of excitement dancing in my chest from the possibility that Melody will be our answer, the one who will save my mom, is hard to tamp down.

“I’ve got it, Patti.” I hear Hudson and turn, seeing him step out from a room at the side, and I suddenly feel an overwhelming sense of relief and safety.

“No problem, Doc,” Patti says before turning and walking back to the front desk.

“Hey,” I murmur to him, releasing a heavy breath as my body relaxes.

“Hey, you,” he says, his voice low, then he steps toward me and slides his hand around my waist, pulling me tight. I fall into him, tears already threatening and my hands already shaking. As I wrap my arms around him, I never want him to let me go.

“Lacy? Are you alright?” he asks, clearly concerned because my behavior is off.

“Just... hold me...” is all I get out, and I feel his hold around me tighten. His hands splay across my back, nearly every inch of my front covered and my back protected, and I bury my head in his chest and close my eyes. He rubs my back, his hand moving up and down slowly, and I just breathe.

“It will be fine. Your mom will be fine.” He thinks I’m upset about Mom, and I



should be. Guilt riddles me instantly. Here I am, worried about some random flower delivery, when my mom is literally fighting for her life. I clear my throat and pull back a little, looking around, because we are standing right in the middle of the corridor. Anyone can see us.

“Sorry, I’ve just had a big day.” I give him a small grin, and he eyes me warily. He knows that isn’t it, but he doesn’t push, and I’m thankful.

“Besides, should we be this close at your place of employment, Doctor?” I tease as my hand runs up his arm, enjoying the feel of him, my frantic state already soothing the minute his hands touched my body.

“Hmmm, no one around who I can see...” he says before he bends his head and his lips hit mine. The kiss is soft and over too quickly, but it’s enough to rid me of the swirls of anxiety I’ve been feeling all day and the immense fear I experienced this morning. “How are you?” he murmurs as he pulls back slightly, assessing my face.

“I’m good, even better for that amazing discussion we had in your kitchen yesterday. You?” I ask, pushing the topic onto him as I still feel my hands are a little jittery. It’s been a long time since I was thoroughly kissed like that, and I can’t hide my smile.

“Same, but I realize that there are many other rooms in my house I still need to show you,” he says cheekily, and I giggle.

“I look forward to that, Doctor,” I admit. “Do you still want to share a sundae with me on Saturday?”

“I want nothing more, especially if you do that sexy thing with the cherry stem in your mouth.” He winks, quickly pecking me on my lips again. “We better go in. Your mom has been in with Melody for about fifteen minutes. I just had to take a call.”

I nod, and Hudson knocks on the door of the consultation room.

“Enter,” a stern female voice says before Hudson opens the door.

“Lacy’s here,” Hudson says, opening the door wide for me to step through.

I walk in, spotting Mom straightaway, smiling, and I get one in return.

“Sorry, I’m late,” I say as I sweep in and look around. My eyes settle on the woman sitting opposite my mom. I knew she was stunning, seeing her on the video call last week, but in reality, she is almost like Barbie. Blond hair, blue eyes, blinding white teeth, and even though she’s wearing a loose white coat, I’m pretty sure her figure is amazing. The complete opposite of me.

“Hi, I’m Lacy,” I say, extending my hand.

“I’m Doctor Wilkinson. Please take a seat,” she says, and as Hudson closes the door, I sit in the empty seat next to Mom, feeling like I am in the principal's office at school, my hands already fidgeting in my lap. “As I was saying, Veronica, we have discussed this before on our video call, that there are no guarantees. I think we all know this is not a disease we can beat. However, partial remission is a correct diagnosis at this point and full remission is also possible. I would like to do a few more tests to check a few things,” she says, and I frown.

“Of course, Lacy and I know the situation,” Mom says as her hand grabs on to mine. The doctor looks at the movement before her eyes flick to mine.

Hudson pulls a chair up next to me and takes a seat with us and my mom practically beams at him.

“So...” Melody says, and the three of us look at her. “What I would like to do is run

some tests, I can see your red blood count is a little low, so a potential transfusion may be needed.”

“Transfusion?” I question, needing clarification, and I feel my mom’s hand grip mine tighter. I take a deep breath, feeling my fight-or-flight starting to develop, so I try to calm my breaths. Then I feel Hudson’s hand grabs my other hand, giving me a squeeze. I see Melody’s eyes flick to the movement, before she looks sharply at Hudson, then her eyes rest back on me.

“What are you thinking?” Hudson asks her, and I look at him, grateful he’s asking the questions as my mind is running and not connecting to many thoughts today.

“Veronica,” Melody says, looking straight at my mom, ignoring Hudson and me. “I think it would be pertinent to run a few more diagnostic tests, because your red blood count isn’t where I like it to be. It can be an indication that there’s possibly some bleeding internally. At this stage, I want to ensure we do everything we can to support you, so we can look at blood transfusions from someone who shares the same blood type as you.”

“I’ll do it. We match. I’ll give her mine,” I say so quickly, my mother looks at me sharply, and Hudson’s grip on my hand hardens.

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“I’m just trying to look at it from all angles. But you are the expert, and I wanted you here. Veronica is best friends with my mom. I wanted to create a little space between me and her care.” I’m not interested in getting into this right now.

“Well, you are a good doctor, so I can believe that. But what I find hard to believe is the way you were holding Lacy’s hand in the consultation room and why now you seem more concerned for Lacy’s health than that of the patient you brought me in to consult with,” Melody says, and I sigh.

“Veronica and Lacy are well-known in the community. Lacy is her primary caretaker...” I start to explain.

“Hudson. I don’t need a community history lesson. I know what I saw. Amanda was not only my sister, but my best friend. But if you think you can fuck some young girl from a small town and that I’ll be okay with that, then you’re mistaken,” she spits out.

My anger rises, and I swear if Melody wasn’t the amazing doctor she is, I would not be entertaining this completely inappropriate conversation. “Who I fuck is none of your business. Lacy, outside of the medical support you are giving to her mother, is none of your business. I appreciate you consulting on Veronica’s health for me, but if you can’t be professional about this and leave this personal bullshit at the door, I might be better to find someone else.” I’m protective of Lacy, and there’s no way Melody is bringing this bullshit to Whispers. I would like to think her professionalism would be at the forefront, but she was close to her sister, so I should have thought about this more.

“You got me to take time out of my busy schedule to consult for you, and that’s what I’m doing. I would have appreciated a heads-up on the entire situation before I started with the consultation. However, what I don’t expect is for you to undercut my opinion. In my opinion, Lacy is fine to donate blood to her mother. You either want me to manage this, or you don’t, Hudson. Which one is it? Because I have better things to do with my time.”

I sit forward and look at Lacy’s file again. The numbers look fine, and even though I don’t like it, it doesn’t mean the facts are lying.

“Fine,” I murmur in agreement. Medically speaking, she can. Maybe I’m just too protective and too close to this situation.

“Great. I’m going to manage this process moving forward. I will have my office talk to Williamstown Hospital and organize the donation immediately. We may need a few from Lacy as Veronica’s tests did come backshowing some issues. And as you know, we need to have some time in between, so the sooner we start, the better,” Melody says, and I nod, even though she can’t see me. I need to trust her.

“Okay, Melody, we will do it your way,” I tell her, closing Lacy’s file.

“Good, and Hudson?”

“Yes?” I ask, knowing she has more to say.

“I think you need to take a good, hard look at what you are doing. I always thought you were a smart man. But dating someone so young like Lacy, and Amanda has only been gone a short time...”

“Amanda has been gone for years...” I say, letting my words hang between us as my frustration simmers. I’m a widower, I know that, but how long do I need to remain

single before moving on with my life? It's literally been over five years. I need to move on, and I have. I don't need her family's approval, and I find it astounding that I'm getting this attitude from her, considering her own father is a known philanderer and her mother a socialite who turns a blind eye.

"I need to go. I will keep you updated," she says, ignoring my statement, then the line goes dead. I throw my cell on my desk and sit back in my chair as the familiar feeling of despair settles in my chest.

I don't like it. But Melody is the specialist, and while her opinion on my private life is none of her business, I don't want to get in the way of her medical expertise.

I sit opposite Tanner and Connor at the bar. It's quiet tonight. Midweek is always like this, and after the day I have had, I needed a friend.

"Tough day at the office?" Connor asks, watching me closely.

"You could say that," I murmur, lifting the glass of whiskey to my lips, appreciating the burn.

"What's going on?" Tanner asks.

"I got a specialist in from of the city to consult on Lacy's mom," I tell them. It isn't a secret; practically the whole town already knows.

"Lacy said. Melody, right?" Connor asks, leaning back in the booth.

"Yeah," I say, trying to collect my thoughts, wondering if it was such a good idea after all.

"Lacy mentioned her time at work might be a little ad hoc for a while. She needs to

give blood?” Tanner frowns.

“It’s something for Veronica.” I don’t elaborate; they don’t need details, and while I know they will keep everything confidential, I need to ensure I keep things private, not telling them anything Lacy hasn’t already.

“So what’s going on with you and Lacy?” Tanner asks, looking me dead in the eye.

“Are you two are a thing?” Connor follows up, and I look at them both.

“Yeah... yeah, we are.” There’s no point denying it.

“Don’t fuck with her. She’s my best employee ever. Plus, she’s Victoria’s best friend,” Tanner warns, and I give him a nod.

“Not planning on it.” I sip my whiskey as I think about her.

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“Aw, double dates in your future, then, boys?” Connor quips, and I smirk. I’m relieved he has no interest in Lacy, even though I initially had reservations about that fact.

“Smart-ass. Just wait your turn,” Tanner says with a chuckle, and I smile.

“What turn?” Connor huffs. He’s never said anything, but he seems to like the single life.

“Your turn to be pussy-whipped,” Tanner says, pointing at him.

“Never going to happen,” Connor says, shaking his head like he is having the last laugh.

“Gee, I look forward to the day some woman puts you on your ass,” I tell him, grinning.

“Lacy is pretty independent.” Connor smirks before lifting his drink to his lips.

“She’s smart too. Funny, caring, sexy as hell,” I finish for him, smiling as I think about her while Tanner’s hard stare hasn’t wavered.

“Are you sure?” Tanner asks, and Connor looks at his father before looking back at me.

“I’m sure. I want her and I’m pretty sure she wants me.” Lacy doesn’t have a father in her life, and while Tanner isn’t overly close with her, he is her boss and his



girlfriend is best friends with Lacy, so I know he takes the care of her seriously.

“Good to see you back into dating,” Connor says.

“Took me long enough.” I smile, happy about my connection with Lacy and comfortable with how things are going, even though the conversation with Melody left a bad taste in my mouth.

“I think Dad holds that record,” Connor jokes, and I laugh as Tanner grumbles.

“Fuck off, the both of you,” Tanner murmurs, which has us both laughing even more.

“Pretty nice bunch of roses you sent her this week. Must have cost you a pretty penny,” Connor says, and my smile falters.

“Roses?” I ask, my eyes narrowing, and his cheekiness mellows.

“Lacy got a flower delivery. We all thought it was from you.”

“Not this time. I know she likes the roses in the distillery garden, so I never sent any...” I say, suddenly feeling off. If she isn’t getting flowers from me, who the hell is sending her flowers?

“When did they arrive?” I ask, knowing Lacy has been off for a little bit lately, especially after witnessing her reaction to whatever she checked on her phone.

“The morning before her mom’s hospital appointment,” Connor says, and I look at Tanner, seeing him frowning.

“She has never had a delivery of that nature before,” Tanner murmurs, and I shake my head. None of it makes sense.

I clear my throat. “It was probably from a friend,” I say, my stomach feeling heavy, knowing that Lacy isn’t seeing anyone else. But I know she is keeping something from me, and I need to figure out what that is.

“Well, we have the New York trip for Lacy coming up,” Connor mentions, trying to change the subject slightly.

“About this New York trip...” I start, because I have been meaning to talk to them both about it. And especially now. The next few months are not going to be great for Lacy, and I want to do everything I can to make her smile. I just wish I knew what was going on so I could fix it.

26

## LACY

I look around the room. I feel a bit cold, but I take a deep breath and put my big girl panties on. I left Mom in the care of Jennifer this morning, after she made me a nice bowl of warm oats while I got ready, acting like the auntie I never had. It has been about a week since she came into our lives, and already there is a difference. I don’t feel as rushed; I don’t feel like I need to do everything, and my stress levels have lowered. Mom is happier, too. Jennifer shares her love for romance books, so I think they talk for hours about that.

I sped out the door this morning to get here, my usual Saturday routine disrupted to come to Williamstown to donate blood for the first time.

Hudson wanted to drive me, but I needed to do this on my own. Something he wasn’t happy about, so he arranged a car and driver to bring me. I couldn’t refute it because the shiny new car pulled up in my driveway just as I was walking out the door. His timing is impeccable.

“Well, this is not what I was expecting this morning.”

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“Let me,” she says as I pull back just an inch, and she grabs the hem of her top, pulling it from her frame. Following suit, I rip the remaining buttons from my shirt as I pull it open and off my shoulders.

We don’t wait before her hands land on my bare torso, nails digging in as I cup her breast. Molding it in my palm, my lips slam back onto hers, my other hand gripping her face and keeping her close. Her lips are warm and wanting against my own as her hands hit my belt, undoing it quickly.

“Are you sure you want this, Lacy?” I ask, because even though I know she does, I want to hear it.

“Yes. I want this. I want you,” she says, her chest pushing against mine as my fingers unbutton her jeans. My breathing labored, my skin prickles at feeling her bare body next to mine.

“Are you sure?” she asks, cheeks flushed just as I drop my jeans, kicking off my boots in the process.

“Fuck, I have never wanted any woman more than I do you right now,” I tell her honestly before I swallow her smile, my tongue tangling with hers. Lowering her zipper, I push her jeans over her fantastic ass, and she shimmies them down, her underwear going with them as I drop to my knees.

“Wow,” she pants, seeing me kneeling before her. Her bare pussy is right in front of me, and my mouth waters at the sight. I lean forward and flatten my tongue, taking a taste of her that has me groaning. Looking up, I watch her head fall back against the

wall as her hands thread through my hair.

“Oh shit,” she breathes out, and I smile before I fully dive in. Her legs widen as she releases a whimper, leaning against the front door in nothing but a flimsy lace bra that does little to cover her round breasts. I lick her clit, circling it a little with my tongue as my hands glide up her bare legs, stopping at her ass, where I grab her thigh and pull her to me.

I moan against her pussy, relishing the feel of her on my tongue, my lips, my face as her hips start to grind. God, I could eat her all day.

“Oh... yes... yessssss” She bites her lower lip before she starts to pant. Her fingers stretch on my scalp, pulling at my hair as her hips move more and more against my face. Her confidence with me rises each time we’re together. She has grown her butterfly wings, and she’s fucking magnificent with them.

I suck on her clit a little, teasing her before lapping her more, over and over in perfect rhythm.

“Shit, I’m close... Hudson.” As her hips move faster, I know she will explode soon so I flick her clit with my tongue, before I suck on it hard, feeling her legs tremble in my hold.

“Hudson! Oh my God, Hudson!” she screams as her whole body starts to shake, and she comes on my tongue right here against my front door. “Yes, yes... Oooh...” Her voice quivers as she comes down from her high, and I slow my pace, kissing her center, enjoying the feel of her on my face and lips. Her soft bare skin is so smooth and silky; it’s my new addiction.

“I think your pussy is my new obsession,” I tell her as I skirt my finger gently up and down her opening, not able to resist feeling her and admiring as her body convulses a

little at my teasing touch.

“That is such a great stress reliever...” she moans as her head falls forward, and she looks down at me. I see her face free of tension, fears, and responsibilities, and I smile. I have taken the edge off, and now we get to have fun.

I stand, picking her up by her thighs, and I squeeze her ass in my palms as she hooks her legs around my waist, her bare pussy now warm against my pelvis.

“I can walk, you know...” she teases, and I kiss her bare shoulder.

“Don’t care. I like to carry you.”

Her lips find mine as I turn and run us upstairs. I can’t see where I’m going, entirely consumed by this woman, but I find my room and walk inside before I peel her from me and throw her onto the bed.

“And throw me around?” She laughs, as I crawl onto the bed after her. Quickly removing her bra, she tosses it across the room.

I pause, taking her in. Totally naked, on my bed, in my house.

“Hudson?” she questions, her gaze searching mine as I look back into her eyes. A new, more intent hunger unlocks at the need I see reflected back at me, and I’m immediately on her.

“Fuck, you are beautiful, Lacy,” I tell her before my mouth captures hers.

Our movements become frantic, like we have been dying for each other for years, and I feel her hands coast down my chest to my waist, before they land on the waistband of my underwear, the last piece of clothing between us.

“You are so hard...” she murmurs against my lips as she pushes down my underwear. My cock springs up hard against my stomach, and before I understand what is happening, she wraps her hand around my length and gives me a few pumps.

“Lacy,” I growl, pressing my forehead against hers as I look down at where she holds me. Precum already glistens as she runs her thumb over the tip, slowly pumping me some more.

“You are so big...” Her sweetly spoken words have me thickening more in her palm.

“Lacy,” I say in a warning because I’m right on the edge. How can I not be? I have the perfect woman underneath me. Entirely naked. With limited reserves left, I lean over to my side table and grab a condom from the drawer as her hand continues to move up and down my shaft languidly, exploring, and it feels fucking amazing.

I sit back on my heels and rip open a condom, watching her watching me as I sheath myself.

“How's that no dating going for you?” I tease as I hover over her again, positioning myself between her legs. Feeling her warm, wet pussy, I slide my cock up and down her folds, the action already making her squirm and whimper.

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“Is that what this is? Just another date?” she questions just as playfully as I edge inside her. She exhales shakily, and her head pushes back into the pillow as she welcomes me in inch by inch. I’m not a small man, and she has to stretch around me, but I grit my teeth, taking it slow.

“No, this is me making you mine,” I say as I pull out a little and push back in, quicker this time. She bites her bottom lip just as I feel her hips lift to take me deeper, and I growl at her eagerness. It makes it harder for me to restrain myself.

“Yours?” she says breathily, looking back up at me, her hands gliding up my bare forearms to my shoulders, her fingers caressing my neck.

“Mine,” I confirm, and she smiles as I thrust into her all the way.

“Hudson!” she gasps, her body arching into the mattress as her breasts push up against my naked chest. I lower my head and take her nipple into my mouth. “Make me yours.”

Her pleading statement is like music to my ears, and my thrusts quicken as I scoop my hands around her waist, lifting her hips as I start to piston. Both of us moan in unison.

“Fuck, I love your pussy.” Our skin slaps as her hands fly up above her head, using the headboard for leverage as her legs widen for me.

“Oooh, shit... Hudson... You’re so deep, so good...”



“Wrap your legs around me, baby. Put them around my waist nice and tight,” I tell her, and she does, her legs locking my hips in, as I move my hand and start to circle her clit with my thumb. Her panting increases as our hunger does, chasing our orgasms within each other.

She pants and moans as I continue to thrust into her, looking down at her perfect body. Her breasts bounce in time with my thrusts, her mouth dropped open, her head pushed back, and her fingers white-knuckled.

“There you go, just like that. Clench around my cock, baby,” I murmur, feeling my release simmering just at the surface as she does just that. I’m not sure sex has ever felt this good.

Her eyes open and she looks right at me, her smile small as her panting increases.

“Yesssss,” she whisper-moans, and I know she’s close because her hips are moving rapidly against mine, the two of us so frantic the sounds of our skin slapping could almost be comical.

“So perfect. So fucking perfect. You going to come on my cock?” I grit out, barely able to say the words.

She hums, out of breath.

“Be a good girl, Lacy. Let go for me.”

“Yes... Yes... Yes!” she screams as her head pushes back into the mattress and her hips push flush against mine, pussy fluttering around me.

“Fuck,” I shout, coming almost immediately as she does. “Damn, baby.” I let go, my release so hard my vision turns fuzzy, but through it all, our eyes stay only on each

other.

28

LACY

Hudson's body is warm and heavy lying on me, his hard breaths into my neck soothing. Our skin is coated in sweat, our hearts thumping madly, but for the first time in a long time, I'm truly happy.

"Lacy... Baby," he moans, kissing my shoulder, and my grin widens as he moves. "Give me a moment." Pecking my lips, he slides off the bed and into the bathroom, and I place my palm to my heart, resting it, hoping to calm it a little.

"You look happy?" he asks from where he is watching me in the doorway, and only now do I take the time to drink him in. I try to talk, but my mouth opens and no sound comes out as he stalks toward me, completely naked, and I get the full view of Doctor Hudson Hamilton.

"Cat got your tongue?" he teases as he slides back next to me, the condom now taken care of.

"I prefer dogs," I murmur, and he grins.

"Butterflies and dogs. I got it," he says, nodding, his smile genuine.

"And giraffes. I really like them," I say quietly as his hand coasts up my bare stomach and over my pebbling nipple. My body feels liquid, a soothing buzz simmering over my skin at his touch. I have just had two orgasms. Two. Never has that ever happened before, so I'm unsure how my body is burning up for him again already. But it is.

“Giraffes really like you too,” he murmurs, then leans forward and kisses me, softly and tenderly, almost like we are trying to freeze this moment in time.

“So this is your room...” I comment as he leans up on his side, his head resting on his elbow, watching me. Going at my pace, just like he said we would.

“For the time being, until we move into our new place,” he says, and I let my eyes wander. It’s massive, the bed itself bigger than I even knew was possible to make. His windows are large, the late afternoon sun warming the room, and thick luxurious drapes hang on either side. The carpet is soft and warm underfoot, and the decor is what I think Victoria would call luxe minimalist in tones of grays and whites. Not to mention, the bed is the softest I have ever experienced.

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“It’s nice,” I tell him, stretching out my limbs as he continues to draw soft circles on my chest, his hands never once leaving my skin.

“It looks better now that you are in it.” His smirk is evident, delight dancing in his eyes. “I like having you in my bed, Lacy. I like spending time with you outside it as well,” he says honestly.

“Well, that’s good because I don’t just share my special Saturday sundae with just anyone,” I tease, and he laughs.

“Come, let’s take a shower, then I want to cook you dinner.”

I almost balk in disbelief. No one has cooked me dinner before. Not like this. Sure, some people drop off casseroles for Mom and me on occasion, especially when she’s sick. And Jennifer is amazing in the kitchen. But outside of the chicken soup Hudson arranged from Rochelle the other week, it’s been a long time since someone else cooked for me.

“Cook me dinner?” I wonder if I heard him right.

“Yeah. A king cooks for his queen. I might even feed it to you as well...” His words are laced with innuendo.

“You are a charmer, Doctor Hamilton.” I sit up and he takes my hand, leading me into the bathroom, which is almost the same size as his bedroom.

“I meant what I said earlier, Lacy...” he says as he leans into the massive shower and

turns on the water. I watch it steam up instantly and look around, wondering if this is a shower that caters to the elderly or disabled due to its size, but with the lack of handrails, I assume this is just how billionaires bathe. It makes my bathroom look like a kids' camp shower.

“And what was that?” I ask as I step into the water, heat encasing me immediately, and my muscles relax as I feel him step in behind me. His chest is hard against my back as the water cascades over us.

“You are mine,” he murmurs in my ear, the feeling of his words and his breath coating my skin in goosebumps as I lean my head back against his chest.

“I like being yours...” I whisper, as his hands coast up and down my naked sides, his fingers skirting my curves, his lips peppering my shoulders. His hands run up my chest, and he cups my breasts, the water flowing down them as his fingers mold them in his strong palms.

“Good.” He grabs the loofah and some soap and runs it across my body. It feels heavenly and calming, and I turn in his arms so I can do the same to him.

“You know you can tell me anything, right?” he asks, and I look at him and swallow. I need to. I need to tell him about college, my professor, but not yet. Not now.

“I know.” I nod, smiling, trying to reassure him. I can tell he's concerned and maybe I didn't hide it well enough all this time. I clear my throat and look at his body.

“So, you need to tell me about these,” I say, letting my hands skim across his naked torso, looking at the artwork that adorns his chest almost completely. He lifts his hands to lean against the wall behind me, almost caging me in. I continue to soap down his body, before I wrap my hands around his length, him feeling thick and heavy in my palm.

“Hmmmm. It's a bit hard to concentrate when your hands are on me like that.” He’s eyeing me like he wants to eat me whole, and I giggle but then feel a little woozy.

“Lacy?” Hudson’s voice is harsh, and I look back up at him.

“Are you okay?” he asks, standing back a little, changing the heat of the water to be cooler.

“I’m okay,” I say as I shake my head.

“Your pupils are a little dilated.” Turning off the shower quickly, he grabs a towel.

“I just feel a little lightheaded,” I tell him quietly as I rub my eyes, seeing spots.

“Here.” Wrapping me in a large soft bath towel, he picks me up, feeling like I weigh nothing and am snuggled into a cloud.

“Carrying me again?” I try to tease, but the concern etched into his brow tells me he’s not in the teasing mood anymore.

“Rest here. Let me get you some cool water,” he says, striding around the room still entirely naked, water dripping from his frame, to a small fridge in a cupboard I didn’t even notice earlier. Walking back, I see him cracking open the bottle of water as I take in a deep breath, my skin cooling and the spots leaving my vision.

“Here, drink,” he says, sitting on the bed, and I take the bottle from him and do as he says.

“After your blood donation today, I should have been more careful. I’m sorry,” he says, looking remorseful.

“I’m fine. A little lightheadedness is nothing new.” I wave my hand at him to ease his concern.

“Nothing new?” he asks tentatively, and I balk.

“Sometimes I feel a little faint, but it’s just because I’m so busy,” I tell him, again trying to act like it’s nothing, and his frown deepens.

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“I feel selfish just thinking about it,” I tell her honestly, because it’s such a first-world problem.

“Not at all. Lacy, you have been through so much,” Victoria says, and I take a deep breath and nod, sipping the champagne and feeling the bubbles dance on my tongue, keeping my mouth closed. She doesn’t know about college. No one does.

“It wasn’t until I met Hudson that I felt like I was anyone’s first choice or first thought or first anything.”

“I can’t imagine what that feels like,” she says, sorrow in her eyes, and I give her a smile, not needing any more pity.

“It’s fine. I’m used to it.” I wave her off, trying to lighten the tone of the conversation, which got serious quickly.

“That’s why you have been doing everything yourself, isn’t it?” she asks, looking at me.

“What do you mean?” I take another sip, needing the liquid courage.

“Well, you felt like there was no one in your corner? No one you could rely on? No one there to catch anything or do anything or handle anything.”

I stay silent and give her a nod.

“Hmmm, and then sexy Hudson Hamilton came to town and swept you off your feet



and is starting to make you feel like he could be the one who takes care of everything?" She says the same words Hudson has said to me a couple of times, and I swallow.

"I mean, I'm independent. I don't need a man..." I start to say.

"Maybe not. But you are allowed to want one. You are allowed to enjoy Hudson, spend time with him, laugh with him, have hot, sweaty sex with him..." she says, hitching her eyebrow, and I can't help the wide smile that spreads across my face at her words.

"I knew it! You've gotten down and dirty with the new doctor. Okay, I need details, and please do not skip anything, because this is normal, Lacy. Wanting a man, being giggly over a new romance, and you, my friend, deserve it more than anyone."

The guilt of putting myself first still lingers, but I know she's right. This is all normal and I deserve it just as much as anyone else.

So I tell her everything. I give her an update on my life, all the while holding the jar of cherries, not once thinking about the stress of leaving my mom, and my smile never leaves my face.

30

LACY

"Oh, we should totally get that," Victoria says to me as I try on a new little black dress. We have shopped and eaten our way around the city this week, all the while partaking in one spa treatment per day and making notes for the development of our own Whiteman's spa back at the distillery.

“Agree. It will match those hot black heels you got yesterday,” Victoria’s friend, Fiona, says from where she is sitting, bags at her feet from her own shopping today.

“It’s a bit out of my price range...”

All week us girls have had a blast, and it’s the most fun I’ve ever had. I’ve spoken to Mom every day and she’s thriving. Apparently, Jennifer joined her at the knitting club in town, and the two of them have not only been knitting a new blanket for next winter, but Mom is now even more embedded into the community, meeting new ladies and old ones, bringing her more support than she’s ever had.

“Not true. It’s on sale,” Victoria says, pulling at a sign in the store that says thirty percent off everything. I smile. I’ve indulged more than I ordinarily would this week. On everything. I have a few new outfits, feel like I have put on ten pounds due to the restaurants we’ve been eating at thanks to the work expense account, and Fiona and Victoria took me to a moody cocktail bar last night. Fiona met some man here a while ago and was hopeful she might see him again. He didn’t turn up, but we did make our way through a pretty extensive cocktail list, the slight thump in my head a reminder of our time.

“Okay, done. This is the last thing I’m buying, though. I have officially gone over budget,” I tell them, my small savings taking a little hit, but nothing that I can’t make up for once I get back to work.

“I think your new doctor will like seeing you in this,” Fiona teases, and I smile as I look at my reflection. The dress fits like a glove, but that isn’t what catches my eye. It’s my face. The dark circles that were always around my eyes have lessened. My skin looks brighter, probably due to the facials and massages. My shoulders are lower and pushed back, posture tall, my body appearing more confident.

“From what I’ve heard, I think Hudson would prefer it off her body...” Victoria says

under her breath, just loud enough for us to hear. I look at her quickly as Fiona giggles, and they seem like they have sort of private joke happening.

“Ahhh, anything you care to share?” I ask because, clearly, she knows something.

“Nope. Nothing. But we do need to get going. We have that other spa at three.”

“Oh my God, I love my job...” I murmur to Victoria as the elevator takes us up to Tanner's penthouse after an afternoon of total bliss. The massage today covered me in warm oil, and I'm so relaxed I can barely keep my eyes open.

“Me too,” she says as the elevator opens, and we walk inside.

“What's going on?” I balk, seeing all our bags packed and waiting near the door.

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Here, on the Upper East Side, with uninterrupted views of Central Park, I had my staff pack the kitchen with food and stock the bar with whiskey and wine. I felt pride as I showed Lacy around my city home, watching her eyes alight with admiration for my high ceilings and polished finishes.

Now as the sun sets, I wait for her at my bar. Two fingers of Whiteman's in my hand, I shoot off a few emails on my cell as she gets ready for our date. I had a team of stylists from Saks do some shopping, and I filled half of my closet with clothes for her because I wasn't sure what she had brought with her. I had the second bedroom rearranged into a dressing room, so she had her own bathroom if she wanted and her own space to utilize. I have two other guest rooms, so it isn't like I needed the bed.

My plan is to take Lacy out for dinner at a Michelin star restaurant. I know she loves food, and it's one of the best in the city. So I ensured the stylist included some evening dresses, but also jeans and casual clothes for tomorrow. Victoria told me I needed options, so I did as Lacy's friend said and practically purchased the entire store. Her cell is here next to me, as is her purse and her lip gloss, and it vibrates, catching my attention. A number is on the screen, and it's somewhat familiar, but I can't place it as the ringing ends and goes to voicemail.

"Since you didn't tell me where we're going, I just picked a dress that I thought you would like." Her voice penetrates through the quietness of my open-plan living room, and I look up, needing to grip on to the bar in front of me for stability at the sight.

"I think I need to cancel our reservation," I murmur as I stand, throw back the remaining whiskey, then stride toward her.

“You don’t like it?” she asks, frowning, looking down at herself.

“On the contrary. I just don’t want any other man looking at you tonight, and in this dress, every pair of eyes in the city will be on you,” I tell her as my eyes travel down her body and back up as I come to stand in front of her. She looks fucking breathtaking. The dress compliments her feminine shape, highlighting the curves of her hips, her voluptuous breasts, and her amazing ass.

“I can change?” she asks, a slight tease in her tone, and my nostrils flare as I look at her face. Her skin is fresh and glowing, makeup minimal, except for some bright-red lipstick, which I want coating my cock later. Under the light, her eyes dazzle and hair shines, slicked back into a tight low bun at the nape of her neck.

“You look stunning, Lacy,” I tell her seriously, my voice deep as my eyes do another canvas of her body. The red satin dress is long, grazing the floor and skimming over her body like water. Held up by two thin straps over her shoulders, I can tell she isn’t wearing a bra, and I reach out, smoothing my hand up the soft fabric at her hips, not feeling any underwear underneath either.

“It isn’t really underwear friendly...” she whispers as I bow my head to meet hers, our noses almost touching.

“You are making it very hard for us to leave.” I hold back a groan as my fingers walk up the fabric at her upper thigh.

“If we don’t leave, we’ll be late...” Her breath quickens as my nose nudges hers, but I keep my lips just an inch away from her glossy red pout. My eyes stay pinned on hers as my fingers gather the soft fabric in my hand, lifting it up her leg.

“I have missed you this week, Lacy baby,” I croon as my fingers trail her warm skin, from her upper thigh to her hips, confirming she is not wearing anything under this

dress.

“How much?” she teases, the warm breath of her words hitting my lips as they hover dangerously close to her own. I skirt my hand around the front of her hip to feel her bare pussy, and she whimpers at the soft touch.

“Just as much as you have missed me, it appears,” I murmur as I slide my finger along her folds, feeling her wetness. I spread it around as she grabs on to my forearms for balance.

“Hudson... the dress...” she warns, but I wrap my other hand around her waist to hold on to her, my fingers now circling her clit. My pants grow tighter, my dick now rock solid.

“Don’t move and the dress will be fine. Stay completely still, Lacy.” I circle her clit over and over again, pulling breathy moans from her throat. Her forehead meets mine, her chest rising and falling more quickly.

“I can’t...” she pants, as she leans forward into my hold, and I squeeze her tight.

“You can. Stand still. Feel my fingers fucking you.” I push inside her warm center, first with one finger, then with two.

She moans, our eyes still pinned to each other, her panting, me gritting my teeth so hard they might crack.

“Fuck, I missed your pussy,” I growl, swallowing as my mouth waters just thinking about it. My palm moves, rubbing against her clit, my fingers thrusting at a slow, sensual rhythm.

“It missed you too...” she breathes out, and I feel her body starting to shake in my

arms.

“This is just to take the edge off, baby, until we get home later,” I murmur, and I hear her take a sharp intake of breath as her head lolls back. She pants my name, gripping me tighter as I thrust harder and bring my lips to her ear. “I’m gonna make you come so hard you feel me for days.”

“Hudson!” she cries out, her mouth opening in the perfect red ‘O’ as she grinds down on my hand. As she shakes and pulses, I pinch her clit, relishing how she comes undone in my hands.

“That’s it... Good girl,” I purr as her head falls forward and meets my forehead again. She whimpers when I remove my hand and let her dress flutter to the floor, her eyes opening to look right into mine. Bringing my hand to my mouth, I lick my fingers clean, watching a renewed hunger flare in her gaze.

“Now we are ready to go,” I tell her with a smile, one she returns, and we walk out of the penthouse down to my waiting town car, her steps a little unsteady and me with a raging hard-on.

32

LACY

“So I’m guessing you love the dress?” I tease him as I hold his hand and step out of the car. This town car is luxurious, the driver in a proper suit, now parked right outside the restaurant. A small breeze skirts across my bare shoulders as Hudson hooks his fingers in mine and lifts my hand to his lips.

“I’m going to love it even more when I get to take it off you and see your beautiful body,” he murmurs against my skin, just loud enough for me to hear, and the heat I

felt before is now back with full force. I was flushed moments ago in the car and tried to put myself back together as best I could after he brought me to an orgasm with his fingers. It was unexpected, hot as hell, and left me feeling more relaxed than any massage ever could.



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I still can't believe I have a few days off. I haven't taken any leave from the distillery since I started, and any spare moments I get, I'm managing things for Mom, so a day or two in the city with Hudson is really special. I have already spoken to Mom this afternoon, and she's doing well, so I'm letting myself just go with it all and enjoy every moment.

"There were a lot of dresses to choose from. You didn't have to buy all those clothes," I admonish him as we walk across the sidewalk. I frown a little, thinking about it all. The closet was full of female clothes, all new and still with tags. All in my size. I know Victoria helped him, but I still feel overwhelmed and left the tags on everything so they can be returned. The gifts are too much, too expensive, and not something I can ever pay back.

"Take what you want back to Whispers and leave the rest here for when we come back," he says like this is my life and we will just spend our time between the two places. My heart skips a beat at the thought. Could this be my life? The more time I spend with Hudson, the more I'm falling for him. The glimpses I'm getting of what it would be like doing life with him fill me with excitement and joy, from fancy dinners in New York to helping Harvey with homework back in Whispers. As the restaurant door opens and we step inside, I push those thoughts to the side.

"Mr. Hamilton. Welcome back, sir." A man in a three-piece suit greets us. "Right this way."

We follow him through the restaurant to a table for two down the back, away from prying eyes.

“People are looking at us,” I murmur, my cheeks heating as every pair of eyes in the room turns our way. I look around and while we are dressed formally, so is everyone else.

“They are looking at you, wondering how I managed to get someone so young and beautiful on my arm,” Hudson says, smiling like he doesn’t have a care in the world. We haven’t talked much about our age difference, primarily because it doesn’t seem to matter to either of us anymore. But I’m aware of how young I look, and while thirty-six isn’t old, Hudson does look a little older and certainly very distinguished, so people will come to their own natural conclusion on that.

“Are you flirting with me, Doctor Hamilton?” I toy with him as we arrive at our table. I like feeling like this. Carefree, natural. Just a girl with her man, enjoying life without the daily stresses that compress me in Whispers.

He holds out my chair for me to sit, and when I do, he leans over and kisses my bare shoulder. Shivers skitter around my body at the touch before he takes his own seat opposite me.

“Is it working?” he asks with a quirked eyebrow, and I laugh as the waiter leaves us with the menus.

“You don’t need to flirt. You had me at for good,” I tell him, the honesty whipping from me so suddenly, I feel my cheeks blush.

“For good?” he questions, confused.

“The first words you said when you were sitting in my armchair the first week you were home.” Feeling nervous at my admission, my breath catches, and a feeling of warmth spreads through me. I watch Hudson thinking, his lips relaxing into a small smile and his eyes dancing in delight. I feel a little vulnerable, and I swallow roughly,

waiting for his response.

“I wanted to see you that day. While I knew I needed to check your mom, it was you I really wanted to see,” he says, and my mouth opens a little in surprise before I smile even wider.

“Champagne, sir?” The waiter appears at our side.

“I think so. I feel the need to celebrate,” Hudson tells him. His eyes don't waver from mine as he grabs my hand in his on the table, his thumb brushing across my skin.

“What are we celebrating?” I ask as I take my glass and he takes his.

“To the start of something pretty special.” Lifting his glass in a cheers, I copy him, my stomach fluttering at the look in his eyes.

“To the start of something special,” I say, grinning like a fool. That's exactly what it feels like. The start of our lives together. I take a sip, the bubbles dancing on my tongue, and Hudson orders us dinner. Again, thinking of me and my needs by ordering us two steaks, because they are good for my iron levels.

I take the last sip of the French champagne as I finish off my meal. I haven't eaten out at a restaurant like this before. In college, I worked at the local dive bar, and back home, the closest place to eat out is the diner or Whiteman's Bar. The restaurants Victoria and I visited this week were nice, but nothing like this. This restaurant is next level. If Jolene could see me now, her stare would be searing. She would be green with jealousy.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Hudson asks, leaning back in his chair and watching me closely.

I give him a small smile. “Just thinking about Whispers,” I tell him honestly, and he smiles as his phone vibrates. He checks it quickly before his smile widens and he laughs.

“What?” I ask, smiling automatically.

“Connor. He hates me because I’m here with you and he has just flown in so he can do the treatment tomorrow and then spend the weekend.”

I giggle at that, and Hudson looks at me curiously, his smile still wide. “What?”

“It’s just...” I start to say, my laughter interrupting my words. “Tomorrow’s treatment is a little different from the others.” I’m already imagining Connor and what’s going to happen tomorrow.

“Different?” Hudson asks, pocketing his phone. “Different how?” Sitting forward, he grabs my hand on the table, his focus entirely on me.

“Well, Victoria and I planned to try something totally out of left field... Tomorrow’s treatment is a sound healing massage, followed by yoga flow at this small wellness center on the outskirts of town,” I explain, and he pauses for a bit before he throws his head back and barks out a loud laugh.

I can’t help but laugh along with him, and a few people nearby glance at us.

“Ohhh, I would pay money to be a fly on that wall,” Hudson says, cackling, wiping his eyes.

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“I just feel sorry for the therapist.” Connor is going to hate every minute of it. “He’s probably expecting an hour-long relaxation massage, not something like sound healing.”

“Yoga is going to be like hell for him,” Hudson agrees, still smirking.

“I’m surprised he came,” I say, my hand now warm and tingling from his touch.

“Well, the Jets play tomorrow night, so he was keen to sit in his suite to watch the game,” Hudson says, and I roll my eyes. Connor is such a boy. Whiskey, football, and women are his priorities. In that exact order.

“Dessert for you,” the waiter interrupts, and I sit back as he places a small slice of cherry pie onto the middle of the table with a scoop of vanilla ice cream.

“Cherries?” I say to Hudson as the waiter leaves us again.

“Every time I think of cherries, I think of you.” He picks up a spoon and points it at me.

“They are delicious,” I tell him, grinning. The cherry pie before me looks amazing, and my mouth is already watering.

“You’re delicious,” he murmurs as I grab a spoon and take a bite. It tastes just as good as it looks, and the fire in Hudson's eyes burns me up in the best way.

“Hmmmm, there is that flirting again,” I hum as we slowly eat the pie, the

temperature between us only escalating.

“I’m not flirting, I’m being completely factual. There is nothing else I would rather eat,” he says too smoothly, and I fail to breathe.

“Than me?” I ask quietly, my eyebrow raised.

“Than you,” he confirms, his sexy smirk only growing at my shy reaction. I readjust in my seat as my pussypulses at his words. He is so good at that, and now it’s all I want.

“I think we should call it a night.” Putting down my spoon, I wipe my lips teasingly slow with my napkin.

“Check, please?” Hudson says with a raise of his hand, and the waitstaff scramble. He stands immediately, eyes on mine as he takes my hand, and we are out the door in under ten seconds flat.

33

HUDSON

We push through the door to my penthouse like we have just been unleashed.

“This fucking dress,” I growl, pulling it from her shoulders. The fabric is so light and dainty, it glides to the floor, leaving her completely fucking naked in nothing but a pair of gold strappy stilettos that do something to my insides that has my knees nearly buckling.

“You like the shoes too?” she hums, and my eyes flick from her feet to her eyes. The smug look of satisfaction is about to be fucked right off her face.

“You’re teasing me,” I growl. As I rip the dinner jacket from my shoulders and slam my lips into hers, her hands cup my face, pulling me to her.

“I like teasing you,” she murmurs against my lips as I grab my shirt and rip it open, buttons flying across the room. I yank it from my body, not giving a shit that I just ruined it.

Her hands are already opening my belt, and I kick off my shoes as our lips continue to consume each other, our need evident, like a palpable presence surrounding us. I’ve been hard for her since we left for the restaurant, and now I’m almost at the boiling point.

“I like everything about you,” I groan as I kiss down her neck. She unzips my pants, and they quickly join her dress on the floor at our feet. I don’t stop my lips as I kiss down her chest, taking a nipple in my mouth and sucking as she pushes down my underwear, me walking her farther into my penthouse. The two of us are now naked, the only thing on her body the high gold heels that I want digging into my back.

“Oh God, I need you...” she says with such a lustful desire as her eyes take me in, and I feel like the fucking Hulk.

“You’ve got me.” I grip on to the back of her thighs, lifting her to me. Her legs wrap around my middle with ease as I walk us a few steps to the windows. The city lights sparkle below, and she inhales a sharp breath as the bare skin of her back touches the cool glass panel. Her nipples pebble, goosebumps littering her soft skin, her face glowing, and I can’t wait another second to run my lips over every inch of her, licking, tasting, kissing all over.

“You’re mine, Lacy baby. All mine,” I grit out, feeling almost feral. The two of us are so urgent for each other we have left a trail of clothes on the ground in our wake, our hands gripping and exploring, lips kissing wherever we can reach as we pant. But

the words are not a lie. She is mine. In every way possible. I'm completely enamored by this woman, feeling with certainty that she is the one. The one person who was put on this earth for me.

"Fuck me, Hudson," she begs, and that is all the invitation I need before I position myself at her core. Her legs tighten around me slightly, and I slide into her easily, feeling like I'm truly where I belong.

"Oh God," she exhales as her head falls back against the window, and I start to move in earnest. I'm demanding, my hips pushing against hers, the sensations almost overwhelming with her wrapped around me.

"So perfect, Lacy. You are so fucking perfect." My teeth gnash together when she moans beautifully in response, because I don't want to come too soon. I'm not sure if it was the champagne or the fact that we are somewhere new and different and out of Whispers, but she's totally relaxed tonight and getting more confident with me by the second. Her body jolts against the glass with every one of my thrusts, her hands threading into my hair, the familiar sting at my scalp turning me on even more.



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“Let me guess, he knew this? He knew that you were a scholarship kid?”

“I hadn’t thought about that before, but yes. Yes, he would have seen that on my record.” I nod. “So I went to his office to meet him and discuss my grades. I was panicking because I didn’t want to fail, and I only had one semester left. I was so close to graduating. But I was also so scared...”

“What happened then?” Hudson asks, then gets up off the sofa and starts to pace the living room. I grab a cushion and bring it to my front, cuddling it before I continue.

“I went to his office and took a seat. He went through my grades, and none of it made sense. He said I was failing from the start of the semester, but that wasn’t possible because I passed everything up until I started skipping. So he must have gone back through and lowered my grades. He told me that the only way those grades would be changed back so I could pass his class was if I showed him my gratitude,” I say, and Hudson stops pacing to look right at me.

“What the fuck?” He’s not happy about any of this, that much is clear. I squeeze the cushion tighter, feeling extremely vulnerable, my heart pounding, but I know I need to push through.

“I didn’t know what to do or what to say, so I just sat there quietly. Scared. Shocked. My body almost couldn’t move. I felt like a deer caught in headlights or something. He stood up and walked toward me, leaned over my chair, and ran his hands through my hair. Then he said that a good first step would be for me to get on my knees... and... and then he started to undo his belt.” My voice quivers as my anxiety makes it feel like I’m shaking from the inside out. I squeeze my eyes shut, but it doesn’t help

because all I see is the visual of him that day. Hearing it all out loud makes me feel sick to the core. I've had it so bottled up for so long, my therapist the only person who knows.

Hudson remains quiet, staring at me in what looks like shock and rage.

“When I heard the clink of his belt, full-blown panic took over my body, and I bolted up from the chair. The movement caught him by surprise, because he stumbled back, not expecting it. His pants were around his ankles, so he kinda tripped but caught himself on the desk. It gave me enough room to rush past him to the door, but...” I have to pause as my eyes water.

Hudson rushes to me, kneeling on the floor at my feet, grabbing on to my hands and pulling me close to his chest as my tears start to fall.

“He had locked the door,” I choke out. “I didn’t realize he had. He must have done that when I walked in for the meeting. I just got it open when he slammed it shut and crowded me against the door. I could feel him... hard... on my back, and he buried his head into my neck and sniffed me. And then he said that I could go, but I wasn’t to say a word to anyone; otherwise, my mother would not survive her next round of treatment and that he also expected to see me in class the following week.” It isn’t until I finish the story that I feel my cheeks are wet and I’m fully sobbing. Hudson holds me tight, rubbing his hands up and down my back.

“It’s okay. I’m here, you’re safe. Lacy baby, I’ve got you,” he whispers, and my breaths calm little by little. Pulling back from him, I dry my eyes.

“I’m fine. It’s just a lot to revisit,” I explain, feeling that our romantic last night in New York is now ruined.

“What happened after that?” Hudson asks, and I shake my head.

“As soon as I left his office, I went straight to the administration team and told them I needed to finish my remaining subjects remotely due to my mother’s ill health. It was all on record that I might need to do that anyway, given her condition, and so I swapped to all online professors, moved back home, and I never saw him again.”

“So you never went back for your graduation ceremony?” Hudson asks, and I shake my head once more. Wearing the black robe and hat is a rite of passage for every college student, but there was no way I was setting foot back at that college.

“And you never told anyone?”

“There’s no point. There are no witnesses, and no one would believe me over him,” I say, my tone one of dejection.

“Is that who messaged you that day in my kitchen? You got a message and your face just went white,” he asks, and I nod slowly. “Connor mentioned that you got flowers at the office?”

I swallow roughly and nod, knowing this is only going to upset him more.

“He sends me letters, emails...” I start to say, and Hudson’s expression turns furious.

“He still contacts you?”

“All the time. Calls me, texts me, but the flowers were new. He hasn’t done that before...” I tell him as nausea rolls through me.

“His behavior is escalating,” Hudson says, thinking to himself for a moment.

The silence makes me nervous, so I can’t help but blurt, “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you earlier, I just—”

“Don’t apologize. Everything in your own time, Lacy. But I’m here for you. I want you to know that.”

I take in a deep breath, feeling a little lighter for sharing as I look into his eyes and see the support and protectiveness there.

“I know some people at that college. What was his name?”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s in the past. I don’t want to ever think about it again. But I wanted to be honest with you.”

“He is still trying to contact you, Lacy—hell, unwanted calls, emails, and now flowers. It isn’t right.”

I know what he is saying is true, but I just can’t think about it. “I can’t...” I whisper, my heart pounding.

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“But what if he is doing this to someone else? Someone who doesn’t have the courage to leave like you did?”

That has my pulse stuttering as goosebumps pepper my skin.

“I hadn’t thought of that. But it’s only my word against his. He’s one of their top professors, and I’m just a scholarship kid.”

Hudson’s shoulders are rigid with tension as his eyes bore into mine with intention. “I will get everyone at that college fucking fired.”

I’m shaking my head as I respond, unable to process all this. “I know how frustrating, horrible, and sick it is. But I just can’t deal with it, with everything happening with Mom and work being so busy. Besides, it’s just me against him. I can’t win that battle.”

“It’s no longer just you, Lacy baby. You have me firmly in your corner. I’m here to support you with anything you need. I have access to the top lawyers, powerful people. I will make him pay. All I need is a name,” Hudson says, and I think about his words.

“He wants me to go back, do a face-to-face semester over the summer.” I huff a laugh because he might be a professor, but he is somewhat delusional if he thinks I will ever see him again.

“That’s so out of line. You do know none of it is your fault. He was preying on you. Hell, he still is, by the sounds of it. I want to bury him. Just give me a name. Just say

the word.” He looks about ready to jump up off the sofa again and start calling the police himself.

“Let me think about it,” I say quietly, needing time to sit with my thoughts and get a handle on my emotions. I don’t want to dig up the past, but if there is another woman going through what I did, or even worse, then I wouldn’t wish that on anyone.

“But Hudson... please, promise me you won’t say or do anything? Promise me you won’t tell a soul, and if I decide to do something about it, I will come to you, and we can do it together. But promise you won’t do anything without me,” I almost beg him.

Hudson sighs as he looks at me, perplexed and obviously struggling, before he nods.

“I promise. I won’t do anything until you are ready.”

I nod, grateful to now drop the subject. But I’m relieved I told him. There is nothing between us now. He knows all of me, and I know all of him.

35

LACY

Imoan, feeling every inch of my sore muscles, but feeling well rested as the faint glow of light hits my eyes. It’s our last morning in New York before we fly back to the reality of Whispers, my body, mind, and heart having all reached new heights these past few days.

Hudson has not only delivered more orgasms than I thought possible, but he has treated me like a princess. Wining and dining me, he’s taken me out and about to enjoy some sights before curling up together each night. I told him all about my college reality and now there is nothing left that he doesn’t know. I feel lighter for

sharing, but I would be lying if I said I felt totally relaxed. I'm still on edge, wondering when the next note or gift will come.

I crack open my eyes, the soft-pink glow of the morning shining in from Hudson's bedroom windows. The same ones that look over Central Park in his amazing penthouse that I am not sure I ever want to leave.

"What are you doing?" I ask, seeing him perched up on an elbow, looking at me.

"Watching you sleep," he says softly as his hand lazily skims up and down my bare skin, from my hips to my breasts and back again. As I wake, the movement sends pulses to my center and my body stretches in response.

"That's not creepy or anything." I giggle.

"Hmmm, back to teasing me again already." Smirking, he leans forward and kisses me. "Good morning, baby," he murmurs against my lips as his hand travels from my chest down my stomach.

"Morning, Doctor," I say, smiling, but then gasp as his hand glides straight down to my center, his finger circling my clit.

"How are you feeling?" he asks, all the while his finger continues to circle, my body tingling beneath the touch.

"Hmmmmmm... really good now..." I close my eyes on a moan, feeling warm all over.

"Does this make you feel good?" he asks as his tongue flicks my nipple, almost in time with his fingers.

"Yes," I say breathily as he pulls the nipple into his mouth, sucking and nibbling

while his finger moves a little faster.

“Good.” His lips drag to the other breast, doing the same thing, and I bite my bottom lip.

“Your fingers are made of magic,” I pant out. My heart thumps harder when he slips a finger inside and presses against that special spot that has me whimpering.

“Your body is perfection.” Kissing my breast, he molds the other one in his other hand, playing me like amusical instrument. It’s like he’s become a master of knowing exactly how to touch me.



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“I could wake up like this every morning...” My body arches as I feel my orgasm closing in on me.

“I want to wake you up like this every morning,” he murmurs against my skin as my hips start to move against his hand, building the friction in a way that has my eyes rolling back.

“Hudson!” I whisper-shout, and his finger works me overtime, knowing exactly what I need. He sucks on my nipple hard, thrusting his finger harder as his thumb strokes my clit with the perfect pressure, and I come quickly with another cry of his name.

“Good girl,” he groans, and I melt into his mattress as he kisses up my chest to my lips. We lie together, naked and kissing, taking our time, in complete contrast to last night when we couldn’t get to each other fast enough.

“Let’s have a shower, then I need to feed you,” he says, sitting and pulling me up with him. I lazily follow to the bathroom and his enormous shower, which is similar to the one he has in Whispers.

As the water coats us, I start to come out of my pleased daze.

“Tell me about these.” My hands glide from his shoulders down his torso. My fingertips graze each ridge of muscle in appreciation. It’s clear Hudson works out regularly; his body may as well be sculpted. “What does this clock mean?” I ask, as my finger circles the clockface on his chest.

“Eleven thirty-five... It’s the time Harvey was born,” he says, soaping up his large

hands before they rest on my shoulders. Spinning me around, he massages my muscles, and I groan in relaxation.

“What about the sunflowers?” I ask, looking up at him, and he smiles, enjoying my observations.

“My mother’s favorite flowers,” he admits.

“Hmmm, she has good taste. And these letters and numbers?” I frown as I try to make out the longitude and latitude crisscrossing his ribs.

“They are the geographic coordinates of Whispers.”

Nodding, I look at another one, a familiar symbol that I can’t quite place. “What’s this?”

“A Caduceus for medicine.” he says, and I hum as it’s all making sense. His whole life history is inked onto his skin.

“Why? Why tattoos?” I ask curiously. I love them on him, but it’s just not something I expected.

“I went a little numb when Amanda died. She was young, the loss was great. I was left with this tiny human and didn’t really know what I was going to do. I needed to feel something again. To feel like me again,” he explains, the two of us standing in front of each other, eyes not wavering from the other as the water streams down. There is nowhere to hide here from our vulnerabilities. “The tattoos were the one thing I felt like I could control. The pain of etching into my skin is the one thing that grounded me. A little like your stars,” he says, and I smile even as tears glaze my eyes, understanding all too well.

“What's this one?” My hand smooths across his wet skin, my fingers skimming what looks like a flame.

“Marie’s Place,” he says, and my eyes flick back up to his as my heart stutters.

“I’m sure you’ve already been able to tell, but I tattoo things that represent periods in my life that have made an impact,” he says as his hands move to my waist to hold me tighter, punctuating the fact that this tattoo has me within the ink. With my stomach fluttering, I look back at the flame, the memories of that night still there, but less damaging with him by my side. I lean forward and kiss it. I kiss it because we came out of the fire together. Alive. But also, I kiss it because he has something of me on his skin. Something we endured together.

“Any plans for more?” I ask, still taking in the fact that we’ve been connected through something so traumatic and are together like this now. I continue to look over the other images and decorations that adorn his skin.

“Hmmm. If you keep touching and looking at me like you are, then I would say yes.” Running his palm up my side, his thumb grazes my nipple, which is still peaked, until he moves higher to cup my jaw, tilting my head to look at me.

“I like touching you,” I tell him as my back arches a little, my chest moving upward to get closer to him. I run my hand across his hips to massage his cock, relishing how he pulsates in my hand. He drops his grip from my jaw and rests it around my neck, tightening before his thumb brushes across my racing pulse.

“You’re teasing me,” he grits out as I pump him languidly, and I feel him thicken even more in my palm. Moving his hand into my wet hair, he pulls it, bringing my head away from his chest so I’m looking up at him before his lips claim mine. The kiss is hard, scorching, his grip on my hair causing pleasurable pain to my scalp as his other hand cups my ass, squeezes, and pulls me to him. Our bodies mesh against each

other, the water cascading down us both as his rock-hard length presses into my stomach. Moaning into his mouth, I hold on to him, pulling away slightly to drop to my knees.

“Baby?” he asks, looking down at me with fire in his eyes, the water hitting the back of his shoulders.

“Hmmmm?” I say as my lips take in his tip and suck, smiling around him as a moan rumbles in his chest.

“Jesus. Put it in your mouth, baby,” he murmurs as his hand rests against the wall behind me, his other hand running down into my hair again. I lean forward and take more of him, swirling my tongue like I do with the cherry stem, and I hear him moan again.

“Just like that... You suck my cock so well, baby.” I look up into his eyes as I do it again, taking him deeper this time, feeling my clit tingle as his expression holds pure want for me. Seeing him like this brings out a whole new side of me. I’ve never been so excited to get on my knees for a man.

“Fuck yeah... That’s it,” he groans, lifting his hand to slap on the tiles behind me to join his other one. With his hands now plastered against the wall, I take control and run mine up the backs of his legs, resting them on his ass, pulling him into me as my pussy flutters. “Your mouth is magic. I’m not gonna last much longer.”

There’s a desperation in his tone that turns me on all over again, and I suck him down in earnest. His hips start to move in and out of my mouth with small thrusts, and I rub my thighs together, needing the friction.

“I’m going to come, baby,” he warns as our pace quickens, and I nod with a moan around him. He comes with a roar, panting as I swallow his release and slide him

from my mouth to sit back on my heels. I'm smiling like a fool as I stare up at his awed face, something in his eyes quickly changing from hunger to adoration. Hudson is quick as he lifts me from the shower floor, straight up onto his body, my legs automatically hooking around his waist as I giggle.

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“You’re beautiful, Lacy. I am so glad I found you,” he says, and my chest feels heavy as he kisses me with so much more than lust.

“I am glad you found me too,” I whisper against his lips and circle my arms around him tight.

Hudson not only found me, but he made me into a butterfly.

36

### HUDSON

I stride up and down my hallway, unable to stop moving. We got home from New York a few days ago, and I have been on edge ever since. Jumping back into work is all that’s been able to keep my head on straight, but just barely. That changed this morning, though, when I woke up with an overwhelming need to get justice for Lacy. I’ve tried to set aside what she told me, my festering anger over what she’s been through unable to be suppressed any longer.

“Dad, your turn!” Harvey yells, and I pace back down to the dining room, where there is a board game out and my parents and Harvey are sitting around the table.

My father frowns at me, so I plaster a fake smile on my face.

“Already my turn?” I ask, trying to act like I am having an awesome time.

“Here are the dice!” Harvey says, smiling as I take the dice from him and roll them

on the board, moving my piece along.

“Next!” I say, handing the dice to my mother, who senses something is up as I turn and walk back down the hall, pulling at my hair. I hear her and Harvey giggling in the background, and I roll my head on my shoulders, trying to ease the tension that builds.

“Son,” Dad says from behind me, his tone laced with concern.

“I’m fine. I just have some work things to do,” I tell him, lying about where my stress comes from.

“Well, go do them. We’ll take Harvey up to our place for afternoon tea,” he says, and I nod in appreciation.

“Thanks, Dad,” I say with a heavy exhale.

“You tell me if you need anything.” He knows this isn’t a work thing at all. If I can be half the father to Harvey that my dad is to me, that would be amazing.

He turns and walks back to the table before I hear him telling the others that he feels like ice cream and that Grandma has chocolate chip in her freezer. Harvey shouts in excitement before jumping up from the chair and racing out the door, my parents chuckling at him and following his fast-paced steps.

When they’re gone, I continue my pacing, with my baby girl at the forefront of my mind. All I can think about is what kind of asshole would prey on innocent college kids who are from small towns and on scholarships. It’s almost the perfect storm. Country kid without city knowledge or life experience or contacts, who genuinely believes the senior professors at their school are genuine and honest, who can’t afford to fail even one test as their grades are connected to their funding. The whole thing

reeks of a power imbalance and must be a gold mine for those who, like Lacy's professor, want to take advantage of young people while they have no real support system.

I struggle with wanting to hire private detectives to search every motherfucking professor on that campus so I can find the man responsible, and keeping this to myself as Lacy has requested.

It is unlike me. My medical profession and ethics instill that I help, not harm, yet for the first time ever, I want to do some damage. I can't. I promised her I wouldn't. But the bitterness on my tongue is not abating and the heaviness in my gut is not diminishing.

The ringing of my cell grabs my attention, and I frown when I see the name on the screen.

"Hudson?" he says as I pick up before I even talk.

"Hello, sir. Nice to hear from you," I say to Gordon, Amanda's father, the man I haven't seen or spoken to for years. I still remember him on our wedding day. He wore a scowl on his face the entire time, like he was at his daughter's funeral, not her wedding. He left pretty quickly after the formalities. I remember Amanda said at the time he had to rush to work commitments, which I found strange, but now, knowing what kind of philandering asshole he is, it's clear he just had a better offer.

"Yes. Melody has told me that you are back in Whispers," he says, straight to the point—not asking how Harvey or I are, not entertaining any type of casual banter—and I roll my eyes. He clearly doesn't give a shit about his grandson. We have been here for months, and this is the first call.

"Yes. We moved a while back. It's nice to give Harvey some fresh air and space to



run around,” I tell him, my already agitated state increasing.

“Well, Gloria and I were thinking we would come out to see you. She misses the boy.” Even though his tone is arrogant, I don’t miss the fact that he said his wife misses her grandchild, but he doesn’t mention himself.

“Of course, you are always welcome to come to Whispers,” I tell him through gritted teeth. Entertaining them at the ranch for a few days is my idea of hell.

“Great, well, I will organize a few things,” he says, although what he really means is his assistants will organize a trip, and he will tag along purely for his wife. I’m not sure what agreement they have, because as far as I can see, she is well aware of his desire to have other women. I can only assume either it’s a money thing or they are in an open marriage. Either way, it isn’t my business.

“Looking forward to it,” I say, keeping things neutral. He’s not a man who is overly warm at the best of times, so I don’t feel the need to be that way either. I’m about to say goodbye when another thought hits me.

“Actually, before you go, sir?”

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“What is it?” he asks, sounding annoyed, like he hasn’t got the time, even though he called me.

“I’m just wondering where you are lecturing these days?” I try to ask casually, like I’m making small talk, which is something we have never done.

“Willowstone. Why?” There’s an edge to his tone I don’t miss, and my eyebrows rise.

I know I shouldn’t ask, but he is a good contact, having been in the education system for years.

“Just wondering who I need to speak to in order to report a crime against a student?” I can call the university directly, but I would rather go through personal channels. Things move quicker that way.

“Pfft. Stop wasting my time. Clearly, you have too much time on your hands these days, Hudson. You need to move back to the city.” His arrogance hits me immediately. That and the fact that he doesn’t answer or acknowledge my question.

I scoff, about to ask another question to get further information, but the call ends without even a goodbye.

The fucker hung up on me.

Rolling my phone in my hand, I think about Lacy. I don’t want to talk about it with her until she is ready, and I don’t want to push her, but the whole thing makes me

upset.

It doesn't take much more spiraling thoughts from me to press my contacts and make the call I've been debating.

"Hudson. How's things?" Sawyer, Tanner's lawyer from the city, who is often in Whispers, answers almost immediately. His upbeat tone is much more refreshing than the last call.

"Sawyer. I'm doing good. And you?" I ask as I pace again, wondering if I'm doing the right thing.

"Fine. But Tanner has me looking at the contracts for Victoria's goat milk soap business. Apparently, it has picked up and they are really busy. That and my asshole of a brother is in Capri with that new leading lady of his," he says, huffing, and I smile. From what I see on socialmedia, my friend is living his best life in the South of France.

"When are you in Whispers next? I need some advice," I say, taking in a breath. I feel bad for a beat that I am doing this behind Lacy's back, but it's just advice. All confidential, and if I can get things ready for when she wants to make a move, it will be all the easier for her.

"I will be there soon, actually. Within the next few weeks."

Relieved, I nod, even though he can't see me.

"Great. I would love an hour of your time if you can spare it," I tell him.

"No problem. I can make it work. Everything okay?" he asks, and I drop my head.

“Hopefully. I just need some advice on a personal matter.” I keep it simple, not wanting to delve into it on the phone.

“Okay, well, I will speak to you then,” he says, and we say our pleasant goodbyes before I end the call.

I look out the window toward my parents’ house, where my son is, wanting to join them but still feeling uneasy. I made Lacy a promise, and for the first time in my life, I’m not sure I can keep it.

37

LACY

I rush into the diner, my Saturday morning blood donation all done. It's been a week since New York, and aside from seeing Hudson most days, my life has gone back to being somewhat normal. Hudson and I flew back in his private jet and then both hit the ground running with work. Now as I get back into my routine, we decided to meet here for the weekly sundae together, my mom resting and getting ready for a big week as her first transfusion nears.

“The boys are already here waiting for you,” Rochelle says to me the minute I walk in, and I hold my breath and glance around. In the far corner of the room, I spot Hudson and Harvey sitting in a booth, both looking at me expectantly. My smile grows as my shoulders relax, just being around them.

The looks Hudson and I are getting are less and less as the locals are now so used to seeing us together. That, plus our mothers have been settling the rumor mill for us, knowing that I hate being the topic of conversation in this town. Even though it has been happening for most of my life.

“Thanks, Rochelle.” I offer her a smile, and her cheeky wink makes me laugh.

“I’ve missed that laugh, darlin’. It’s good to hear it again,” she says before walking off and refilling the coffees for patrons nearby. I swallow, thinking of her words. These past weeks with Hudson have been like I am walking on air. He calls me and checks in with me every day, and when I get his sweet text messages, I can’t stop smiling. I feel so much different, so much better, more like a version of me I want to be since he came into my life. My to-do list is full but not as long because we now have Jennifer, and work is still busy but even more exciting because I love working on our new projects. I don’t feel as wound tight anymore, and I like that I have someone else to talk to about it all. I’m still on edge, though. Still waiting for something that I know is coming, yet I have no idea what she is going to do next. My nerves are frayed, jumping at noises during the night. The only time I feel safe is when I’m with Hudson.

“Well, if it isn’t Miss Perfect walking in to get her weekly ice cream,” Jolene snarks, sitting close by in a booth with her team of gremlins. I didn’t see her at the hospital this morning, so she clearly has the day off.

“Hi, Jolene,” I say, looking at her, then at the gaggle of girls around her. I don’t see these girls much and haven’t spent any time with them since school. But they are here, every Saturday, just like I am, and on occasion seem to like ruffling my feathers.

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“You didn’t have to do that,” Hudson tells me quietly, holding my hand on the table and giving it a squeeze

“I wanted to. I know Harvey loves planes.” I shrug. I should have spent the money on getting Mom a new blanket for her knees or maybe on the screen door, but instead I went to Tony’s Toy World and picked up the plane, knowing how much it would mean to Harvey. I can get the new blanket for Mom next week and the screen door will be fine until next month.

“Can we do it? Can you come over tonight and we can do it together?” Harvey says, his eyes wide, face still plastered with surprise and shock.

“Oh, I...” I start to say, because while I thought we could do it together, I hadn’t planned on it being tonight. My eyes flick to Hudson to gauge his reaction. I should have probably asked him before I brought his son something. I’m not totally sure of the rules around this kind of thing. I think it’s a nice gesture, but many parents may feel differently. But his smile is warm, the love in his eyes that he has for his son obvious, and when he flicks his gaze my way, it doesn’t falter.

“Come over tonight. Let me cook you dinner?” Hudson offers, and I take a deep breath. I’m trying to balance all my responsibilities, but the guilt I’m feeling for leaving Mom at any time is eating me inside.

“Please, Lacy? Pleeaaassee,” Harvey says, bouncing in his seat, and I laugh lightly. I have no idea how I’m meant to turn him down, let alone his handsome father, whose eyes haven’t moved from me the entire time I’ve been here.

So I find myself nodding with just as much giddiness. “Okay. Sounds fun.” I take a deep breath and quickly run through my mental to-do list. I know Mom will be fine to spend tonight alone. She has her cell, and I’m not too far away. Jennifer and I have ensured her independence has grown these past few weeks, and I know she likes to have some alone time. She will probably appreciate me being out of the house tonight.

“Great. Let’s get our afternoon treat, and then we can take you home, pack you an overnight bag, and bring you to the ranch,” Hudson says, leaning back, happy that the decision is now made.

“I got your usuals,” Rochelle says, sliding up to the table, with one sundae and one brownie, both with extra cream today.

“Thanks, Rochelle, they look delicious.” Hudson gives her a broad smile, and I think I see her blush.

“Anytime, Doc. Looks like a nice gift you got there, little Harvey.”

“Lacy got it for me!” Harvey says excitedly, and I suddenly see spots in my vision. I blink them away as I hold on to the table tightly, feeling a little faint.

“Did she now?” Rochelle says, smiling, and I can tell she is pocketing that information for later. Probably to tell my mother or share it with her friends down at the community center, where she plays a weekly game of bridge. Although I don’t know how much bridge they all play; it’s more like one big gossip session in front of a deck of cards, if you ask me.

“Harvey is very spoiled, and Lacy is very generous,” Hudson says, watching me, before he curls his fingers in mine, still on display on the table. Rochelle notices them move immediately, and her smile widens even more, like we have just given her

the best gift.

“Treats are on the house today,” she says, grabbing the menu cards.

“You don’t have to do that.” I frown, confused. Over the years, Rochelle has treated me on the house a few times. Typically, when I have come in super sad after one of Mom’s particularly bad weeks. But today, that isn’t the case.

“Oh, nonsense. It’s nice to see young love blossom. You don’t see a lot of that around here.” Her eyes twinkle, her lips twitching before she steps away.

“She has had one too many coffees today, I think,” I quip, before I let go of Hudson and grab my spoon, the sundae in front of me teasing me. My vision has cleared up, but I’m a little nauseous. Maybe my blood sugar is low.

“So how was this morning?” Hudson asks, eyeing me carefully.

“It was fine. Just like the last time, over pretty quickly.”

“Any dizziness? Fatigue?” he asks in his doctor voice, and I roll my eyes.

“I am fine, Hudson,” I say, grinning as I wave him off. I don’t need him worrying about me. I’m already feeling better as it is, anyway.

“Are you going to eat that cherry?” Hudson asks, one eyebrow rising with a sexy smirk on his lips. I swallow, my eyes flicking to his son, who is completely oblivious to our flirty banter.

“You want to watch?” I ask quietly, my tone laced with a trace of seduction, my eyebrow quirking to meet his in a challenge.



He doesn't say anything, but he leans back, throws his arm over the back of the booth, and his eyes hook on me as Harvey shovels in his brownie next to us. Hudson's jaw ticks, and flames heat my insides, my stress from everyone's eyes on us before now all forgotten.

"Put it in your mouth." His request almost comes out as a demand, and I swallow before I grab the cherry stem, letting the glossy red ball dangle before I place it in my lips and taste it. I suck the juices, dropping it into my mouth, and as I do, I hear a small rumble from the man sitting opposite me, whose eyes are burning into my own.

He waits and watches as my tongue darts around in my mouth, and I swallow the fruit before I grab the stem from my lips, perfectly tied, and place it on my napkin.

"I have a new admiration for cherries," Hudson murmurs as he sits forward again, grabbing his spoon, our little show for two over.

"They are my favorite," I tease, smirking.

"And you are mine," he says quietly as he digs into my sundae, and my stomach flutters at the sincerity in those words. My weekly treat is now one I share with a man I think I am falling in love with.

38

### HUDSON

As I finish cleaning the kitchen, I watch Lacy and Harvey at the dining table as they open the model plane. Their interaction comes easily, and it has been a long time since I've had any woman as close to my son as Lacy is right now. His own mother loved him more than anything, but he was only a baby when we lost her, so he has never really had a female in that role before. You would think they have known each other for years and do this every day. Harvey is completely at ease in her presence and Lacy is laughing, clearly enjoying herself, and a new feeling of contentment rests in my chest. Like this could possibly be something. This could possibly be my life here in Whispers.

"I think it's bedtime, buddy," I call out to Harvey, walking over to where they sit.

"But Daaaaadddd," he whines, not happy because we haven't had any time to put this plane together, but it's late, and he has been running around all day. Just when I'm about to tell him no arguing, I spot him yawning.

"Bedtime," I say again, my voice lowering as I walk over to him.

"We can start it tomorrow," Lacy says to him, her smile soft. The light shines on her glossy red lips, and all I can think about is her tongue and that fucking cherry from today. I need to order a box of them so every time she comes over, I can watch her eat them and tie the stem. It's the perfect foreplay for me, and even now, thinking back to it has me half-hard.

“Can Lacy tuck me in?” Harvey asks, and I pause. He has never asked for anyone else to tuck him in before. Not even Grandma. I look at Lacy, knowing she doesn't need another thing to add to her list, but before I can say anything, she smiles at my son, and I see him melt.

“I would love to,” Lacy says, then looks at me. I have no idea how I can resist either of them at this point. As Harvey walks down the hall to his room, my body is humming for her.

“Come on, we can both do it,” I tell her, holding out my hand for her, and she takes it. Her delicate fingers entwine with mine, and we follow Harvey down the hall to his room. I'm surprised to see him already changed and crawling into bed. He's obviously more tired than I thought.

“Can we do the plane after breakfast, Lacy?” Harvey asks, his eyes half closing.

“Sure thing. Now you get some sleep because we will need full brain power for the model plane tomorrow,” Lacy says, stepping forward and pulling up his blankets, tucking them around his shoulders. “Good night, Harvey,” I hear her whisper before she steps back.

“Good night, buddy.” I kiss his forehead, his breathing already deep, eyes fully closed. Huffing a laugh, I shake my head as we step out of the room, and I close his door.

“He really is adorable,” Lacy says as we walk together back down the hall.

“Thank you for the plane. You didn't need to buy it, but I know Harvey loves it.” I wrap my hand around her middle and pull her to me. Holding her close, toe to toe, we face each other.

“I knew he would love it.” She looks up at me, and now that Harvey is down, there is only one person on my mind.

“I like it. I also like you, Miss Jones,” I murmur as I bend down, putting my lips to hers. The kiss is soft, a little tease, for her or for me, I’m not sure.

“Well, that’s good because I like you too, Doctor Hamilton.” Her tone is light and sassy, and I smile as our lips touch again. Moving my hands around her tighter, I pull her to me, sealing my lips to hers, and I feel her body mold into mine. Her hands run up my arms and hug my neck as her body arches slightly.

“Let’s go,” I say against her mouth before I bend and pick her up and muffle her surprised scream with another kiss. As I grab her ass and lift her to my waist, her legs curl around me perfectly. She cups my jaw with her palm and her thumb rubs across my stubble, her soft skin in complete contrast. Any tension I hold starts to fall away.

“Do you need anything else before I lock you in my room for the night?” I ask as my lips find hers again and I kiss her slowly.

“No. Just you. I just need you,” she whispers, shaking her head a little as I squeeze her ass in my hands, my jeans tightening just by having her in my arms like this.

“Good. Because you’ve got me.” And then I’m moving, hitting the stairs and running straight up them to my room on the other side of the house as Harvey.

“Hudson!” she squeals, her grip tightening around my neck to hold on, but there is no way I would let her fall. My palm is flat on her back, the other still grabbing her ass in these sexy-as-sin jeans she wears.

“Are you practicing?” I tease, before I lower my head and suck on her neck, my steps not faltering.

“Practicing?” she asks breathily as her head falls to the side, letting me bite and suck on her skin. As I walk across the threshold and into my bedroom, her hips grind on mine with a moan.

“Practicing yelling my name,” I tell her as I toss her onto my bed.

“Hudson!” she yelps in a mix of excitement and shock. I close the door behind me and stalk toward her, her eyes glistening as she sits up onto her knees to greet me.

“I like having you in my bed, Lacy baby,” I tell her as I lean down and kiss her slowly. As I do, I grab the hem of her sweater, and she sits back, lifting her arms so I can sweep the knit straight over her head.

“I just like being where you are,” she says quietly. I sure as hell want her with me every day, and if I could make that happen ASAP, I would. She waits, watching me as my eyes bore into hers.

“You are everything I never knew I needed.” I cup her jaw, searching her eyes as I swallow roughly, my feelings coming in thick and hot. “I thought I knew what life was about. I had Harvey, I was successful at work. I have money, the jet, real estate. I have everything I could ever want or need. But I still remember the first time I saw you.” My other hand runs through her hair and her hands settle on my chest, still up on her knees on the mattress, with me standing on the floor right in front of her.

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“It was just a nightmare. People have them all the time. You’re safe. You don’t need to worry.”

I swallow, trying to moisten my dry throat as I nod. He cups my jaw, his thumb rubbing across my lips before he leans forward and kisses me.

“Hudson...” I whisper. My body calms from the nightmare, now focusing on him as his other hand trails across my body to my lower back and he pulls me toward him as he cuddles me in his embrace.

“This is real, Lacy. You and me. Just concentrate on us,” he murmurs against my lips as he soothes me.

I lie in the silent room as Hudson’s hand continues up and down my back. His heart thuds at my ear, where my head rests against his bare chest.

“It starts with the smell,” I tell him, wanting to open up.

“What do you smell?” he asks, and I close my eyes briefly before opening them again.

“Gasoline. Then I feel restrained.”

He kisses the top of my head, letting me talk.

“I then see Victoria and start to panic, trying to get to her. Trying to get out of the rope that holds me.” All the while, his hand continues along my back in a steady

rhythm. Keeping me calm, keeping me centered.

“I usually wake up then, but it’s changed lately,” I say, lifting my head and looking at him. The bedroom is still a little dark, but I can see him, the concern etched into his brow.

“Changed how?” he asks as his hand brushes the hair from my face, watching me closely.

“I see you,” I tell him and he frowns so I continue.

“I see you at the end. I see you coming for me. Running toward me. Saving me.” I give him a small smile. “The nightmares are horrible, but since you have been back, they don’t come as often, and they aren’t as violent as they once were.” Feeling safe and calm in his embrace, it’s easy to be honest.

“Over time, they should dissipate even more,” he says, still watching me closely.

“I think they are. I think seeing you again, being with you, I think it all helps.” I swallow past a lump in my throat, coming to the realization just now myself.

“There is nowhere else I want to be than with you.”

I rest my chin on his chest and look up at him. His eyes are on me, the moonlight streaming in through the curtains, giving a soft glow to his face.

“I have fallen for you, Lacy Jones. Baby, I love you,” he says softly, and my heart feels like it is about to explode. The silence sits heavily between us as feelings of longing blanket me in warmth. “You don’t have to say it back...”

“I love you,” I rush out. “I love the way you remember the little things.” I press a soft

kiss to his lips, cupping his cheek. “I love the way you didn’t take no for an answer when you asked me out.” I smile as I say the words. “I love the way you instill so much confidence and positivity into my life when I had very little to give in return. I wasn’t looking for anyone. I didn’t need anyone. Then you came back. You came back to Whispers.”

“I’ve got you, Lacy. I always will,” he says with such sincerity, my eyes tear up as I lie back down. He holds me tight, and together we watch the sun come up on a new day, feeling grateful to have found each other.

But I’m not entirely at ease. His breathing is calm and regular, my body relaxed, but my mind is working overtime. Hudson loves me, my life slowly feels like it is all coming together, yet as I look out the window, I know something is amiss. I can feel it. My life has never been perfect, and while I love Hudson and he loves me, perfect doesn’t happen to a girl like me.

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## HUDSON

I’m running around my place, trying to keep busy. If I don’t, I will blow a fuse.

“So this is all I need, then?” Lacy asks. Her mom is heading into Williamstown today for her transfusion, and Lacy’s nervous, I can tell. She’s fidgeting, her shoulders tight.

“Why won’t you let me go with you today? I promise I’m a great support person.”

“No. It’s fine. I know you’re busy. Besides, I’ll be fine. Mom will be fine.”

I feel like she says the words more for her own reassurance than mine. The gate



intercom buzzes through the kitchen, and I look at the screen, seeing Connor's truck and who looks to be Sawyer in the passenger side.

"Connor and Sawyer are here," I tell her, Harvey's head pops up from where it's been buried in a book about planes his aunt sent him this week. Having a sister-in-law who owns Bloomers Books is a godsend when it comes to those kinds of gifts.

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“Oh? Boys’ day?” Lacy asks, her smile small but there, and I sigh.

“Since you won’t let me go with you, I need a distraction,” I murmur, keen to take the opportunity with Sawyer in town to talk to him about the situation at Lacy’s college while she isn’t here.

“I will be fine, I promise. Mom is the one doing the hard work today, not me,” she reiterates as I see her trimming the stems on some wildflowers that Harvey picked for her. She was only popping in to get the paperwork she needed for the hospital today but took the time to cuddle my son after he presented her with the bouquet this morning, and now she is taking great pride in getting them ready for the vase. I like having her in my house, moving around my kitchen; this whole situation is very domesticated, and it feels good.

“Morning, lovebirds,” Connor says, waltzing into the kitchen like he owns the place. Lacy rolls her eyes as I shake his hand and give him a backslap.

“Door was open!” Sawyer says, announcing his entrance. Connor comes and goes from place so regularly he is almost part of the furniture, so I’m not surprised they just walked in.

“Nice flowers. Pick them yourself?” Connor asks Lacy, clearly teasing her, and I see their dynamic now. At first, I was jealous, but now I see them more like siblings. It’s hilarious, actually.

“As a matter of fact, they are from Harvey,” Lacy says proudly. “Did you tell the boys how much you luuurved the massage in New York? So much so, you are hiring

the therapist and practically dragging her to Whispers?” Lacy teases him, and Sawyer and I cough out a laugh. Connor was less than impressed that he had a sound healing massage when I whisked Lacy away from her work commitments back in New York, but Connor doesn’t have a quick comeback like he usually does, which has me squinting at him.

“Are you blushing?” I ask, shocked. Connor doesn’t get embarrassed about anything, and now my interest is piqued.

“Shut up,” he mutters, before heading to my refrigerator and opening it, grabbing out the juice.

“What did I miss?” Sawyer asks, and Lacy and I look at each other in shock at the coy way Connor is acting. I’m about to push him some more to find out exactly what happened in New York with this therapist, because something clearly did, when my gate intercom buzzes again.

“I’ll check it!” Harvey hollers as I look at my best friend. A grin slowly comes to my face at the realization that Connor Whiteman is not as infallible as people might think.

“Who is it, buddy?” I ask Harvey as he walks back to us.

“Ahhh, it’s Poppy and Nanna,” he says, and I still.

“Who?” Sawyer asks, frowning, and I run my hands through my hair. Of course they didn’t tell me when they were arriving. So typical of them to just turn up unannounced.

“My former in-laws,” I say as my eyes flick to Lacy.

“Oh shit, I didn’t know they were here; otherwise, we could have come by tomorrow,” Connor says, and I shake my head.

“I knew they were coming; I just didn’t know it was today. They failed to mention exactly when they might come to town.” Seeing them now is one of the last things I want to do today.

“I should go. I’ll just get these beautiful flowers in some water, then I will leave you all to it,” Lacy says with a tight smile as her movements quicken, clearly uncomfortable with the situation on top of what is already a stressful day for her.

She is beautiful today, even with a million things on her mind. I don’t care if my former in-laws meet her. It was bound to happen one day; it might as well be now because she isn’t going anywhere. Before I can say anything else, I hear the front door open.

“Anyone home!” my former father-in-law yells out as he walks in like he owns the place. Not that dissimilar to Connor, yet Gordon is no friend of mine. I take a deep breath to steel myself, trying to remain courteous for Harvey’s sake.

“Good morning, Gordon. I wasn’t expecting you today,” I say, letting him and everyone else here know that their visit is unexpected.

“Oh, Gordon, you said you told him we were coming,” Gloria, my former mother-in-law, huffs from behind him. “I hope we’re not interrupting?” Coming into the kitchen, she sees everyone here. Dressed to impress, high heels on and fully made up, as only a socialite from the city can be.

“Not at all. You remember, Connor. And this is my friend, Sawyer,” I say to her as I step forward and kiss her on the cheek in greeting. It hasn’t gotten past me that Harvey remains back at the table, obviously not eager to see them either. I don’t

blame him. He hasn't seen them in a while, and even then, their visits were few and far between, despite them wanting full control and say in his life. They are practically strangers.

"And this is my partner, Lacy," I introduce them, my gaze finding Lacy in the kitchen, but I freeze as soon as I take her in. She's holding the vase of flowers, smiling and looking radiant, but then her eyes lock on my father-in-law, and she goes deathly pale.

"Lacy?" I question, as Connor frowns and takes a small step toward her protectively, and Sawyer looks at my in-laws inquisitively.

"Lacy?" I move toward her and take the vase from her shaking hands, and she clears her throat.

"I need to go," she says quietly, looking at me, my father-in-law, and back to me again. I can hear her breathing quicken, and she seems a little panicked. While I expected meeting my former in-laws may create a little awkwardness, I wasn't expecting this level of fear. She swallows audibly before she gives everyone a fake smile and practically bolts from my kitchen, striding right out the door.

I look over everyone, confused, before I shove the vase of flowers into Connor's hands and run after her.

"Lacy," I call out as I reach her outside my front door. "Wait." Grabbing her elbow, I turn her to face me. My breath catches at the petrified look on her face, and my senses heighten.

"Talk to me, baby. Tell me what's going on," I ask her, searching her eyes. Clearly, she isn't okay. I can almost feel the unease vibrating from her body, but I have no idea why, and it has my heart pounding.

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“It’s fine. I need to go and get Mom ready, that’s all. I’ll talk to you later,” she rushes out, giving me another forced smile before she slips from my grasp again and runs to her car, but not before she looks over my shoulder, and her expression falls.

I watch her get in her car and take off down the drive before I turn around and see my father-in-law standing there in the open doorway. He hasn’t looked at me once, his eyes still on Lacy’s car, even though it’s barely visible. I see his eyes crease, and his mouth turns up in a sick smirk, and then it clicks. My stomach drops, and my anger rises.

“Did you tell me you are lecturing at Willowstone at the moment, Gordon?” I ask as I tentatively step toward him, and only now does he look at me, giving me a smarmy smile. I don’t know how I know, but I do. I spot Sawyer and Connor, as well as Gloria behind him, probably wondering what is going on.

“I lead their statistic faculty,” he says, nodding, pocketing his hands and rocking back on his heels like the arrogant son of bitch he is. I see red.

I stride toward him, and without any warning, I throw my fist at his cheek so hard, I feel like I broke my own hand.

“You sick son of a bitch,” I yell as he falls, his knees hitting the ground in front of me as I hear the scream from his wife.

“I’ll charge you with assault!” he splutters at me as he tries to get up, and I lunge at him again.

“What the hell?” Connor says, grabbing me from behind, pulling me back. I shout and kick and elbow Connor in the torso, trying to get out of his hold, because I want to pummel this sick, preying asshole into the ground. I can’t even see straight, I’m so enraged.

“You’re a fucking pedophile!” I yell, feeling like I am out of my own body. I have never been this angry. Ever.

“She was of age!” he barks at me, and I freeze. Gloria gasps in horror. He isn’t denying it. I see Sawyer out straighten the corner of my eye, paying very close attention now, the lawyer in him kicking in.

“She was your college student. You groomed her!” I shout or growl; I don’t even know what I sound like at this point. I see my mom and dad come out from their place and walk swiftly toward us, hearing the commotion.

“She wanted it. They all do,” he says quietly, but not quietly enough, by the looks Sawyer and Connor have on their faces. Connor’s grip on me loosens, and while I haven’t actually said Lacy’s name, it’s apparent exactly who I am talking about. Connor steps forward, fists tightening.

“I think you both need to leave,” Sawyer says, stepping in between Gordon, Connor, and me, aware things are not going to get any better.

“What is he talking about? What is going on?” Gloria asks as I see my mom rush inside, no doubt going to find Harvey as my father stands watching.

“Do we need to call the police?” my father asks, looking at Gordon. Two totally different men. My father is strong, solid, a workhorse. Jeans and a casual shirt are his daily attire. My father-in-law is in a suit and wouldn’t know a hard day’s work if he tried. One contributes, one just takes.

“Yes! We do. Your son assaulted my husband!” Gloria screams. The entitlement of these fucking people is astounding.

“No. No police,” Gordon says, wiping the blood from his lip, which I busted open. Pity there isn’t a doctor in town who will see to his injuries because he sure as fuck isn’t welcome at my hospital.

“She doesn’t know, does she?” I say, looking at his wife, who looks stricken, but I don’t hold back. I can’t. “Gloria, your husband preys on college students. Gives them good grades for sexual acts. When they don’t comply, he fails them and then stalks them until they agree to come back and make up their grades at a special summer school. It probably makes them a little more accessible, doesn’t it, Gordon? Since the number of staff at the school over the summer break reduces quite a bit. Less people. Less eyes?”

Not even acknowledging me, he grabs his wife’s elbow and leads her toward their car. His eyes flame as he glances at me, and I can tell I’m right.

“Fuck, how long have you been doing this? How many young women have you assaulted?” I ask, and I see Sawyer on the phone, no doubt to the authorities. We will let them go for now; we can’t hold them, but they won’t get far. It’s all out now, and he needs to be dealt with. His game is up.

“I have no fucking idea what you are talking about, and if you don’t stop with this nonsense, I will sue you for defamation!” he yells, and he knows he’s fucked. He knows I will stop at nothing to end him and that I have deep enough pockets to do it.

“Sounds like that will be the least of your problems,” Connor says, coming to stand next to me with his arms crossed over his chest. Connor is massive. Bigger than Tanner. Tall, broad, and the one person I don’t ever want to get in a fight with. Clearly, Gordon agrees, because his mouth is now tightly closed, and he gets in his



car, barking at his wife to do the same. They drive out of my place so quickly their tires almost screech.

“I called the police. He won’t get far,” my mom says, and I turn, seeing her standing in the doorway. She wasn’t here for all of it, but I don’t have to tell her. She knows. They all do.

I just hope Lacy will forgive me for what I have done. Because I promised her I wouldn’t do anything until she was ready. Now, I’ve broken that promise.

41

LACY

My cell phone has been ringing off the hook since Mom and I got here.

“Are you going to answer that?” My mom sighs, as sick of the ringing as I am. I continue to ignore it but turn my volume down, not wanting to hear it again either.

“No. It’s just Hudson. He is worried,” I tell her, plastering a fake smile on my face. My hands won’t stop shaking, and my stomach rolls and twists so much that I’m sure if I had eaten breakfast today, I would have already brought it back up.

“Why don’t you answer him?” she asks, knowing something is amiss.

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“Because I’m here to concentrate on you.” I tell her half-truths. She is my priority today, but I’m freaking out about what happened this morning.

My professor is Hudson’s former father-in-law. There is no way I can tell Hudson that it’s him. No way he can know that man is the same man who groomed me in college. How is that ever going to work? I don’t want to ever see him, but he is Harvey’s grandfather, so of course if my life is entwined with Hudson’s, then I will see him, hear him, hear of him. But I can’t. I can’t have that man in my life. He makes my skin crawl, makes me feel pitiful and useless and less than. And dirty. He makes me feel disgusting.

“You really need to stop worrying about me. Maybe Hudson should come and wait with you?” my mom says, worried I’m freaking out, thinking it’s all about her. And it should be. All my thoughts should be on her. Yet another thing that horrible man ruins for me.

“I’m okay. Just a little nervous for you,” I tell her, putting a fake smile on my face. I’m getting sick of having to fake it all the time.

“It’s cold. Are you cold?” I ask Mom as I grab a blanket, my own hands feeling like ice blocks.

“Stop fussing, Lacy,” she scolds me, frowning. “You’re looking pale. Sure you don’t need the doctor?”

I shake my head. I do feel woozy, my body exhausted, a little dizzy, but I’ll be okay.

“I’m fine. We’re here for you. Not me.” I give her a soft smile. We have been waiting in this cold hospital room for what feels like all day, but it’s probably only been less than an hour.

“Good morning. How is my patient doing?” Melody says, sweeping into the room, her blond locks tied back into a tight bun, her makeup flawless, even though she is about to operate.

“Feeling great. Ready to get this over with.” My mom smiles while I bite the inside of my cheek.

“Great. So just to go over today, we are going to wheel you down now into the theater. We will do a bit of a poke around, using keyhole surgery, inserting a camera into your abdomen and just making sure everything is as it should be. As I mentioned, your red blood count is still low and declining, which I don’t like, so if we find a bleed, we will fix it, and then do the transfusion if needed. At this stage, I think it is,” she says in a tone that relaxes my shoulders somewhat.

“How long do you expect it to take?” I ask, holding on tightly to my mom’s hand as I stand by her bedside.

“It should only be an hour to two, depending on what we find. We should have your mom wheeled back here in no time,” Melody says, giving me only a half smile. I don’t think she likes me much. Then she sighs and grabs her cell from her pocket.

“Sorry, this has been ringing off the hook all morning.” She acknowledges us both before she puts the cell to her ear and walks out of the room, but not before I hear her greeting.

“Hi, Mom,” she says, her voice fading as the door closes, and I swallow. Then it triggers in my mind that it’s Melody’s father. I wonder if she knows her dad is

horrible and predatory. I shiver, not wanting to even think about it anymore.

Jolene walks in and gets Mom, ready without even a look in my direction, and I take another deep breath. It feels like the universe is throwing everything at me today, and I'm trying not to buckle, but I'm feeling sensitive to everything. I just want to sit in the corner and hide. I don't want to face the world anymore; it's just too much. All of this is too much.

"We ready?" Jolene asks, and Mom gives her a warm smile while squeezing my hand.

"Good luck," I say to Mom, putting on a brave face. "I have some work to do, so I will stay here and keep busy." I won't move from this room until my mom is back.

"Be back in a flash, sweetheart," she says as some other nurses come in and crowd around her bed, getting it onto the wheels and moving. Then the bed is pushed out of the room, our hands breaking free, and I stand, alone, in the cold space, feeling anxious but positive that she will be back soon and with good news.

Taking a seat on the armchair, I grab my bag, about to pull out my laptop. Might as well try to get ahead with work so there isn't as much to get back to. As I gather my things in my lap, the door to the room flies open.

"I don't know what kind of games you are playing at, but you have some fucking nerve," Melody seethes, and I jolt to my feet.

"What do you mean?" I ask, frowning.

"First, you take Hudson from Amanda, and now you are ruining my father? What kind of sick, twisted bitch are you?"

With my heart in my throat, my eyes are wide as she spits her words so violently, I actually feel her saliva hit my cheek.

“What?” I say on a shaky exhale. I think I’m in a state of shock.

She knows. Which means Hudson knows.

“If I knew that you were this kind of person, I would never have agreed to see your mom. As it is, I need another donation from you.” She stalks to the small trolley that is off to the side, full of needles and other bits and pieces.

“More blood? Why? Is Mom okay?” I ask, starting to panic, even though she was only just wheeled out.

“Oh, your mom will be just fine.” I don’t like her tone. I remain still, trying to breathe as she pulls the trolley over to take more of my blood.

“Now shut up, sit down, and give me your fucking arm,” she demands, all niceties out the window. The last thing I want her doing right now, in her current state of mind, is sticking me with a needle, never mind laying a finger on my mother.

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I can tell by the way she's genuinely frightened that she's telling the truth. I investigated Jolene the minute Lacy said she was her high school bully. She's a health nurse, does blood tests, and helps out around the ward. She isn't a seasoned professional, and I dare say has never had to help a patient like this.

Lacy has an IV connected to her arm, her body lifeless and pale, and my whole world crumbles.

"Lacy!" I feel for her pulse, which is faint, and I thank the stars her chest is still rising and falling as I manically start looking her over.

"Lacy!" I yell, as I get to work pulling the IV from her arm. By the look of the bag, she has donated more than another pint of blood, and I'm furious as I try to stem the blood flow while I simultaneously feel her pulse to ensure she is still strong.

I'm breathing heavily, panic crawling up my throat. I'm a doctor, a seasoned professional, but the insane fear and adrenaline that I felt months ago grabbing her from the rafters at Marie's Place comes crashing back to me.

"I have her, Doctor Hamilton," one of my colleagues says, pushing through the door with a team. They know I'm off duty. It's hospital protocol that I step aside and let them handle it, but I don't want to let her go. My heart literally falls out of my chest as they push in front of me and take over. I don't want them to have to restrain me and forget about Lacy, so I step back quickly, moving out of their way, and watch them work on her. I fist my hands. Watching others treat her is the hardest thing I have ever had to do as they try to rouse her, attaching machines to check her heart and pulse. My eyes flick to Jolene, who is standing to the side, shock on her face, and a

healthy dose of reality of exactly how precious life is on her mind.

I can barely breathe. I swallow hard, my mouth dry as I look back at Lacy. Her body is still limp, her beautiful hair out, her features softened and her skin deathly pale. She looks rested, at peace, and I look up to the ceiling and close my eyes, praying that this isn't the end.

She will be alright. She has to be, because I'm going to marry this girl.

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LACY

I hear voices, but I feel like I'm far away, in a tunnel.

"She will be fine. Needs rest. But she has had fluids and an iron transfusion. She will make a full recovery," I hear Hudson say quietly.

"So what, Melody tried to bleed her dry?" my mom asks, and I hear the pain in her tone.

"Apparently," Hudson grits out before I moan, trying to talk.

"Lacy?" Hudson asks, his voice panicked. "Lacy baby, do you hear me?" A grip on my hand tightens.

"Hmmmm, where am I?" I croak out, squeezing my eyes shut, my body feeling heavy, no energy to even move.

"You're in the hospital, sweetheart," my mom's voice comes through again, and I feel her squeeze my other hand.

“Mom?” I ask, wanting to know how she is.

“I’m fine, honey. A bit tender and sore, but fine. My surgery went well and was over quickly.”

I try to pull at my memories—her surgery, hospital, what happened before that. Melody.

“What happened?” I ask as I slowly open my eyes. I see Hudson’s face looking down at me from right above. He is blocking the bright lights, his eyes full of concern. I’ve seen this before. Months ago, after Marie’s Place. We have been in this exact same position, and I try to take a deep breath. His hand cups my face.

“It has been one hell of a day, baby.” He sounds a little choked up, his eyes watering a little.

“I’m okay. We’re okay,” I whisper to him, then another realization hits me with a powerful force as I remember why Melody was so upset. As I remember that Hudson now knows the truth. “The professor?” I ask him quietly, and he nods.

“We got him. I’m sorry I broke my word to you. I’m sorry that I got other people involved in what is your private history, But Lacy, I needed to keep my initial promise to you. I’ve got you, baby. I’ve always got you,” he says, and I tear up and nod shakily, not confident in my voice right now.

“The professor is being questioned by police,” he tells me, and I hear my mom huff.

“I’d like to question him with this walking stick I’ve got here,” she grumbles, and I look at Hudson with widening eyes and a sinking stomach.

“She knows. All our friends and family know now. Victoria, Tanner, and Connor are



right outside with Harvey—none of them want to leave here without seeing you today.”

Taking that in, I don’t feel as badly about everyone knowing as I thought I would. It’s more comforting than anything, having support, not having to keep this secret any longer. I swallow and try to sit up a bit. As I do, I see my mom in a wheelchair next to my bed.

“Mom, shouldn’t you be resting?” I ask her. I don’t want her putting her own health at risk for me.

“Tsk. I’m fine. Feel a bit like a pin cushion, but otherwise okay. They found a small bleed. They fixed it and I’m all fine now.”

I look at Hudson, who nods in confirmation.

“Here, take a drink.” Holding a cup of water to my lips, I take a drink, not realizing how parched I was.

“He has admitted to some things. Sawyer and his team are building a case, and they would like a statement from you, if you want to be involved. However, he pretty much admitted to everything on my front doorstep, which was captured all on my security cameras,” Hudson says, and my eyebrows rise.

“He will not be a part of our lives, and neither will his wife or Melody. Melody is looking at losing her freedom too after this.” Hudson says Melody’s name with a bit of a bite and looks at my arm.

“What happened? I remember giving more blood, but I don’t remember anything else,” I say and I see Hudson’s jaw click.

“Melody received a call from her mother just as she was going into surgery. She found out about her father. She thought you were making it all up. That’s what her mom told her on the phone. They weren’t happy that we were dating. They hated you from the moment they knew about you. I think she acted hastily, being so upset. Aspur-of-the-moment decision made her hook you up for another donation that wasn’t needed. Your already low iron levels and the few donations you have already given made you weaker than usual. Melody hooked you up to the IV and left you there.” He looks like the words he says taste bitter on his tongue.

“Oh my God,” I say as my stomach clenches. How could someone do something like

that? I could have died.

“Jolene found you. Apparently, she wanted to come and see you and check on you. She was also hanging around outside, wanting to apologize, but I sent her home. Told her that once you are better, you can decide if you want to talk with her or not. But she was a help. She’s the one who sounded the alarm so we all came running,” he explains, and my brow furrows. Who would have thought Jolene would ever be my savior, yet here we are.

“If I had just gotten my head out of my ass quicker and come sooner, I could have...” he starts to say, frustrated with himself. Head shaking, his eyes search my face. “I don’t know what I would have done if you weren’t okay.”

“You came. You’re here now. And I’m okay. More than okay with you by my side,” I tell him softly. Even though my strength is almost nonexistent, I grab his hand and squeeze it in mine.

“I’m here, Lacy baby, and I’m not going anywhere. You’re stuck with me if you’ll still have me?” he says, tone full of regret as he locks eyes with me, and I frown.

“I’m yours,” I tell him without an ounce of hesitation, tears pricking my eyes. I can’t believe he could think I wouldn’t want to be his. “I love you.”

“And I’m yours,” he confirms, placing his lips to my forehead in a tender kiss. “I love you too, baby. So much.”

With those sweet words as my lullaby, I close my eyes and fall back asleep, knowing the two people I love the most are both here with me. And for the first time in a long time, I trust that everything will be okay.

EPILOGUE - HUDSON

“It’s so peaceful here,” Lacy says from beside me as our feet crunch in the snow. We are in Rovaniemi, Finland, staying in an igloo under the stars, making one of her dreams come true. Harvey was crushed he couldn’t come, but we promised him next year and his grandma is making his favorite cake to make up for it. That and the fact that Lacy has been video calling and sending him photos almost every minute of the trip has her smiling and him laughing. The way she has stepped into a parenting role with Harvey is heartwarming. He loves her and she loves him.

“Apart from the drunk Santa at the end.” I scoff, laughing. He was an old guy who clearly had a few too many whiskeys to warm up in this weather. Lacy giggles, and I bask in the sound. It has been six months since things exploded. At the time, it was stressful, but I hired good people, good lawyers, therapists, and home help for everyone, because while Lacy and her mom were the most affected, the extended family, Harvey, my parents, and the distillery all needed some guidance too.

It was money well spent as I now hold her close as we walk back to our igloo after dinner at the main hotel.

“He was very entertaining,” she says, smiling. Lacy has come a long way in her healing, and I couldn’t be prouder.

My former father-in-law was convicted this week in the court of law for the crimes of grooming underage victims, assault, and harassment. He has been dropped from ever working in education again and will serve some time behind bars. Although not enough, in my opinion.

Melody lost her license. Lost her career. She was also tried in a court of law, admitted guilt, and was let off with a hefty fine and a record. Her mother had a fall from grace, the socialite with all the money now no more. I have no idea where they are. They’re not allowed to contact us and certainly not allowed anywhere near Whispers, me, my son, my girlfriend, or my other properties. I heard they may have fled to stay with other family in Europe, but I don’t know for sure.

“I’m happy to see you smiling,” I tell her honestly. There have been a lot of tears, a lot of sleepless nights, but we have come through the other end stronger. Together.

“I feel okay now. I think the worst is behind us,” she says, and I hold her tighter.

Once Lacy came forward with the allegations and proof against Gordon, there was a huge media onslaught. While I kept her safe and protected at home, she did make a public statement, and as soon as she did, many other girls came forward. Twenty in total. Their tales were all similar to Lacy’s. Some girls fled like Lacy did, but others weren’t so lucky.

“I just really want to move forward now, you know. Connor and Victoria have been working hard and I think I might jump back into it. Working a little more will be good.”

Tanner, Victoria, and Connor have been amazing through all this. Lacy has had time away from work to deal with everything and they never hesitated to support her.

“Have you spoken to your mom tonight?” I ask her, knowing she already did.

“Yes. She and Jennifer were in Williamstown today. Apparently, they have some new women coming into the group.”

When her mother floated the idea of opening a knitting group in Williamstown for other cancer patients, Lacy was a little hesitant, but both Veronica and Jennifer have started somewhat of a movement around the Whispers region. They are often driving here, there, and everywhere, talking to other women who are sick, giving support, and Lacy’s mom is thriving.

As we continue to walk, I can see our igloo up ahead. It’s cold, and smoke puffs from our hot breaths, but the sky is clear, just as the weather predicted, and full of stars. It’s almost impossible not to look up.