



Silver Fox's Twin Babies

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

Description: Seven years of secrets are about to shatter.

Evan Montgomery.

The silver fox billionaire.

My father's best friend's brother.

Seventeen years my senior.

And the father of my secret twins.

One grief-filled night gave me two heartbeats and a lifetime of lies.

Now he's back, running the company where I work.

And those late-night meetings in his office?

Let's just say his executive desk is getting quite the reunion tour.

The whole city's watching.

His brother's guarding our secret.

His daughter has his stormy blue eyes.

His son battles the same dyslexia he once did.

And the chemistry between us? Explosive enough to burn down his empire.

They whisper about the curvy assistant warming the CEO's bed.

They don't know every scorching touch, every desperate kiss, every forbidden moment bent over his desk...

Is just another secret ready to shatter.

But while the tabloids hunt their next headline...

While his brother fights for life after a heart attack...

1

AMBER

Everything was perfect in this classroom—bulletin boards organized, students’ desks neat and tidy. It almost made me chuckle at how absurd it felt to see a second-grade classroom so clean. But Mrs. Newsome had always been the sort of woman to run her classroom the way a drill sergeant ran boot camp. I smiled as I sat down on the small wooden chair across from her desk.

I’d been waiting in the hallway for the past fifteen minutes as her previous parent-teacher conference ran late. It was my lunch hour, but I had flexibility to step out when I needed, thanks to Jacob. My boss—my late father’s best friend—really understood how important my children were to me and supported me as if I were his own daughter, which I really needed at times.

“Ms. Lawson, it’s so good to see you again,” Ms. Newsome said as she sat down in her chair. Her wavy blonde hair flopped over her shoulder and she tossed it behind her back. The powder-blue suit she wore felt too formal for a teacher’s attire, but today wasn’t a classroom day. She was entertaining parents, some of whom had children like my son Parker, who really struggled.

“Same...Thank you for hosting these conferences.” I winced at how dumb I sounded. It wasn’t like she had a choice. It was something the school made every teacher do this time of year, nearing the midway point of the first semester. The last two years’ conferences hadn’t gone as well as I hoped, so anxiety knotted my stomach for this one too.

“Thank you for taking time from your busy schedule to come in. I know as a single mom this has to be a challenge, so I won’t keep you long.” What may have sounded like condescension from others came across as genuine compassion and understanding, which put me a little more at ease.

Last year’s teacher was a snooty woman who was stuck in old-school thinking that I was a bad mother for not settling down and giving my children the two-parent home they needed. She never missed an opportunity to make me feel belittled, and I disliked her very much. But this year, I felt like I was on a team with my twins’ teacher to help them grow and learn, and that was all I could hope for.

“Well, let’s start with Vera,” she said, and she slid a report card across her desk. The first nine weeks of school had boasted all A’s on her report card in every subject. Vera was so smart, which I knew before I even enrolled her in school. She could read at four years old and got frustrated with Parker when she tried to share things with him. He just struggled, right up until school, where he was diagnosed with dyslexia. We’d been battling that ever since.

“Wow, all A’s again. I’m not surprised.” I pored over the high marks and comments from Vera’s other teachers. The music teacher and art instructor both left high praise, and the gym teacher left a smiley face sticker in the comment section. My eyes popped up to Mrs. Newsome’s face where she held a bright smile.

“I’m recommending her for the Gifted and Talented Program. If she gets accepted, she will have a great chance to fully explore her abilities and excel in special classes.” Her hands folded together over her desk and she cocked her head as she waited for my response.

Warmth spread through my chest, which I knew was the feeling of pride swelling up. I knew Vera was only seven and that a child who excels at this age isn’t necessarily a genius, but it was special that she was doing so well that the teachers were already

pushing her toward greatness. I didn't know what "special classes" meant, but it might be good for her. Parker, however, might not like it. He'd already shown hints of jealousy when Vera received praise and he didn't.

"Special classes? What does that look like?" I set the report card down on her large honey-colored desk between the box of tissues and her mug of steaming coffee, and she nodded at me.

"Well, it would place her in a gifted classroom with other students who also excel. Some of those children would be a bit older than her, but no more than two years. They'd have a special instructor who?"

"A different classroom?" I said, frowning. I hated the idea of separating them. Even when they were nursing infants they slept in the same bassinet. They slept in the same crib until they were too large. I wanted them to always feel as close in life as they were in the womb.

"Well, yes. The Gifted and Talented Program is run by Mr. Temple, and he works with a range of students who excel. She wouldn't be in my classroom at all." I watched as Mrs. Newsome's cheery smile turned more serious. I'd never been faced with the idea that Parker and Vera would be split up at school. Each year when their teachers were assigned, I made sure to speak directly with the principal to ensure they were in the same classes. Eventually, that might not be possible, but they were so young, and thankfully Jacob pulled some strings for me financially to make it possible thus far.

"I just don't like the idea of them being separated." The tension that was starting to lift slightly, returned, pressing down on my chest. I clutched my purse against my stomach and gripped the leather strap. I would go to bat for my kids any day, but I just didn't want to do it with their teacher today.

It wasn't that I didn't want the best for Vera either. I wanted her to have all those chances, just not at the expense of leaving Parker behind or severing their close connection. The chair beneath me squeaked as I shifted nervously in my seat.

"Well, that's the other thing we need to discuss." Her expression fell into somewhat of a look of concern. She pursed her lips and her brow furrowed as she unclasped her hands and picked up the second report card under her grip.

When she passed it to me, she continued, "Parker is showing signs of major struggles in his reading. Unfortunately at this age, he's at a critical juncture. He's quite lucky you discovered his dyslexia when he was young. If not for that, he'd have been held back. As you can see, every subject that requires reading he is failing or nearly failing. History, English, science...He is just not keeping up with his peers." She pointed at the paper in my hands, and I didn't even have to read the comments to know what his other teachers would say.

He had an A in gym, a B in music, and an A in math too, but the F's lined the rest of the paper. It made my heart ache. We'd spent so much time and put so much effort into helping him. Jacob gave me such good ideas too, considering how Evan, his brother, struggled with severe dyslexia like this too. Parker had been to therapists and learning coaches, and it wasn't connecting with him yet. It made my heart so sad to know he was struggling like this, especially when he was so smart. His little brain just didn't see the world the way mine or his sister's did.

"Parker needs help, Ms. Lawson." I looked back up at Mrs. Newsome's face and saw her worried eyes. "I'm recommending him to a program too, one that will pair him with tutors and therapists to help him get up to speed. He isn't ready for this classroom, and if he stays here he's just going to continue to fall behind. I'm afraid I may have no choice but to hold him back and I know you don't want that for your twins."

The words were a dagger to my heart and my breath hitched at the idea that Vera would go on to third grade next fall while Parker had to stay behind in second grade. I couldn't let that happen, but separating them to different classrooms was also on my list of things I'd never do. It felt like an impossible situation.

"Thank you so much for your thoughtfulness on this," I said carefully, "but I'm not ready to make any choices on that. I need to talk to a few friends about it." I blinked back the tears fighting their way to the surface and set his report card back on her desk on top of Vera's. It was so disheartening to learn that my baby boy was struggling so badly, yet I still felt so proud of my little girl for how well she was doing.

I hated that intelligence was being measured by a tool that wasn't even. Every child's brain was so different; it made it seem unfair that because Vera was a strong reader whose brain functioned normally, she was hailed as super smart and excelling. Meanwhile, Parker was just as smart, but he was being labeled as a slow learner. If they could only see him playing his games at home, they'd know he was just as intelligent.

"Think about it, but I really believe it's what's best for them. I'd never want to do anything that you think may hurt them though." She stood and offered me her manicured hand, and I stood, hugging my leather purse to my belly, and shook her hand.

"Thank you, Mrs. Newsome. I'll be in touch." Nodding, I backed away and slunk into the hallway and out toward the door. I tried to look at the bulletin boards on the hallway walls for any of Vera's or Parker's artwork, but my heart was heavy. It was never an easy thing to hear that your child was struggling, probably every parent's worst fear, but to me, it felt even more daunting.

As I drove back to work in heavy traffic, I cried softly. Maybe I felt a little sorry for

myself too. Being a single mom was hard enough, but add to that a struggling child and it made the weight of the world crush me. Mom and Shelby would be there for me and help me make a good decision. I knew that. But I also knew Jacob had probably heard similar things from his parents about Evan...

Evan...My mind wrapped around his name for a moment before I pushed it away. The most obvious source of information for this situation was the only one I was never going to seek out. I couldn't. Not after the way things happened.

I parked in my usual spot and headed into my office. Shelby wiggled her fingers at me as I passed her desk and I nodded at her with my sullen expression. She looked fresh and happy in her festive sweater, and I probably looked like the Grinch. I just couldn't hide my discouragement. She was in the middle of things too, or I'd have stopped by her desk for a venting session. As it was, I was behind though. I had to catch up before day's end.

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My office was all the way in the back of the building, adjoining Jacob's. When he offered me this job as his executive assistant, I was floored. After the twins were born, I was so hard up for a job that I applied to be a paid intern, and he elevated me to C-suite level. I knew people thought I'd gotten special treatment, but he put people in their places. My dad left him with one dying wish—that he take care of me as if I were his own, and he had.

When I walked past his office, his head popped up and I knew he'd be in to see me in a matter of minutes. I sat at my mahogany desk and used my compact mirror in my purse to dab some powder on my face and freshen up so he wouldn't know I'd been crying. I had barely gotten my purse stashed in my desk drawer when he rapped on the door and walked in.

"Got a sec?" Jacob said, standing in my doorway. It was hard to look at him and not see my father. They were bosom buddies, did everything together. He'd been gone eight years now, and not a day went by that I didn't miss him.

"Sure," I said. There was no enthusiasm in my tone, and it didn't escape him.

"How did it go?" Jacob strolled into my office across my dark Berber carpet with his hands in the pockets of his gray slacks. He was tall, towering over my desk as he stood to my right looking down at me.

"Horrible," I sighed, and I dropped my head. "Parker is really struggling, though Vera continues to excel." The same iron grip I'd had on my purse strap in the classroom returned, but this time on my chair's armrest. I found myself doing that when I was nervous, gripping something tightly. My therapist, whom I'd stopped

seeing months ago thinking I was fine, told me it was my subconscious trying to work out how to be in control when there was no way I could control things.

“I’m so sorry to hear that.” Jacob sat on the corner of my desk and rested a hand on my shoulder. I looked up at him with a frown and tears in my eyes again. Jacob was the closest thing I had to a father or brother, and I appreciated deeply how he cared for me.

“I can’t let them be separated. You know how much I don’t want that.”

“Why would they have to be separated?” His eyebrows drew together in confusion.

“They want Vera to go to this gifted program, and they want Parker to join a teacher who can help him with his struggles, or they may have to hold him back.” The words tasted bitter, souring on my tongue. Just saying them reaffirmed my hatred for the idea of them being apart.

“Well, don’t get too worked up. I’ll see what we can do.” He stood again and I stood too and wrapped my arms around his chest. For a second, he seemed shocked and then his arms encapsulated me. I needed my father, but he was the next best thing.

“It’ll be alright, Amber. You’ll see. Evan went through some of the same things. Okay? Let me see what I can dig up. We’ll get Parker the help he needs without neglecting Vera.” He patted my back and I pulled away nodding, swiping at my eyes. I knew to take him at his word because he’d never failed me.

“I have to run out to a meeting. Catch you after work?” he asked. My nod of assent was my goodbye too. I sank back into my chair and rested my head on my folded arms on top of my desk.

I was so thankful for Jacob’s presence in my life every day. It felt like a part of my

father was still here with me every time he took a moment to check on me.

He really had been there for me, fighting for my little family in every way, including fighting his own board for my job. And the fact that he knew everything and held my confidence was more special, though he had lectured me many times about coming clean.

But at this point, there was no reason to. Evan had no interest in the truth. He came back from Europe five years ago with a woman on his arm, and I knew then that I'd made the right choice. Not telling him about the twins was the right thing. He had the life he wanted to live and I wasn't part of it at all anymore. The fact that he lived in a town twenty minutes away and never asked about me was proof enough.

What we had was nothing but a blip on the radar. The sex was amazing, but he never wanted anything more than that. And I had moved on, with Jacob's help, and his wife's. Together with my mother and my best friend, I'd come out of that deep depression and I was doing fine. I just had to fight for my kids the way this tribe of people around me fought for me. I could do this.

After I cried a bit more...

2

EVAN

I leaned back in my chair, rubbing my eyes after hours of staring at the data on the screen. The engineers were still talking—tired but driven. Each of us was trying to push forward the next phase of our renewable energy initiative. We were deep into testing a new energy storage system, the kind that could change the way we think about solar and wind power. The numbers were promising, but there were always variables to consider. I glanced up from the spreadsheet and caught Sarah's attention.

“Talk to me about the efficiency gap in the storage model,” I said. “You said it was down by 5 percent last week, but we’re still seeing a plateau. What’s holding it back?”

Sarah adjusted her glasses and kept scrolling through her tablet. “It’s the hybrid system. The integration of the backup power source is slowing things down. It’s working, but not as seamlessly as we’d hoped.”

“We need to stabilize that hybrid transition,” I said, tapping my pen against the table. “If we can’t get that smooth, the whole system falls short of what we’re promising investors.”

“I think it’s the capacitor design,” Ben chimed in, leaning forward from the far end of the table. “We’re pushing it too hard in one direction. Maybe we scale back the output and optimize the power flow instead of maxing it out.”

The back and forth was draining me for this entire project, not at all energizing me like it used to. I scrubbed a hand over my stubbled chin and turned to look out the window. The conversation continued with a bit of bickering over the best way to fix our situation, and I got lost in thought about other things, namely how life seemed to be stuck on repeat.

Days were long. Nights were short. I worked fourteen-hour days, ate alone, and slept heavily only to wake up the next morning and do the same thing like a hamster on a wheel. Not at all the way it was when I spent time in Europe. However, back then I had a zest for life. A zest that slowly dissipated the longer I was there and fell flat when my feet touched ground back home in Buffalo.

My eyes raked over the view of Crescent Springs out my window. It was dreary, even for October in New York. Or maybe the rose-colored lenses I’d seen the world through for so long had dimmed with the passage of time. Maybe I had changed, not

the scenery, and maybe my jaded view of life was what truly colored my vision.

“What do you think?” Sarah asked, and I snapped back to attention to see her eyebrows high and her eyes wide.

“Think?” I asked. I hadn’t been paying attention to a word they said.

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“About reducing the output to balance the system’s response times...”

They were waiting for an answer I wasn’t prepared to give them, and I was grateful that my phone started ringing loudly. It gave me an excuse to duck out of the meeting quickly. Something to break up the monotony of the same old, same old I’d been living. I held up a finger and barked out a quick, “I’ll be back. Ben, take the lead.”

Sarah looked defeated, slouching back into her seat as I strolled toward the door. I looked down at the smartphone in my hand, a prototype I was testing for research and development, a fancy new thing. It was Erin’s name and number that flashed across my screen, causing me a bit of confusion.

Erin, my brother’s wife, never called me. It wasn’t that Jacob and I were on bad terms; we weren’t. We were just busy men. I hadn’t spoken to him in a month, but only because we were busy running our own parts of this family business. So Erin’s call was shocking, and slightly concerning too.

“Erin? It’s Evan...What’s wrong?” I knew it had to be something serious for her to call me. It wasn’t like Jacob’s birthday was coming up or something.

The second hint of some dark cloud looming was the slight snuffle I heard before she said, “Evan...It’s Jake...He uh...He had a heart attack.” Erin’s choked-back sob wrenched my gut.

It felt like my body froze mid-sentence. My limbs felt numb; my mouth unable to utter a word. I turned toward the conference room and stared at the bickering

happening over the table and it felt foreign, surreal. So similar to life fifteen years ago when I was approaching thirty, just got a promotion to senior developer. The call was the same—except it was my father.

“Uh, is he okay?” I asked, and the words carved out a hole in my chest that instantly flooded with a torrent of emotion I hadn’t felt in a long time.

“I don’t know,” she wailed. She was no longer trying to hold back her sobs. They gushed out of her loudly into the mic and my ear took the brunt of it. Pain made me hold my phone away from my head for a second before taking a deep breath and blinking back the dread that wanted to paralyze me. I had to be strong for her. She had no one else. Jacob was her everything. She’d moved from Washington state to follow him.

Now it fell on my shoulders to care for her, and I had to snap out of this. “I’ll be right there...Okay?” There was no way she should be driving when she was like this. “Stay there. I’ll come pick you up. We’ll go to the hospital.”

My mind conjured up worst-case scenarios: Jacob died instantly, she found him lying face down, the company would disintegrate. It was all I knew, all I’d ever known. I was shocked when I got the call from my mother that Dad had died of a heart attack. Jacob and I both knew we were at risk for heart disease. We took care of our bodies, treated them like well-honed machines, like the ones we built at Montgomery Enterprises. I didn’t know how this could happen.

“Hurry, Evan. They’re taking him to Mercy.” Erin’s hiccups of grief were the last thing I heard as I ended the call and leaned back into the conference room.

“Guys I have to go. Family emergency. Ben, finish this up. You all can leave early.” I blurted out the orders before turning to run for my office. My mind was stuck there, outside that door, reeling in the revelation that my brother had suffered a heart attack

just like my father. But my body moved.

I suddenly had all this energy. I felt like I could pick up a bus and throw it. My heart raced and my hands were sweaty. I snagged my keys and jacket, and raced down to the parking garage for my car.

When I got to Erin's she was waiting. I didn't even get out of my car. I barely had the doors unlocked by the time she got to the passenger door, and she flopped into the seat, slamming the door shut as she huffed out, "Go...Go, Evan."

"Did you hear anything? Have they called?" I put the car in drive and floored it. Under normal conditions, I was a very safe driver—perfect record. But today I was a maniac, weaving in and out of traffic, running red lights after safely ensuring the intersection was clear. Erin didn't nag me once, though her hand gripped the handle above her door with white knuckles showing.

"He was breathing when they loaded him on the stretcher." Her lip trembled but she wasn't crying anymore. "It's all I know. It happened at work..."

My throat constricted. This would be a media storm, and the company would definitely get publicity for it, but most likely the wrong kind. Shareholders would be up in arms demanding answers. There would be no one around to give them those answers though. Jacob was CEO. I wasn't even next in line either. I was just head of research and development. The board would be scrambling to meet, probably today even.

"Okay," I said, sucking in a deep breath. "One thing at a time. Let's get to the hospital and see what the doctors are saying." I reached over and gripped her hand, and she squeezed my fingers like life depended on it. "It's all we can do right now. We stay positive and hope for the best."

“Would you pray?” she asked. I wasn’t a religious man at all, wasn’t even raised to be one, but I appreciated the sentiment. I felt hopeless too. It almost made me wish there really was something bigger out there in control, something that could step in and save us.

She wept as she squeezed my hand, and I parked under the emergency department awning. I didn’t care if they towed the car; I’d pay to have it released later on. Our need to be in the hospital was greater than any thought about money. I tore off my seatbelt and swung the door open, rounding the front of the car to help Erin out. She walked on shaky feet as we breezed through the double sliding doors into the hospital.

A nurse spotted us and stood up, striding toward us with a look of concern. “Mrs. Montgomery?” she asked, and Erin nodded. Her hand covered her mouth as more sobs escaped. “Your husband was just brought in here. Can you confirm his full name and date of birth?”

Erin sobbed so hard she couldn’t speak. I put my arm around her and answered the nurse’s question for her as the nurse smiled a very bittersweet smile. “I’m afraid, Mr. Montgomery is in queue for emergency open-heart surgery.”

My legs felt weak. I could only imagine how Erin felt. Jacob was her world. To me he was just a business partner, someone I golfed with, someone I grew up with... Though, the pain in my own chest from lying to myself was beginning to make me nauseous.

“Thank you,” I told the nurse.

“You can have a seat in the waiting area through there.” She gestured to a door on our left.

Erin tucked into my chest as my arms came up around her. I led her through the waiting room door as tears filled my own eyes, but I clamped them shut and held my sister-in-law as she cried harder. Her arms pulled me hard against her trembling body as we stood there.

The very real fear that I might not speak to Jacob ever again felt so heavy I wanted to fall over. I wanted to sit down, but I forced my legs to stay straight, to be here like a pillar and comfort Erin. I didn't like the idea of planning a funeral, not now, not ever. I hated them. I avoided them at all cost.

The last funeral I'd even been to was eight years ago, Chester Lawson. He died too young too, the way my father had. His funeral was bittersweet for me. Jacob's best friend...He made a huge impact on my life too. It gutted me, but not as much as it destroyed his daughter, Amber.

Erin's body shook in my embrace and I held her more tightly, but the memory of Amber Lawson and how we met that night at her father's funeral tugged at my thoughts. I let myself have the distraction. I couldn't do anything for Jacob, and the only thing I could do for Erin was to be a stalwart of strength.

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It's what I had been for Amber too, or so I had thought. She gravitated toward me at the funeral, and then for weeks afterward. And what we thought was a hot little fling—she was just too young for me—ended up being something more. I almost canceled my entire trip to Europe for her. But Jacob pressured me, and I knew it was a chance to double the company's influence.

We sparked—ignited into an inferno I thought might cause her to wait for me to return, but I got word from someone within the company that Amber had a new man. Or at least that was the word. She'd had a child with someone, and that soured it for me. Maybe because she wasn't pining like I was, or maybe because it proved I was nothing special.

Now, with my brother's life on the line, I stood here wondering if I made a mistake. I knew I was falling in love with her and I walked away. It could've been my last real chance at love and I blew it for work. And I wasn't getting any younger. At forty-four my own heart was probably on a beeline toward cardiac arrest too.

What a wake-up call. My God...if there was a God...I hoped he saved Jacob. I wasn't ready to put another loved one in the ground.

3

AMBER

The bubbling laughter and intermittent screams of seven-year-old children racing around my small two-bedroom apartment made me giddy. Vera and Parker turned seven on Friday. I took the day off work to spend with them, but we waited until

today, Saturday afternoon, to host a birthday party.

“Woah! Slow down, speedy,” Mom chided, patting Parker on the head as he raced past. The living room just wasn’t quite large enough for games of tag or roughhousing. With the chunky furniture and so many little ones, it felt cramped.

“My gosh, they have so much energy,” Shelby sighed. She turned to me with a smile and an armful of wrapping paper she’d collected from the floor. Her own child, Nicky, was Parker’s best friend, and was also engaged in the high-energy playtime. Cake and ice cream were a mother’s nemesis.

“Oh, you can put that over there.” I pointed to a large cardboard box in the kitchen designated for recycling. “Thank you...”

Shelby waltzed off as I scanned the room and spotted Vera with her friends. They were much calmer, clustered in a corner with their Barbie dolls playing pretend. She offered a sneer of disdain at Parker when he ran up to her with fingers curled up like claws and growled at her. I chuckled at their play. Turning seven was only fun if your twin left you alone to enjoy your own friend group. One day they’d appreciate this more.

“It was really nice of Mr. Price to come help,” Mom said as she started to collect the plates and cups from cake time. I stooped over the table and helped her. There were half-eaten slices of cake, and most of the plastic cups had milk in them still. At my salary I couldn’t afford to throw this much food away, but I didn’t want the twins filling their bellies with junk all the time.

“Yeah, he’s class dad.” I smiled at her as I poured one cup into another to make carrying them out easier. “He goes everywhere.” I glanced at Mr. Price who had finally wrangled the boys and had them in a dogpile on the ground wrestling. It was better than running I supposed. He was older than me too, by several years.

I found that a lot. So far, I was the youngest mother in the class every year, or I appeared to be. I never asked the parents their ages, but most seemed to be in their mid to late thirties. At twenty-nine with a set of seven-year-old twins, I got strange looks. A lot of times I was asked if I was their older sister, which wasn't bad as a compliment.

"Well, it was nice of him." Mom smiled at me as Shelby approached.

"I think Nicky and I have to head out soon. He has to get his insulin. I forgot to bring it with me." Shelby was my lifeline to a normal adult life. I spent so much time with children, I forgot what it was like to have friends and go out. If it wasn't for her friendship here and at work, I would feel like an island of my own.

"Thank you so much for coming...I'm so sorry to spring all that on you." I frowned as I remembered asking such a huge favor of her. After what happened at work while I was out, I was left in a tricky situation. Jacob promised to stop by and pick up the cake, but he and Erin weren't returning my calls.

"It's not a problem..." Shelby looked a bit concerned, her forehead creased with worry. "You think the rumor is true?"

I didn't know if it was or wasn't. Everything I heard came from her. She said people at work were talking about Jacob having had a heart attack, but Erin would have called me...Wouldn't she?

"Gossip starts a fire that burns the whole house down, ladies." Mom eyed me and Shelby before turning to carry her armload of paper plates to the trash.

"Thanks, Mona," Shelby said, rolling her eyes. She chuckled and patted my arm. "I know he's like a father to you. I hope we get answers soon. Maybe he just fainted." Her comforting smile was aimed at helping my heart feel settled but I was still

nervous. With Erin being out of touch, it only made the unsettled feeling of fear worse. Jacob really had been like a father to me, and after putting my own father in the ground, the idea of losing him terrified me.

Someone knocked on the door just as Shelby turned to scream over her shoulder for Nicky to get his coat. I floated that way, not knowing what to expect. My neighbors probably hated the noise from the party, though I doubted it was one of them complaining. And I wasn't expecting any other guests yet, or parents here to retrieve children.

When I rose up on my tiptoes to peek through the peephole, I felt relief wash down my body. A smile formed on my lips as I turned the knob and backed away to swing the door open. It was Jacob. I could tell right away. His salt and pepper hair was partially obscured by the gray scarf he wore, and though he had his back to me, I recognized the tan overcoat.

"Jacob, I was so worried." The words spilled from my lips in a rush, and the man turned around with a gift in hand. Except, it wasn't Jacob. "Evan..." The breath that escaped felt like it sucked all the air out of my chest, like my lungs collapsed after I said the word.

"Hey, Amber..." His voice was soft. He stood only a few feet away. His gloved hands held a square gift wrapped in bright primary-colored paper with a ribbon on top and a card attached.

A knot formed in my throat, and I stood there staring like an idiot. He was every bit as handsome as the last day I'd seen him almost eight years ago. Except, he had a lot more salt to his pepper, and fine age lines had begun to form around his eyes. The stubble was new too. He always kept his face clean-shaven back then.

"Uh, this is from Jacob and Erin..." He held the gift out and I watched his eyes flick

over my shoulder into the room where the kids were being loud again. “I’m sure you’ve heard by now...”

I licked my lips. My mouth was so dry it felt like sandpaper over wood. I hadn’t heard. I wasn’t at work. Even so, Gavin, the company’s COO, was keeping things bottled up. Need to know and all that.

“Heard?” I asked, feeling dazed. I hadn’t seen this man in eight years, and he just showed up on my doorstep. My body vibrated with so many unspoken feelings—attraction, connection, chemistry, terror. If he only knew.

“Jacob had a massive coronary, Amber. He’s in the hospital.” Evan’s eyes searched my expression as if he didn’t know me, as if we hadn’t spent hundreds of hours together talking and having sex. Or was he looking for the connection we lost when he went to Europe and came back with a woman draped on his arm?

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“My God,” I breathed, unable to form more words. Shock rode over my entire body. Every cell was numb and pulsing.

“He had open-heart surgery. He barely survived it. We’re not sure if he’ll make it. It was just yesterday.” His grimace and the way his head dropped when I took the gift made my heart squeeze. I wanted to run to his arms and press his face against my chest to comfort him. But that thing between us, the one where I was his source of comfort—it was over a long time ago.

“The company though...” Was it selfish that I thought about my job? Without Jacob, I’d have no one to report to. I might not have a job to return to. It made the panic slicking through my veins even worse. My cheeks got hot as my body dumped cortisol into my bloodstream.

“I’ll handle that ...”

“Erin,” I said as my thoughts went to her. She wasn’t like a mother to me, more like a sister, because I had my own mom. But she was a sweet lady. She had to be scared. “I should go to her.”

“I’m staying...” he said, and his eyes swept up to meet mine. “But that’s nice of you. She’ll appreciate the sentiment. She has way too much food, so don’t send any casseroles.” Evan’s warm chuckle lit up his face momentarily before his expression drooped again. “I’ll take care of her...She told me to let you know if you need anything you can reach out. Jacob would still want you to be cared for too. We all know how hard you took Chester’s death.”

He ran a hand over his hair and sighed. “I better run. You have a houseful.”

“Yeah,” I said as he took a step backward. “It was good to see you...”

Evan pressed his lips into a line and nodded at me before he turned and walked away, and I felt someone’s hand on my bicep squeezing. I turned to see my mom there, solemn expression on her face.

“Are you okay?” she asked, and I knew exactly what she meant.

There were three people in this world who knew everything. Mom, me, and Jacob. If the news of Jacob’s very real heart attack hadn’t hit me so hard, I’d have been tearing my hair out in fear. Mom pulled me away from the door, and I turned slowly to look down at Parker’s chubby face as he said goodbye to Nicky. He was the spitting image of his father. A man I’d kept a dark secret from for years. A secret Jacob helped me keep because he knew what it would mean for both of us.

A secret that I had a very bad feeling was about to be uncovered.

“Come on...I’ll pour you a drink,” Mom said, taking my hand as she ushered me away from the door.

Yes. A drink. That was what I needed.

A good stiff drink.

4

EVAN

Not much had changed in the past eight years here at headquarters, though the offices

had gotten a carpet upgrade at some point. I strutted through reception and past the cubicles of some of our associates. After the emergency board meeting held yesterday afternoon via Skype, I knew my presence here would come as a shock. Only the higher-ups were being told about me taking over for Jacob, and the shift would be temporary.

I shuddered to think what would happen to our father's company if Jake died. Me being voted in as temporary acting CEO was a hard sell—the way Jacob told me it would be a long time ago. There were reasons why my father handed the company over to him in his will, reasons I was the one sent overseas to build and expand. It wasn't that I wasn't trusted. It was that I hadn't been trustworthy.

But my playboy ways were done now, those moments long forgotten. I learned my lesson the hard way when I had my heart ripped out of my chest by more than one woman. I grew up really fast, and when Amber and I had that fling, it was a moment of clarity to me. I was messing with people's emotions, including mine, and I had to stop it. I'd never forget the look on her face when I told her I was going to Europe for at least eighteen months, maybe longer.

It was just a flash, so brief I almost missed it, but she was hurt. I hadn't meant to hurt her. I thought at first I was just comforting her after her father died, but then things turned more frequent, more serious. In my heart, I knew she wanted to ask me to stay, and I wanted her to. It just didn't work out that way. Jacob thought shipping me overseas to do something for our company would make me grow up, and it had. Really fast.

The surprise I thought I'd see on the faces of the lower-ranking staff was there. Wide eyes accompanied head nods and stiff smiles as I passed desks. Taking over for Jacob was going to be a hard job but not one I was incapable of taking on. I'd been in R&D for so long I knew our products inside and out. I had worked my way up the ladder just like he had, but with him at the top, there was no room for me. Maybe someday

it'd be COO or CFO, but for now, I was content with what I was doing. I enjoyed my team, and I was going to miss them for the duration of this temporary job, but I knew I could do it.

I passed the C-suite offices knowing they'd been informed already, and I went straight to Jacob's office. I had a meeting set up later this afternoon to assure them all that I was not replacing my brother permanently and that I would need his help. This appearance was more for optics than anything else, and to connect with Jake's executive assistant to make sure I was up to speed on things. I didn't have half the experience with dealing with customers, shareholders, or investors that Jacob had and I would lean on this team immensely.

His office was well-kept. A large oak desk dominated the room, with matching bookshelves behind it, though he had barely any books on it. His diplomas and certificates were framed and displayed on the shelves, along with knickknacks and decor I could tell Erin had been the one to pick out. The color scheme had changed since the last time I was here from Dad's colors of gold and blue to a more calming tan and honey, and throw pillows of similar colors on the clunky leather couch matched.

I was standing in the middle of the room thinking about my brother and how strong of man he was when I heard someone behind me clear their throat. I turned around and was shocked to see someone I thought I may never see again standing in front of me.

Amber Lawson, with the lips of a goddess, and a curvaceous figure that commanded my attention, stood with a tablet in hand and a professional expression on her face. Reading glasses perched on the tip of her nose and she looked at me over the rim like a naughty librarian who kept all her kinks wrapped up behind the rule-behaving facade. Her hair was twisted into a bun and her form-fitting suit screamed "I'm a businesswoman."

“Mr. Montgomery,” she said, nodding at me. She took two strides closer and my heart flipped in my chest. When Erin gave me that gift for Amber’s child and I had to stop by, I felt a chokehold grip me. I thought it would be awkward, that she’d turn me away or be upset at seeing me. She was as shocked about Jacob’s heart attack as anyone else, and after hearing Erin go on about how she and Jacob had all but taken Amber in, I knew she was close with them.

“Amber,” I breathed, feeling a little lightheaded at seeing her. I had no clue she worked here, so it was all starting to make more sense why Jacob had purchased a gift for her child. My eyes dropped to her hands, where she extended the tablet in my direction. I’d already seen on her left ring finger that there was no ring, which usually meant no spouse, but I had dismissed it.

Amber moved on years ago. She had a child with someone else. If that wasn’t a kick to the curb, I didn’t know what was. But it didn’t dissuade me from checking her out, or remembering how amazing her body felt against mine.

“You’ll see here that you have a full schedule of meetings. It’s nearing eight thirty and you’re running late already.” She tapped the screen and the itinerary lit up. I tore my eyes away from her round cheeks and looked down where she was pointing. “You need to be in the conference room soon, and I have so much to get caught up on after my day off on Friday.”

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My brain felt like it was catching up too. My thoughts were racing, but my movements were slow. I traced my eyes back up to her face and she stood with her hands folded in front of herself staring at me. “I have to run.” She swallowed hard and her cheeks flashed. She looked flustered.

“You were expecting me?” I asked, confused.

“Mr. Chaney told me to expect you.” Her eyes flicked to the clock on the wall and she blinked hard a few times.

“Is everything okay?” I asked, and my shoulders relaxed a little. She seemed as nervous as I felt. I didn’t realize she was Jacob’s assistant; Erin said nothing about it. The history between us was thick and rich with so many not-safe-for-work memories. I wasn’t sure if we were going to be able to put that aside to work together.

“Uh, yes.” She nodded, but there was something there. My dick twitched as she got more flustered. I imagined her getting flustered by me, turned on a little. Maybe her body was reacting to being near me again after all these years, the way mine was to hers.

“Something’s wrong. Tell me,” I said, and I tucked the tablet under my arm and crossed my arms over my chest.

Amber’s cheeks were rosy now. She fiddled with the hem of her jacket, the way she did when she had something to say but she was scared to. I’d seen her do it a million times. I had memorized her like the lyrics to a love song I would never forget. She was imprinted on my mind.

“It’s just that, well, sir...” She pressed her lips into a line and pulled the jacket down again. “Jacob and I have this arrangement. I’m a single mom and I have to take care of my children, so he gave me?—”

I waved my hand and she stopped. “Whatever arrangement he had stands.” I smiled and winked at her, feeling my body kick into overdrive at her nervous energy. It turned me on, the embarrassment, the vulnerability. When we would role-play she would get so flustered, and I loved it. Seeing this—her real embarrassment and nervous energy—had my dick swelling.

“Thank you, sir,” she said, and I swore she curtsied. Then she turned to go and I called after her.

“Amber ...”

She stopped to turn back to me and her hands were on her jacket, tugging at the hem again. “Yes, sir...” The way her voice rose at the end, the question in her tone, made me want to command her to come back and bend her sexy body over my temporary desk, but I wasn’t getting those vibes from her—yet.

“Stop calling me sir.” I winked again and her lips flushed darker. “Please. I’m not replacing Jacob. He’ll be back when he’s recovered, and I’d much prefer the sound of my name on your lips...Not ‘sir’ or ‘Mr. Montgomery.’ Oh, and if it’s possible, would you be able to work through lunch? Maybe later tonight too? I need help to catch up.”

“Oh, uh...Yes, of course.” Her forehead wrinkled and her smile faded into nervousness again, but she really had no choice. I really did need the help.

“Good, you can go.”

She nodded but she said nothing as she scurried away, and I watched her hips sway back and forth. How lucky of a man was I? After all this time it felt like fate had intervened in my life to put her in my direct path. I walked to Jacob's chair and sat down, but when my eyes fell on the picture of him and Erin together on their trip to Hawaii, I felt guilt needle at my conscience.

Fate would never harm my brother just to align my path with Amber's again. And I could never wish harm on my brother just to get a chance to see the woman I had been in love with all those years ago.

But that didn't mean I couldn't enjoy working with her or trying to rekindle a flame that had long since died out. Amber Lawson and I were going to work together as two professionals under one roof. If something more came from it, so be it.

And maybe I hoped it did.

5

AMBER

"Are you okay?"

Shelby's voice made my head pop up. For the past five minutes my face had been buried in my hands, elbows firmly planted on my desk. Out of the hundreds of employees here at Montgomery Enterprises, I was one of the lucky executive assistants who had their own private office. Shelby slipped in and shut the door behind herself.

"No, are you kidding?" Seeing Evan at my house the other day when he delivered the twins' birthday gift from Jacob and Erin was a shock to my system. Mom had to stay on to help clean things up because I required a hefty dose of alcohol and a hot shower

to shake the nerves. What if he'd seen the twins?

"It was nearly eight years ago, Amber..." Shelby walked over and sank into a chair across from my desk and sighed. "Besides, he came home with that bimbo on his arm, and when he left it was on bad terms, remember?"

Shelby was partially right. Jacob confessed to me six months later, when I confessed that Evan was the father of my babies, that the reason Evan had been sent off was because of his philandering, though that wasn't the official reason. Jacob was embarrassed. I was too. I'd been a part of that, though I didn't think Jacob had all the facts. But who was I to correct him? Especially when he'd given me a much-needed job...

"Okay, but he's back, Shelby. And yes, he was back years ago and worked in Crescent Springs, but not here. Not under the same roof. Not with me reporting to him." I'd been caught off guard by the whole thing, and since this morning when he asked me to work late, I'd been stuck in fight or flight.

"Well, he's hot. Would it be so bad to entertain him again?" She winked at me, but I wilted. I knew what she meant, and I'd seen the desire in his eyes. While I would love to throw myself at him because that sex was so amazing, I just couldn't. I had children to think of now. Children I didn't learn about until after he'd been gone a few months. Children I hid from him with Jacob's help because Jacob knew how irresponsible his brother had been.

By the time both of us realized Evan had grown up, he had moved on. He was with someone else who worked in the company, and I demanded that Jacob keep my secret. He did so begrudgingly, but with my protection in mind.

"So Vera has to do flash cards with Parker." I pulled the key out, avoiding her gaze, and slid it across the table. "She doesn't have to do that, but her homework only takes

her like five minutes. So I make her do it instead of me so they collaborate. Then Parker just has a few math sheets to do after that. He's pretty quick with it. After dinner they can play video games." I forced a very fake smile and Shelby rolled her eyes as she took the key.

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“Are you going to be okay?” Her hand rested on mine and I sighed.

“I have to do what I have to do. It’ll be fine.” My rationalization was covering my nerves, which were betrayed as I tugged on the hem of my suit jacket. I’d seen Evan’s eyes devour me, landing on my hands as my nervous habit appeared again after years of thinking I’d kicked it. He brought that out in me.

“Okay, but if things get weird, you just call me. I’ll bring the kids and come back.” Shelby was my lifeline right now. I hadn’t told Mom about working with Evan yet, and Jacob wasn’t around, obviously. Shelby knew nothing about the kids’ father, so I was just stuck with no outlet for the time being.

I stood slowly and tugged my jacket again cursing myself silently for letting my nerves show. “Thanks for watching them. Hopefully it won’t be late.” I walked around my desk and hugged her, and she left to get the kids from school. I was alone. It was closing time, and Evan was waiting in Jacob’s office for me. There was no more putting this off. I had a job to do, and I couldn’t let Jacob down, not now when he needed everyone around him to carry on and keep things moving smoothly.

I picked up the stack of files and a tablet I’d been using all day to prepare Evan for what lay ahead, and I sucked in a reassuring breath before I walked out of my office and up the hall. My skirt shifted uncomfortably with each step and I wanted to fidget with it, but I knew it would give away my nerves.

When I rounded the corner and walked into Jacob’s office, the scent of Chinese food hit my senses and made my mouth water. All this time and he hadn’t forgotten that kung pow chicken was my favorite. It was set out on paper plates with plastic forks

and steaming dishes of dipping sauces next to egg rolls. I dropped my eyes to the sight and then they rose to meet Evan's azure gaze.

"What's this?" My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth as I tried to talk, and I probably sounded like an idiot. Had I been baited into a date with him, or was he being cordial since he asked me to work late?

"I thought we're both working late; it's almost dinner time. Are you hungry? We should make sure we're fueled up for this." His hand gestured at the food spread on the short coffee table by Jacob's large leather sofa.

It was tempting.

Evan was tempting.

I had missed him. Not a day went by the past eight years where I didn't think of him. It was hard not to. At first I forced myself not to because every time I pictured him I cried. I thought he was the one. Five months of bliss ended shockingly when he told me he was leaving, that it could be years. I was so attached, so vulnerable with him. And he just left. I could have said something, asked him to stay, but how? And let him give up his future with his father's company? I knew Jacob was a stickler back then.

"Uh, sure..." My gut roiled. I couldn't help it. I tugged on my suit jacket when he took the files from my hands and nodded at the sofa. I blurted out, "Those files are everything you need to know. I made a document on the tablet too." My tongue felt swollen, my hands sweaty. I was so turned on around him even when I told my body to knock it off. He was a blast from the past. Yes, we had sex. But he was my boss now. Here only temporarily to help. I couldn't let my heart get out of control.

"Thank you," he said politely, and as I sank onto the couch, I thought maybe he'd sit

across from me. I was wrong. Dead wrong. He sat right next to me almost close enough for our thighs to touch. “You smell good,” he said, and my head dipped.

I reached for a plate of food and took a bite so I didn’t have to respond. Things got awkward really fast. I shoveled food into my mouth and tried not to look at him, but he ate slowly, with confidence. He kept looking at me too, watching me. I felt like he was curious, or maybe I was paranoid.

“I’ll be here a while it seems...Jacob may take months to recover.” I nodded and chewed and never said a word. Keeping my mouth full of food wasn’t the most socially acceptable thing to do, but it was safe. Until the food started to run out and I was feeling the pull of chemistry.

Evan clicked his tongue and I looked up at him. His hand reached out and brushed a piece of rice off my lip and I froze. The way the pad of his thumb curled my lip down as I swallowed wasn’t the hot part. It was the way he didn’t shy away from looking into my eyes.

“We have a lot of history, Amber.” His pause punctuated the sentence with sizzling heat. “Do you think we’re going to be able to work together? I could see if Gavin’s assistant would switch...” His hand stayed on my cheek. My eyes dropped to his lips and back to his gaze. I noticed his eyes dropped too. To my chest.

“Uh, no. That’s not necessary,” I said, heaving out a sigh. His hand dropped but I could see the desire in his eyes. This was a horrible idea. I still wanted him just as badly as I had years ago. The same heat stirred in my gut. The same ache in my groin for his face to be buried there. The same yearning in my heart for connection...

My eyes dropped to the table, and I reached for a napkin to wipe my own face. I came in here to help him with his work, not talk about our past. I supposed it was inevitable. There was a lot left unsaid. When he told me he was leaving I just stopped

talking to him. It hurt too much. I went through a depression so bad for months that I never even noticed my period hadn't come for more than twelve weeks. When I came to myself, it was too late. He was gone, and I was pregnant with his twins.

"I'm sorry," he said, setting his plate on the table. His hand rested on my knee and squeezed softly. His hand spread warmth up my thigh to my groin and I choked back a whimper. How did he still do this to me?

"Sorry?" I asked, swallowing the lump in my throat.

"For just leaving... You know, we really had something. I thought you might've been the one, Amber." I heard the sorrow in his voice and it melted my heart. But he did leave. He left me and found someone else. I saw pictures of him with the bimbo on his arm and knew even if I wanted to, I'd never have the heart to tell him about his children.

"You had a job." I heard the hollow tone with which I spoke, but I wasn't sorry for it. Some of that pain lingered yet unhealed.

"Yes, but I had you, and I threw that away... It's just that... when I came back and heard you had a baby with someone else..."

Two babies, I wanted to correct, but I said nothing, mostly because panic started rising. He really had no clue. Jacob had done an amazing job at hiding my secret for me, for which I was eternally grateful, but now I was terrified that Evan was going to ask. And what would I say then? What would I tell him truly happened? Hiding something wasn't the same thing as directly lying. I could never just blurt out the truth. My kids' futures were too precious for that.

I thought I was going to throw up the food I'd just eaten. His hand squeezed my knee again. I kept my head down and he kept talking about the past.

“I was surprised you moved on so quickly. Kinda hurt by that too.” His hand rose up and touched my chin, forcing me to look up at him. “I shouldn’t have left. When I got there, I knew that. I missed you too much.”

My eyes searched his sincere expression, and I leaned into his hand unconsciously. His palm cupped my cheek, then he ran his fingers over my ear as he tucked hair around it. “It was a real idiot move to leave you.”

I wanted to hit pause, to go back to the moment he asked me if working together was going to be too difficult because I had a new answer for him. No. No it was not. Tears were already welling up in my eyes at his sincere apology, and blinking them back wasn’t working. How long I’d waited for him to say these exact words. It was too late now. Too many years had passed, too long with this buried secret.

“Evan, I ...”

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“I am sorry ...”

The pull was too much. He didn’t let me look away. He forced me to keep eye contact, and when he leaned in and his lips brushed over mine, I caved. I was a damn fool. I caved and let him kiss me, and I poured every ounce of emotion I’d stored up for the past eight years into it. My lips danced over his, relishing the flavor of his dinner and my tears. He bit my lower lip and I rested my forehead against his momentarily.

Until it hit me.

I just kissed my boss.

Panic shot down my chest and I lurched up out of my seat, spilling my plate of food. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” I blurted out and tried to run away, but he got off the couch and captured my hand.

I just kissed my boss. Oh God. This wasn’t good.

6

EVAN

I pulled Amber back to me. I hadn’t intended to scare her, not even a little. This dinner was supposed to be a bridge between the awkward interaction we’d had earlier in the day to an agreement between us to put the past aside in honor of Jacob. But her hand trembled in my grasp, and I could see the tears streaking down her cheeks.

“Hey,” I said softly. I pinched her chin and forced her to look up at me. Still, she avoided eye contact with me. “What’s wrong?”

Her lack of response spoke volumes, but not as loudly as the way her hand rested on my hand that was cupping her cheek. She leaned into my touch and sniffled, and I used my thumb to brush a few tears off her cheekbone. The touch was innocent enough, but the hunger in her eyes as she looked up at me through her eyelashes was anything but. My fingers curled more tightly around the back of her neck and we stayed deadlocked like that, staring into each other’s eyes for a moment.

It was like nothing had changed, like the last time I kissed her was only yesterday and the fire and passion between us was still thriving. My eyes bounced between hers, watching as she licked a tear off her lower lip. I couldn’t avoid watching her actions. I was mesmerized by how strongly I felt toward her.

“May I kiss you again?” I asked, but Amber didn’t respond in words.

Instead, she sucked in a breath and stepped closer to me, tipping her head up under mine as she pressed another kiss to my lips that ignited an inferno inside me. We were alone. The offices were empty and dark. My other hand slid around her waist and pulled her against my body where my swelling dick pressed on her thigh. She whimpered, but she didn’t pull away. Her hands rose up around my shoulders and locked behind my head.

The kiss deepened as she parted her lips for me. My body was on fire. It’d been so long since I did something so risky. Jacob had always lectured me, which made this feel doubly wrong and doubly enticing. My hands were greedy, groping her as I backed her toward the desk. She didn’t resist me either. She started undressing me as we moved. Her hands worked my tie, then the buttons on my dress shirt.

“My God, you’re just as sexy as the last time I saw you.” I didn’t mention the day I

left. I knew it would conjure bad feelings for both of us. Getting on that plane felt so wrong, but I thought it was the right thing. Now I knew it wasn't. I'd made a mistake.

"You've gotten older..." Her lips turned upward in a grin as she backed away with both sides of my tie in her hands. She pulled me along with her until her hips pressed against the desk. "I like that smoldering look you have now. Salt and pepper suits you."

"You're stalling," I growled low in my throat. "Don't think I didn't notice you undressing me with your eyes the moment I walked in."

Amber bit her lower lip, her eyelashes batting seductively. "And here I thought I was being so subtle," she teased.

There it was. The spark I remembered about her. I kissed her jawline, finding a tear, then took time kissing and licking up her tears until our mouths met again. She guided my hands to the hem of her skirt, which I inched upward as she shed her suit jacket. There was no more tugging of its hem. She was relaxed—putty in my hands now.

I pushed her hips upward and back, so she was perched on the edge of the desk with her skirt up around her waist. Her panties were damp with arousal, but I focused on her blouse first, undoing one button at a time. I couldn't get enough of either. My lips trailed down her neck, over the curve of her collarbone, to the swell of her breast that spilled out of her bra. I cupped her breast, marveling at its heaviness in my hand as I circled her nipple with my thumb.

"Oh God," Amber moaned, her back arching as I tugged on her nipple through the lace material.

I looked up at her. Her eyes were still closed, but her body was begging me for more.

I gave in to the temptation, hooking my fingers in her panties and sliding them down her legs, along with her heels. Her bare thighs were silky smooth against my slacks as I parted her folds and delved a finger inside of her. Hot, wet, and so tight, Amber's walls clenched around me. She was always like this for me—impossibly wet.

“Oh God,” she moaned again, rocking against my hand. When her hand reached for my wrist, I clicked my tongue.

“Ah, ah...Now you know what I like. Don't toy with me, Ms. Lawson.” My gentle chiding made her lips curl into a smile but her head still remained arched back, hair starting to fall from its bun. “Besides, I don't want you to come too soon...”

Amber's eyes snapped open, and she looked at me with passion so intense it almost singed my very soul. “You always did know how to draw things out, didn't you?”

I smirked. “You never complained before tonight.”

She bit her lip again; I couldn't help but lean in and suck the pain away. “No,” she breathed, her hips moving against my hand. “But you left me high and dry that one time, remember?”

“And I've been kicking myself ever since. But let me make it up to you, Amber,” I said against her ear, my voice a low growl. I'd never forgive myself for that. I could try to make up for it though.

The way she worried her lip between her teeth drove me wild. I kneaded a breast while she opened the fly of my pants and pulled my dick out. I was rock-hard and ready. Her hand was magic, stroking me and pulling precum to the surface. The kiss we shared was scorching, branding her taste on my lips until I kissed downward again, taking control.

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Amber hissed and moaned as I nipped at her skin, lower and lower until I was on my knees between her legs pulling her with both hands to the edge of the desk.

“God, so much moisture,” I murmured. “I’ve missed this. You have no idea how much I’ve missed the way you taste.”

Her scent, her flavor, they were all perfect; I couldn’t get enough. My tongue lapped at her folds, teasing and tormenting her until she was a quivering mess on the desk. Her hands were in my hair, guiding me where she wanted me to go. I obliged her, sucking on her clit until her thighs squeezed my head.

“Oh God, yes,” she moaned. “Right there...like that...”

My tongue flicked over her swollen bud and Amber came apart in my mouth the instant I slid my fingers back into her. The way her body spasmed around me was enough to make me come right there, but I didn’t want our reunion to end so soon. I was going to make it last as long as humanly possible. I continued to suck as she writhed and clawed at my head. My dick throbbed and ached to be inside her, and when her spasms subsided, I slowly rose to a standing position before wiping my mouth clean with the back of my hand.

Amber’s head hung back, most of her hair now loose from the bun, and I bit her neck, making her grunt again. I didn’t ask permission. We were way past that. I grabbed my dick with one hand and rubbed it up and down her folds. The way she spread her legs for me was permission enough. I slid in slowly, inch by inch, and she groaned long and low as I buried myself to the hilt.

“Oh God, this is incredible,” I growled deep from my chest. Her hand reached up to pull my mouth toward hers for another kiss. I could still taste her on my lips, and then on her tongue the longer we kissed. One hand stayed on her hip while the other wrapped around the fleshy globe of her breast.

I withdrew almost all the way before sliding back in again, my hips rocking against hers. Amber’s nails bit into the back of my neck as she clawed at me, her breaths coming in pants now. I began thrusting slowly at first, savoring the feeling of her slick heat against my skin. It’d been too long. Her pussy clenched down around my dick again, making the sensations even more intense. It encouraged me to keep going.

And when her hand squeezed between us, rubbing her clit, I knew she was chasing another orgasm. My hips dipped and angled, so I could find the right spot to please her. She whimpered and kissed me harder, her breath coming in thready pulses.

“Higher...” she panted, so I rocked my hips up and kept thrusting. “Yes...there...More.”

It was one thing I loved about her. That she could communicate exactly what she wanted. It made my job easy. Though, tonight it was challenging me to my core. I wanted to blow, but she wanted more.

“This?” I curved my body over hers, my thrusts becoming shorter but more deliberate as she whimpered beneath me.

“So close,” she squeaked.

The sound made my focus intensify, every muscle in my body tensing with pleasure. Her body was so tight and responsive, and I could feel her nearing the edge. When her eyes shot open and met mine, I knew it was time. Her jaw dropped open, a soft gasp escaping her lips as her pussy clenched around me once again. This time, it was

my cock pulling the sweet release from her.

Her head arched down towards mine, her eyes rolling back before closing in ecstasy. Her trembling body pressed against mine, one hand gripping my wrist tightly while the other held onto my neck. The waves of pleasure seemed to last longer this time, and I savored every moment until her lips found mine again, kissing me with a slow and sultry warmth that seeped into my chest.

“Turn over,” I told her, my voice laced with desire. The anticipation of seeing her toned, round ass in the air was almost too much to handle. Amber eagerly complied, sliding off the desk and positioning herself as I had directed. Her body was a perfect canvas for me to explore, and she seemed more than willing to do whatever I desired. As she looked at me over her shoulder, one hand reached back and spread herself open for me.

“Like this?” she asked, a hint of excitement in her voice. My already hard member twitched at the sight of her submission and I gave her a knowing smirk. She knew exactly how to push my buttons.

“Perfect,” I replied with a low growl.

With her holes on display, I stepped back toward her. I didn’t get to grab her tits anymore, but I slid in easily. I grabbed her hips and leaned forward, resting my weight on my forearms. Amber’s hair draped over the desk, and she was a vision.

“I missed you,” I breathed in her ear, and then I began to move again, this time faster and harder than before. She met every thrust with a moan or a whimper. The desk inched forward with the force of my thrusts and Amber’s knuckles were white as she gripped its edge.

“Yes, God yes...” she panted. Just thinking of all the times I’d had her like this only

pushed more buttons. The memories flooded back, times we snuck around, had flings at Jake's house or her father's.

We'd always been like this—frenzied and animalistic when together. The chemistry between us didn't allow us to be anything but. She made the beast come out in me.

“Oh God, I'm...” she panted again, but I couldn't stop. Not until I was done.

When I felt the telltale signs of my orgasm approaching, I reached around and pinched her clit. Amber came apart beneath me, her pussy contracting around my dick while she screamed out her release. It was all I needed to tip over the edge with her.

She shuddered and gasped as I pumped my load into her until I felt it gushing out around me and draining down her thighs. It slicked the friction between us, and her tight clenching loosened. I slowly backed away, careful not to get it on my pants, and she lay draped over the desk for a moment.

My dick proudly stood on end, glistening with her juices as I picked up a napkin from the takeout on the table and wiped myself clean. When I was zipping up, she straightened and I handed her a napkin too. Her hair was mussed, sticking up at odd angles, but her face was drenched in pleasure.

Rosy cheeks, ruby lips—not from lipstick—and a lust haze over her eyes greeted me as I leaned in to kiss her again. “Mmm, I missed you,” I whispered, and I meant it. I missed everything about her, not just the sex. I pulled her in close to me and held her there.

“Evan,” she started to protest, but I placed a kiss on her forehead and she stopped resisting me. Her body was still tense, but her words stopped. I knew it was probably a shock to her—it shocked me how strongly I still felt for her too.

“I’m not sure how we’d make something work since I’ll be your boss, but I missed this. It’s probably a really bad idea to just jump into something right now...You know, with Jacob.”

My lips found hers again in another steamy kiss. Amber was putty, melding against my body with a trembling hand holding unused napkins. My cum was draining down her thighs and I grinned at the thought that I’d just claimed her again. The chemistry, the spontaneity, the way she made me feel...I wanted more of it.

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Amber pressed her hand against my chest and pushed me back gently. “You’re in shock, Evan. Your brother almost died. You’re reeling...You’ll feel different in a few days.” She backed away, buttoning her shirt up. Then she snagged her jacket off the floor and glanced at me nervously. Her eyes flicked around the room and confusion clouded over my eyes. I stooped to pick up her panties and before I could put them in my pocket she snatched them from me.

“Is that what you did?”

The words left my mouth before I could stop them. Pain washed over her expression, curling her lips downward. “What do you mean?” She worked to put on her shoes as I continued.

“You were in shock over your dad dying? Then you just used me and moved on...” I was a total jerk for saying it. Maybe she was right. maybe I was just in shock over all of this, but what I just did with her now—I wouldn’t snap out of it. It was spontaneous, but it wasn’t like I hadn’t thought of doing that a thousand times over the past eight years. Coming back and claiming her as mine.

“Evan,” she said, her tone low.

“When you came to yourself, you realized you didn’t like me and just moved on...” The words kept coming. Things I wondered for a long time but never said out loud. I was never given the chance, and I never made a chance to even say them either.

“I’m going to the bathroom to clean up.” Amber’s head hung as she walked out, and I knew I’d hurt her. Part of me probably wanted to. I’d felt hurt when I learned she had

a baby with someone else, so soon after I left too. But most of me hated myself. It wasn't supposed to go that way.

I slowly buttoned my shirt and put my tie back on. The shirt tails remained hanging, but I was only going to do a bit more work then go home anyway. Until my phone started to ring. When I saw it was Erin I picked up right away.

"Erin?" I'd been waiting on news all day but hadn't gotten the call.

"Evan, he's awake. He's asking for you. I told him about the board's decision and he demanded that you come to him now." She sounded a little flustered. I knew how my brother could be.

"I'll be right there. Give him a popsicle or something," I joked but it landed poorly. Erin sighed and hung up, and I turned to see Amber walk back in.

"I have to go. Jake's awake. He's asked for me." I looked down at the mess from dinner, rice all over the floor from where Amber dumped it.

"I'll clean up. You go." She looked a little discouraged, which was encouraging to me. But after insulting her like that I figured she would want to talk it out, and right now I didn't have time. I had to get to the hospital to see Jacob before he went back to sleep.

"Can you lock up?" I reached for my suit jacket and she scoffed.

"Can you trust me?" The comment stung but I deserved it.

"See you tomorrow...We can catch up then."

And by "catch up," I meant work and us. We had things to discuss.

I left her there to clean up our mess, and I felt bad about it. The entire drive to the hospital I replayed the entire evening. Both of us were sexually charged before we even walked into that room. She seemed hesitant at first but then gave herself to me freely, which told me she hadn't ever truly gotten over me either. That or she was just a minx, which I didn't believe for a second. Whatever the case, I enjoyed every second of it and fully intended to pursue something as long as she didn't give me signals that she wasn't interested.

At the hospital, Erin was waiting just outside Jacob's room. She'd been crying again. It was normal for her in moments like this. I brought a pack of travel tissues, but she had her own.

"How is he?" I asked, and she shrugged.

"He's alright. Now that he's awake, doctors are giving him really good odds of a full recovery. He's in a lot of pain though." Her sad smile was bittersweet, but her news was excellent.

"I'll go in then...Do you want to come?" I waited but she waved me away. I figured she needed a moment. Most people hated hospitals and I was the same, but I had to be here for her and Jacob.

He was a pitiful sight. There were tubes and wires coming out from every orifice, and more from newly made holes thanks to nurses. A huge panel of screens behind him gave readouts of his vitals, but it was the expression on his face that gave me the best indicator of his overall condition. A glare.

"What on God's green earth, Evan?" Jacob's eyes flashed with anger I knew he felt to his core. I walked over to his bedside and stood with arms crossed. I was cold, so tucking my hands into my armpits wasn't a nervous move. I'd left my trench coat in the office in my huff and urge to get here.

“Are you asking me that because it’s October and I’m not wearing a coat? Or because you can’t stand the idea that the board voted me in as CEO while you’re down for the count?” Things had always been tense between us. Jacob thought I was reckless and irresponsible. So had our father. At one point I was. But I’d done a lot of growing up. I had Amber to thank for that.

“You just swoop in and?—”

“Relax,” I told him. I took another step closer and loosened my tie. “First of all, you need to focus on recovering. You almost died. You can’t worry about the company. Second of all, the board members, including Gavin, all voted me to be interim CEO, just until you’re back on your feet. I have help, Jake. Gavin and the team are there; I’m not making any major decisions. And I have Amber...”

My dick still tingled from that hot sex, and mentioning her name made my chest puff out a little. I really hadn’t expected the night to go that direction. It had though, and I couldn’t get it out of my head.

“Don’t you dare hurt her, Evan.” Jacob’s stern warning made me confused. His face contorted, eyes shutting as he winced, and his hand pressed on his chest. My eyes shot up to his monitors where I saw his heart rate was too high, blood pressure too.

“Try to take a deep breath and calm down, buddy.” I reached down and touched his arm and he pushed me away.

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“Ut...most...respect,” he gritted out. Then he continued. “You respect her...Chester asked me to care for her like my own.” I could tell he was worked up and the alarm on his heart monitor started sounding.

“Alright, Jake. No problem.” I squeezed his arm. “I’ll take care of her. Don’t you worry. She’s well taken care of.”

I barely got the words out before nurses were rushing back in. Erin appeared at the doorway and I stepped back from the bed. I had no idea why speaking of Amber made him get sonervous. I realized he hated the idea of me being in charge, and that was no one’s fault but my own. I had to prove myself worthy before he trusted me. But this was next-level. Why on earth would he be so worked up about me and how I treated Amber?

He was so adamant too, and it made his blood pressure and heart rate spike. This was something deeply personal. As I backed away, I started to wonder what sort of secret Jacob was keeping.

“Is he okay? What’s happening?” Erin rushed to his side and my mind whirled faster.

Was Jacob having an affair with her? Was that why? He was keeping this from Erin?

I remembered the gift—for Amber’s kid. Jacob bought her child a gift too...And Erin had made sure to send it with me. Did she know?

I walked into the hallway feeling even more confused and conflicted. If Jacob was sleeping with Amber, why had she slept with me? Did that mean her child was my

brother's child?

This was too much.

I needed air.

7

AMBER

Dinner was done and dusted by the time I struggled into the house. Parker and Nicky were playing video games while Vera sat on the couch reading, and Shelby sat at my dining table with a pot of tea and a half-full mug in front of her. She smiled as I shut the door and said, "I'll grab another mug."

Her feet carried her to the kitchen where I noticed she'd even done the dishes. I could kiss her. I was emotionally exhausted after today, and I desperately wanted a shower to wash Evan off my body.

It wasn't that I didn't enjoy it. I always enjoyed sex with him. It was the guilt I felt, the suffocating secret I kept from him. It clashed with the desire I had to run to him and pour out my heart. As I sank into the chair across from my best friend and she filled a mug for me, I started to think about how bad of an idea it was to keep that secret to begin with.

"How'd it go?" she asked then picked up her mug and sipped from it. I could see the sparkle of intrigue in her eyes.

I shrugged a shoulder and pulled my peacoat off. Working late hadn't even happened. I gave him the files I prepared, but we never broached the topic, which meant I'd likely end up working late again. Being in this position made me wonder if I'd ever

get any work done again.

I couldn't speak. I picked up the mug and sipped. I probably looked like a wreck. My eye makeup was all but gone. I noticed that in the bathroom mirror when I was washing the sex off my body. My lipstick was gone too. Most of it was on Evan's face by the time I was done kissing him, though I hadn't noticed it on his face when we were done. It probably got wiped off when he was between my thighs.

"Amber, what happened?" Shelby's sincere concern etched her face and I looked down into my mug. Her hand rested on mine as she said, "Did he hurt you?" Her earnest tone surprised me. "Did he..."

"Oh, God, no..." I shook my head vehemently. "No, nothing like that." Evan was not like that. He'd never force me to do that. I'd done it willingly.

"Then what?" She sat back and narrowed her eyes at me.

My gaze flicked to the children who were engrossed in games. Then I sighed and looked back at her. She was my best friend. Jacob wasn't exactly accessible, and I hadn't had a sitter or time to go see him even if he was awake, which I knew he was now that Evan told me. Mom would kill me, so Shelby was my only out. I felt deep shame as I confessed to her.

"So we ... uh. We?—"

"You didn't." She almost squealed and I put a finger to my lips and jerked my eyes toward the twins.

"I did."

"Deets, oh my God." She leaned over the table and grinned at me, but I felt like I'd

throw up.

“Look, we have chemistry. That’s all it was. I just. I can’t control myself around him. I knew this was bad. I can’t believe it. And he doesn’t even know about—” I stopped myself short.

“Know about what?” Shelby was a smart woman, but I had never said a thing. Never once had she even asked about the twins’ father. It was a secret I kept buried. I told her the relationship ended and I moved on, and she was content with that.

But the way my gaze lingered on them while they played video games probably gave it away. We sat there for a long time while I watched my son, who was the spitting image of Evan. I didn’t know how she couldn’t see that, except that Evan wasn’t around much. I’d never seen him at headquarters, though his picture did hang on the wall next to his father’s and Jacob’s.

When I turned back to look at her, she was staring at the kids too. Her eyebrows were high when she looked back at me. “You dated him almost eight years ago?” she asked. I nodded. Guilt was already snaking around my throat. “And they’re seven...” I could see her wheels turning. She was putting it all together in her head while shame was flooding my entire body. “That means...”

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“Yes.” My blunt acknowledgment surprised me.

“Evan Montgomery?” Her eyes narrowed farther. “Their father?” she hissed.

My hands covered my face before tears welled up. She had to sense the conflict inside my chest. How could she not? I had just slept with the father of my children, and he didn’t even know they existed.

“Oh, Amber...I get it now.” Shelby stood and scooted her chair around to the side of the table next to me. Her hand rested on my back, rubbing in a circle the way my mom always did. “I’m here. I honestly don’t know what to say.”

I let my tears flow freely before realizing I was just feeling sorry for myself. I’d been the one to let this happen. I made a decision a long time ago which I thought was meant to help Evan. Jacob always told me that revealing the twins to him would only force him to grow up faster, but I knew he’d rush home. Evan needed that time in Europe to build his branch of the company, and I knew how excited he was. He’d even told me it was his shot at proving to Jacob that he wasn’t irresponsible. How could I have stopped that?

“Maybe this is the universe’s way of bringing you two back together? You could rekindle the magic...”

I wiped the tears off my cheeks and smiled at the shout of joy Parker let out. I wasn’t sure what was happening, but hearing him cheer and be happy made me happy. My children were my cornerstone. I’d do anything for them. Keeping them safely tucked away in my own heart was something I’d done for seven full years now. I just wasn’t

ready to expose them to the fact that I wasn't the woman they thought I was.

"I can't do that, Shelby." My hand reached for my tea and I sipped it. "He'd just be angry that I kept that secret for so long."

She sat thoughtfully for a few seconds. "Then don't tell him. Just chase the magic...He never really has to know, does he? He'd end up either accepting your life as is or move on anyway. That way you'd know if he was doing it for you or just out of obligation."

While that sounded logical, I knew I could never do it. "But the guilt..." I mumbled. "I could never live with it. Besides, Jacob knows. I swore him to secrecy and he's always been upset by that."

Parker and Nicky jumped up and high-fived each other and since it was getting later already, I knew I had to stop them from getting another game started. Sitting here talking with Shelby felt good, but it wasn't going to solve my problems. I stood and wrapped my arms around her and hugged her.

"Please, don't tell anyone. I just have a lot of thinking to do."

"Of course," she said, patting my hand. "I'm gonna get Nicky out of here so you can get the twins to bed."

I watched as she stood and walked over to the kids, and while I did, I finished my tea. The bitter taste it left in my mouth to tell my secret so easily didn't leave.

I had refused to accept Jacob's advice to come clean for years. So long, in fact, that he stopped telling me. Even Jacob gave up on Evan ever returning with his full heart. Jacob never shared information about his brother after admitting that Evan was dating someone else; I asked him not to. And I trusted that he was also keeping my private

life private too. Unless Evan showed up on my doorstep and asked, I wanted my privacy.

But he had.

And now my privacy was threatened.

I knew I should tell him, but the guilt and shame were too heavy. I just had to stick it out and try to resist the temptation to reach for him again. Jacob would recover and Evan would return to R&D in Crescent Springs, and I would put this all behind me.

I just had to keep my distance. Which meant changes for the structure of work, but I could manage that.

8

EVAN

Landed one hard blow then another, and Decker danced out of the way. He had his hands up, gloves on, protecting his face and head, and I was on fire.

“Looks like you’re losing steam, old man.” My razzing him seemed to get him going harder, but there was no way he was beating me today. I was on top and rising. The energy in my body felt like I was twenty years old again.

The gym hummed with energy too. People gathered around the ring as I sparred with my good friend, though he hadn’t landed a single blow today. Normally he bested me in a fair fight, which told me my positive mood the past few days was contributing to my dominance right now.

“Keep talkin’ trash, Evan, and I’ll lay you out.” Decker took another stab, then

another. I backed away and dodged. When I sidestepped and spun around, he moved past me and I shoved him into the ropes.

The cheer that went up only egged me on. We never drew a crowd for our sparring, but today it started with a few teens who joined the gym last month. They watched every move we made. It was my habit to do a bit of sparring a few times a week, and this week felt amazing.

“Seems like you’re on a losing streak here, Decker. You better go home to Mommy.” I taunted and circled him, and when he stepped forward with a right hook, I nabbed him with a left jab, crossing my fist over his jaw. The helmet and pads protected him but he went down hard, probably seeing stars.

Cheers erupted around us again, and I raised my hands in victory and absorbed the praise for a moment. Then I helped Decker up by offering him a hand. He jumped up and bumped fists with me before spitting out his mouthguard.

“Dang, you’re on fire today.” He grinned at me as he shucked his sparring gloves and ripped the Velcro on his helmet open. I followed him to the edge of the ring, removing my sparring equipment at the same time, and we climbed out to let the next set of contenders have the space.

“Yeah, sort of...” I knew I had a dumb cheesy grin on my face, but I couldn’t help it. I’d felt like I was on cloud nine ever since Monday evening in my office. Things with Amber weren’t exactly fluid, and I had a lot of questions, but I loved working side by side with her. We hadn’t even spoken about the sex yet. It was awkward at times too. Still, she was a professional and we managed to muddle through the past few days without major incident.

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I'd forgotten how she made me feel young and hopeful. It was such a dramatic shift from the way I felt working at R&D in Crescent Springs. Life had become mundane and repetitive. I hated waking up and going to work on repeat every week. The only thing that broke up the monotony was days like today, but that felt like a thing of the past now.

"What gives?" Decker grabbed a towel as we passed the racks along the wall near the equipment storage. I tossed my sparring gear into a bin to be washed and grabbed two towels for myself. One of them was gross instantly when I wiped the sweat from my face. The other I carried with me toward the showers.

"What gives is I have officially become reacquainted with a blast from my past and it has me seeing stars." I'd never forget the way the squeak of Amber's voice made my dick so hard. Bending her over that desk was incredible. I wanted to do it again, and frequently.

"Ah, a lady friend. I get it..." He chuckled and gave me a shove. "Who is she? Anyone I know?"

He pushed the locker room door open and I followed him through it. Decker didn't know Amber, not the way I did. He'd met her once when she dropped me off at this very gym for a workout. That seemed like ages ago, and it was, but it felt like yesterday. The wild passion and strong affection I had for her all those years ago was still there. It'd just been buried by disappointment and busyness.

"Uh, yeah, maybe..." I threw my fist into my locker door and it sprang open. "I think you met her once...Curvy, short...long, dark hair. Her dad was the one who died

years ago and we hooked up after the funeral.” It sounded horrible, but those were the most memorable things I’d told him.

His eyebrows went up in recognition. “That hottie? Yeah, she was way too young for you then. Dude, you’re pushing fifty now.” Decker chuckled and I sank onto the bench behind me with my duffel bag.

“You’re a jerk. I’m only forty-four.” My own laughter joined his and we paused our conversation as a few men walked past us out the door. When they were gone, I tore my shirt off over my head and tossed it into the locker. “Besides. She’s almost thirty now...”

The thought of Amber made my dick start to swell and given that I had to strip off and shower, I knew I had to stop that in its tracks. I thought of any reason why I could get my dick to stop swelling and the thought of Jacob boning her made that happen.

“You don’t seem sold. You said you’re seeing stars.” Decker pulled his own shirt off and then his shorts. He tossed them both into the locker, and I turned my gaze away as he shucked his boxers and wrapped the towel around his waist.

“She has a kid,” I told him. I couldn’t exactly tell him my suspicion about Jacob. I didn’t have any facts, only a gut feeling, and for all I knew the kid was someone else’s and nothing was happening. Besides, if it was true and Amber really did have Jake’s kid, I could never out my brother like that. It’d be shameful for both of us.

“Ah, well,” he sighed, shutting his locker door, “if you date the mom you date the kid.” He wrapped his hand around the towel and held it closed in the front, and I turned my eyes up to meet his.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I mean,” he said, “that you can’t just assume falling in love with her is enough. If she has a kid and you end up together, that makes you the stepdad. And in some cases, that makes you dad. You gotta make sure you and that kid get along too. You want to fall in love with someone whose kid you hate? What if that kid hates you? Your life would be miserable. You’d end up breaking up anyway.”

Decker waltzed off as I thought about his words. He had a good point. It didn’t matter who the child’s father was, if we didn’t gel, it’d never work anyway. Plus, Amber would be more likely to date me if she knew I was prepared to embrace the ready-made family.

I stripped off and wrapped my own towel around my hips, leaving my gym bag sitting on the bench. I found an empty shower stall and hung my towel over the door as I stepped into the hot water. If I wanted to impress her, I had to touch her heart, not just her body. The universe had given me a second chance to see if something could work between us. I didn’t want to blow that.

I shampooed my hair and washed the sweat off my body as I plotted a way to help her get more comfortable with me. The idea that she and Jacob had some sort of bond still niggled at my conscience, but even if they did, Jake was married. He couldn’t marry her or truly provide for her. He might be upset if he found out, but Amber was a big girl, a grown woman. She could make her own choices.

The idea occurred to me that I knew where she lived. I’d been there. I hadn’t known before this, but even if I had, I’d have dismissed the idea of just showing up. What we had was ancient history only last week. But now, working together with her again, I felt like I had a shot, an open door, if you will.

If I showed up at her home with dinner and a game, she’d have no choice but to invite me in. If she refused, I’d know where I stood. But if there was even an inkling of desire for something more with me, she’d let me come in. So it was settled. I would

pick up some takeout and knock on her door with a deck of cards. Tonight, I planned to make my move.

I should've never gone to Europe, and I intended to make sure she knew I meant that.

9

AMBER

My stomach growled as I stared into the cupboards. I had a single box of mac and cheese, which wasn't enough for everyone. There was a loaf of bread but no deli meat. My fridge was bare too, thanks to Evan asking me to work so many extra hours this week to help him catch up. I should've gone to the grocery store, but I was too busy.

The kids played noisily behind me, bickering about a video game again. I felt like just ordering a pizza and calling it a day. I wasn't going to drag them both out to the store this late in the evening. It was cold and I was tired.

Turning around to see what they were fighting about, I saw Parker with his controller in his hand holding it up over Vera's head. He had a look of defiance. She struggled to reach it and whined at me.

"Mom, he's not sharing!"

"She's trying to kill my person. She stole my diamond armor!"

I massaged the bridge of my nose as Vera snatched the controller and Parker's fists balled up. The bell rang at the same time though, and Parker raced away from the TV to answer it. Vera plopped down in triumph and started playing the game. She seemed happy as a clam when I walked over toward the door Parker was already swinging

wide open.

“Hi,” he said proudly, and I hissed at him.

“Parker, you can’t open the door unless Mommy says so.” I hurried to him and wrapped my arms around him, pulling him away from the door. As I bent low, I saw the shiny shoes on the feet of whomever it was that had run the bell. My eyes traced up the slender legs to the trench coat, and higher up to meet Evan’s gaze.

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My heart froze. Panic flooded my system. Parker stood there with a grin on his face, wrapped up in my arms. I stared up at Evan in horror. He had a smile on his face as he looked down at us and then confusion in his eyes when he looked past me at Vera.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t realize you had company.”

“Parker,” I said, turning my entire focus on him. “That was very unsafe.” I knew my tone was harsh, but I was upset and flustered. Evan just showing up at my house was a wild card I hadn’t expected. “You never, ever open the door unless I say you can. It could’ve been anyone.”

Parker’s face fell and he said, “I’m sorry, Mommy.” His bottom lip pouted out in a show of remorse. I squeezed him but it did little to soften the blow of my tone. All I could think about was Evan, looming over me. This boy looked exactly like his father, who didn’t know a thing about the situation.

“Go...You and Vera. Wash up for dinner.” I stood slowly and Parker walked off with his head hanging. He met Vera and turned the Xbox off. She protested, but when they both looked up at me again, she saw my face. I gestured at them then turned back to Evan, knowing they would go.

“Why are you here,” I said, and my tone hadn’t changed. The same harsh vibe I’d just given my son was now aimed at his father.

“I’m sorry, Amber. I thought I’d bring dinner and play some games. I got cheeseburgers.” Evan held up a white paper sack. In his other hand he held a deck of cards, which he showed me when I looked down at it. “If it’s a bad time, I can go.”

“Kids need nutritious meals, not junk food.” The way my heart was racing made it physically impossible for me to calm down. Evan had seen Parker. There was such a strong family resemblance, there was no way he wouldn’t guess it. Though, his face didn’t seem to show the faintest trace of curiosity. He looked more concerned and regretful than anything.

“I’ll leave. I’m sorry. I thought it would be nice.” He hung his head. “I know Jacob was there for you a lot. Erin told me. I thought since he’s down and out, maybe I could chip in and help. That’s all.”

I said nothing in response because I didn’t know what to say. He was right. This was something Jacob would have done for me out of the kindness of his heart. He was sweet like that—like my father was. Either of them would have been here in an instant with a meal and games if they knew how tired I was or how exhausting I found being a single parent at times.

Evan turned to walk away, and I looked down at the bag of food in his hand and then his slumped posture. My own fear of him finding out something I never should’ve hidden from him was what made me panic. I knew it was best if I did end up telling him, but how and when I told him, I didn’t want to leave to chance. Jacob had pushed me to reveal the secret enough times, I had actually decided that if I did it, I had to make sure Evan was capable of being a father. What better way to do that than to invite him in and see how he interacted with the twins.

“Evan, wait...” I sighed and he turned slowly. A smile spread across his face.

“I can stay?” he asked, and I rolled my eyes. It wasn’t my first choice, but a lot of good could come from it. Needless to say, it only made my anxiety swell when I nodded. But I stepped back and let him in.

Evan set the bag of food on the table and narrowed his eyes in confusion as he shed

his coat. I shut and locked the door, then took his coat.

“I’m sorry. I thought you had company.” He rubbed his hands together and looked around the room again.

“What made you think that?” I asked as I hung his coat on the coat tree by the door. He stood several inches taller than me, which most of the time made me drawn to him. Tonight, it made me feel intimidated.

“I swore I saw two children here.” His eyes fixed on my face and I felt the color drain from my cheeks.

“You did...I have twins.” The knot in my throat refused to go down when I swallowed, so I swallowed a second time. Seeing the shock on his face resolve into more confusion only made things worse, especially when the kids rushed out of the bathroom with cheers.

“Yes! You got Burger Barn!” Parker was the first at the table, tearing into the bag of food. Vera trailed behind, more timid than her brother. She hugged me around the waist and looked up at Evan with large curious eyes.

“Vera, this is Mommy’s friend, Evan. Say hi...” As I coaxed, she squinted and pulled away, favoring the table with her twin over my prompts.

Dinner was awkward. Evan sat across from me and Vera and Parker bickered the entire time. She liked pickles; he hated mayo. Evan tried to pick up a conversation with them, but both were avoidant. I didn’t blame them. We never had company and they were both shy. I tried to coax a conversation out of them too, but they just wanted to get back to their games, so they ate as fast as possible.

When we were finished, Evan cleared the trash, and I pulled out the deck of cards he

set on the table before we started eating. It was a special deck for kids, which made me smile.

“Mom, can we go play Minecraft now?” Parker’s voice was a whine. I cast him a scowl and he huffed.

“We’re playing a card game with Evan tonight instead.” I started dealing and Vera scooped up her cards one at a time.

“Oh, we play this in class with flash cards. Parker’s no good though.” Her comment was nothing more than a fact, but Parker got upset with her.

“Shut up, Vera,” he hissed. He snatched his cards off the table and glowered at her. I felt embarrassed by the way they were behaving this evening. Jacob would have nipped that in the bud right away. Evan probably didn’t have the first clue what to do with kids. He’d never been married, never even serious about anyone to my knowledge. Kids were a new, uncharted territory for him.

“Why does Parker struggle?” Evan sat down across from me and started collecting his cards and Vera blurted out a truth I winced at.

“He’s dyslexic. He can’t even read.” She turned and stuck her tongue out at her brother and I snapped at her.

“Vera, that was impolite. Say you’re sorry.” This time I didn’t even feel bad for my motherly tone. These two were trying my patience and in front of company to boot.

“Sorry,” she grumbled.

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“That’s okay, Park-man.” Evan had a grin on his face and I knew why. “I have that too. And guess what? I get to run a whole company. If you work hard, there’s nothing you can’t do.” Evan beamed me a breathtaking smile. It made my voice catch in my throat.

“You run a whole company?” Parker asked. His eyes went wide and even Vera perked up.

“I do...How do you think I met your mom?” He winked at me again; it was his thing. A thing I liked very much. It made warmth flood my system and I started to relax finally—thirty minutes into our evening.

From there, we really hit it off. Evan was so great with them, even better than Jacob. Parker told him about all the things he was learning in school. Vera recited the poem she’d written last month. Evan let each of them beat him in a few rounds of go fish, and by the time I realized it, it was past 10 p.m. and I was yawning.

“Time for bed, guys. Go brush your teeth and I’ll be in there in a second.”

Both of them protested me for a moment, but Evan pushed them along with a promise to do this again soon. He packed up the cards while I put away the game controllers and shut the TV off. When I met him by the door, he was wearing his coat and looking like he was waiting for me.

The entire night was unexpected, but I had enjoyed it. Evan was as charming as I remembered him, maybe even more so now that he’d developed some maturity.

“Thank you for a great evening,” I told him. I was nervous as I walked over and opened the door. He looked like he wanted to say something to me or ask a question. He’d looked that way all night. I saw the way he studied the kids, but I ignored it. If I got too hung up on the way he was looking at them, I would’ve freaked myself out and blurted out the truth.

“Amber...” he said, his voice lilting at the end. I felt it coming. My cheeks flushed. My breath hitched. I already had a million excuses lined up for him if he asked, because while I would continue to keep the secret the rest of my life, I’d never lie directly to his face. I braced for the blow, but when I heard him suck in a breath I panicked again.

I closed the gap between us and wrapped my arms around his neck. My fingers curled into his hair and I pulled him down for a kiss. Our lips slid over each other’s, and my tongue slipped into his mouth. He didn’t shy away either. His hands gripped my sides and he deepened the kiss as he pulled me against his body. When he pulled away he grinned.

“Would you have dinner with me again?” he asked, and I breathed out a sigh of relief. “Let me show you that nothing has changed between us and we could be good together.”

I didn’t know what to say once again, so I nodded. I’d been so paranoid that he was going to ask who the kids’ father was, I spent the entire night in a state of fight or flight. Kissing him felt like a lifeline to my normal life. So how could I refuse? He was right, maybe we would be good together.

“Okay,” I said quietly, though my gut was already roiling with regret.

“Perfect...I’ll text you the details.” He nuzzled my nose with his, then kissed me one more time before he let me go.

As soon as the door was shut and locked behind him, I was kicking myself. I was only torturing myself by thinking I could get involved with him and make it work. This was insanity. It would never work. The guilt would devour me from the inside out, and I would be breaking my own heart. Evan would never forgive me when he found out. Chances were it would destroy his relationship with Jacob too, which I knew I couldn't let happen.

I banged my head against the door a few times before walking away. My own impulse control issues were keeping me tied up in a mess I wanted nothing to do with. I'd fought so hard to keep this secret and it was like my subconscious was telling me it had all been a waste of time. Evan would find out, and my original desire to protect him and let him have the life he wanted would be for nothing.

10

EVAN

I stood at the hostess stand with my hands in my pockets waiting. I wanted to pick Amber up; my driver was ready for that, but she refused. Never in my life had I met a woman so stubborn, but I admired that about her. She probably needed that grit when it came to raising children and especially being a single mother of twins, which shocked me. I hadn't expected that.

The wait was short, as she was very prompt, which was another thing I admired about her. The clock read 7 p.m., which was exactly when I asked her to meet me when I finally resigned myself to the fact that she would drive separately. She burst through the door with rosy cheeks and a red nose. But the soft smile on her face felt warm, not distant or awkward like her presence across the table from me at dinner the other night.

"Wow, it's cold," she said, shivering as she took her gloves off. She leaned in and

kissed the air on either side of my face as I touched her chilly fingers.

“Yeah, it is...I would’ve dropped you at the door.” My comment made her smile broaden as I slid my hand onto the small of her back and we followed the host to our table.

She took her coat off and I hung it on the back of her chair for her as she sat. Then I scooted the chair and took my own coat off as I rounded the table. The little Mediterranean dive was quiet, out of the way. We offered our drink order to the host and I took my seat across from Amber who looked stunning.

She wore a turtleneck sweater dress that fell almost at her knees, though it didn’t hide her shape. Her curves were on full display as the sweater hugged her form. I admired how she could be so fully clothed yet so sexy at the same time.

“You look beautiful this evening,” I told her. Crimson flushed her cheeks, but she didn’t avoid eye contact with me.

“Thank you. You’re very dapper yourself...” She looked like she wanted to say something but bit it back, so I continued.

“It’s nice getting to spend time with you outside office hours. It was nice the other night too...I guess I didn’t realize you had twins. That’s sort of challenging, isn’t it?” My eyes skimmed over the menu, though I knew what I was going to order already. I did it to avoid making her feel put on the spot or uncomfortable.

“Uh, yeah,” she sighed and picked up her own menu but she kept talking. “Being a single mom is hard, but I manage. Jacob has really been there for me like my own father would’ve been though, so I’m so grateful for that.”

It appeared this was a bad subject. Amber kept her eyes trained on her menu and

didn't look up at me once. I felt a pinch of jealousy when she mentioned Jacob's name. It only furthered my suspicion that there was something going on between them. After all, why would that be the first thing she mentioned when I asked about the twins if there wasn't?

I took a few minutes of silence to steal glances at her and when the waiter returned and took our orders, I decided it'd been quiet enough. We handed him our menus and he walked off to fill the order. I focused my attention on her again. I was determined not to let this night go sideways because of my suspicions or insecurities by reminding myself she was here with me, not at Jacob's house doting over his recovery.

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“So, what has your life been like for the past several years? The last time we spoke outside of work, you were pretty adamant you didn’t want children.” I wanted to pry and unearth the truth, but I knew better than to push her. She was fiercely independent—always had been—and she’d never been one to give up personal information easily.

Amber picked up her wine and sipped it slowly before answering me. “Oh, you know...You jetted off to Europe. Life moved on.” Her eyes flicked away from my gaze nervously then back to meet mine. “The twins consumed most of my time, but I’m happy to be a mother.”

“They seem like really great kids...Parker was it? He seemed discouraged that his sister pointed out him being dyslexic.” Her shoulders tensed and she sucked in a breath. It was obvious to me that the children were a tense subject. I just didn’t know where to begin with her. Decker pointed me in this direction though, so I had to shoot my shot. “I just know how challenging it can be for a dyslexic kid, Amber. If you ever need help or pointers, you know you can reach out.”

“Yeah, thank you.” Her soft smile returned. “That’s really nice of you...But Jacob has been a real blessing. He told me how you struggled too. He gave me lots of resources and things. In fact, he’s helping with a little situation we have going on now too, but Vera...She’s so the opposite.”

Amber’s face lit up when she started talking about her daughter. Apparently, the girl was a wonder kid. It made me happy to see her so enthusiastic, and then the conversation turned back to Parker and how incredible he was at other things besides academics. Before we knew it thirty minutes had passed and the waiter brought our

food.

“So,” she said as she twirled her pasta around her fork, “I heard you were dating someone when you returned from Europe. I guess that didn’t pan out?” Her eyes were curious now, searching me. I wondered why she hadn’t reached out right away. It made sense if she was in a messy relationship that ended with the twins’ father not being present, and she saw that I was dating someone, maybe she didn’t want to rock the boat.

“Well, that’s a mess and a half, but I’ll spare you the details. Let’s just say Bianca was very persistent at pursuing me. I was lonely after we parted ways.” My chest squeezed as I thought of how that relationship ended. Even the most careful of breakups has the potential of hurting people. “She wasn’t my type. We dated for about a month; I didn’t see the relationship going anywhere. I ended it and I think she was heartbroken, but I know it was the right choice.”

The food was delicious. We ate slowly and talked. Amber had a million questions about Europe. I tried to answer all of them. It made me feel good that she was interested in me. I wanted to show her that I was just as interested in her, but every time I brought up her personal life, she shied away from the topic, so I dropped it.

When we were almost finished eating, Amber looked up at me with a bit of a smirk and asked me, “So what’s your type?”

I wasn’t sure what she was getting at. The conversation had hit a lull while we ate, so I wasn’t tracking her train of thought. I asked, “What do you mean?”

One of her shoulders bobbed up and down and she asked again, “What’s your type? You said that the woman you were dating wasn’t your type, so I wondered if she wasn’t your type, what is your type?”

Her eyes bounced back and forth between mine as I absorbed what she was saying. She was smiling now, that perfect ruby grin I loved so much. The playful look in her eye was attractive too and sucked me in.

“Well, obviously you’re my type.” I held my breath for a second while she processed what I was saying, but instead of her eyes acknowledging the comment for what it was—a declaration of my attraction to her—she seemed to be discouraged by it.

“Evan, I’m not sure this is a good idea...” Her hands brought her napkin up off of her lap to her lips where she dabbed her face clean then draped it over her plate.

“What?” Confusion settled in my chest and frustrated me. We were having such a great time. How could she think this wasn’t a good idea?

“Me and you”—her finger pointed at herself then me—“this. I mean, dating and working together. It could get messy. I’m just...I need this job really badly. I can’t screw things up.”

I was miffed. I didn’t think it was a problem for us to see each other since this was just a temporary job and all, but the last thing I wanted was to push her away. She was skittish and withdrawn; I figured it had to do with being protective over her children. I could live with that. I just couldn’t live with the idea that she was pushing me away before we even got a chance to be fully reacquainted. I needed to at least try.

“Sure, no problem. I can hire someone to be a third party between us so we are never alone. It will be a good buffer so we can honor Jacob.” The bitter taste every time I said my brother’s name never got sweeter. Was she pushing me away because of him?

“Yes, okay.” She nodded but her smile didn’t quite reach her eyes this time.

Something was bothering her and I had to get it out of her. The sooner we got past this communication barrier, the sooner we could connect for real, pick up where we left off.

“You know, I’m having such a good time tonight. I wondered if you’d want to join me for a few drinks. I could have my driver take us, then bring you back to your car later. What do you say?”

I dropped two one-hundred-dollar bills on the table for the check and the tip, and Amber gawked at it. Her eyes traced up to meet mine in one velvet swoop. She batted her eyelashes at me, but she was already shaking her head no.

“Evan, the kids. I really should get home.”

“But you have a sitter?” I asked, now doing the prying I wanted to do earlier. Her head shifted. She looked like she was actually considering it so I pressed. “When was the last time you went out for drinks? When was the last time you went dancing? Moms need to have fun too.” I stood and dropped my napkin on the table. Holding my hand out for her, I said, “Join me. I promise, nothing wild. We’ll get you home before your carriage turns back to a pumpkin.”

Amber glanced down at the bills on the table and sighed. “One drink, no more. And I don’t really dance anymore.”

I couldn’t help the grin that stretched over my face. “Amazing. You won’t regret this.”

Now, If I could just convince her that having fun was something even mothers did, we’d be halfway to winning this battle over her conscience. Maybe it was eating her up that she was with me and not the twins’ father—whoever that was. Or maybe she wished I was Jacob. All I could do was show her the best side of myself and hope she

wasn't repulsed, because I desperately wanted another shot to prove myself to her. I was willing to do anything to make that happen.

11

AMBER

Fingers of light cast by the porch light outside the front window reached out toward me where I sat on Evan's couch. When he suggested drinks, I thought he meant a bar or club, but here I was sitting on his couch waiting for him to return from the kitchen. I didn't mind it that much; it gave us more privacy to talk. After Shelby sent a winking emoji with three fire emojis telling me to "stay out all night if I want," I knew she wouldn't mind it being a little later.

Dinner was...okay. We'd had a good time, as far as dates went. I just nursed my little dose of guilt and shame so much it made opening up to him and letting my guard down harder than it had been when we were seeing each other before. I tried, but the secret of my twins weighed on me more than I wanted it to.

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“Here we go,” I heard, and I turned over my shoulder to see him returning to his sterile living room carrying a tray of snacks. It felt cold in here, not temperature-wise, just a sense of emptiness. There were no toys strewn about, no family portraits on the wall. Evan didn’t seem to live in this space or spend much time here. It never used to feel that way, but this was the way it always looked.

My perspective on that shifted over the years. Now I was used to Parker’s video game controllers being shoved in the crack of the couch, or Vera’s books lying on the coffee table. Their shoes were always piled by the door, and most of the time there was at least one jacket or sweater lying around, one pile of dirty socks left for me to pick up.

Being a mom changed me like that. Now I thought the clean lines of Evan’s modern style felt detached from reality, not comfy and stylish. I missed the warmth of knowing there were children in our lives.

“That looks delicious.” I leaned forward as he set down the tray and devoured the charcuterie board with my eyes. I’d eaten, but having a few glasses of wine had already helped me to work up an appetite again.

“I’m glad you approve.” Evan winked at me as he sat down a little closer than he’d been sitting when I asked if he had any snacks.

“You just had this lying around?” I reached for a slice of meat and layered it with a cube of cheese. They were savory on my tongue, complimenting the wine nicely, of which I might have already had a bit too much.

“I might have bought it in hopes you’d join me here after dinner.” Evan leaned over and brushed something off the corner of my mouth, but his hand lingered there. My cheeks warmed under his gentle touch. It was nice to feel cared for. It was also nice to have an evening to relax without children around shouting at me. I was glad I’d accepted his invitation despite how reserved I felt about this whole thing.

There was no mistaking the chemistry between us, but I was foolish enough to have fallen for that sort of thing before. A relationship wasn’t just established on great sex or the ability to banter. Evan and I had tried this. He and I might have worked if he hadn’t been sent off to Europe to get his act together. Now things were different. I was only lying to myself if I thought reigniting that flame would work. I had a huge secret. And once he heard it, he’d never think of me the same way again.

I turned away and his hand dropped, and instead of reaching for my glass of wine, I decided it was time to pace myself. He’d have to take me back to my car and I would have to drive home. I had two children who depended on me now. I couldn’t take the risk of drinking and driving.

“Why do you do that?” he asked, but I didn’t understand what he meant. I reached for another slice of meat and cheese and his hand intercepted mine. “Amber...” he said softly.

My gaze rose to meet his and studied him intently. There was something he wanted to say or ask; I could see it in his eyes. However, instead of pressuring me, which he was never prone to do, he changed the subject.

“Dance with me...” He stood and took my hand firmly in his, then started to pull me to my feet.

“Here? Now?” I glanced around and chuckled. “When you said dancing, I thought you meant a club.”

He pulled his phone out and fiddled with it. Soon, music started pouring out of the speaker, a soft, slow love song I didn't recognize. He managed to pull me to my feet, so I stood and followed him a few strides toward the open area between his couch and kitchen island that separated the space.

“What's wrong with slow dancing in my living room?” His arms circled my waist and pulled me in. I breathed in the smell of his cologne and found myself smiling. He was so romantic at times. I wasn't surprised; past me enjoyed this treatment, and present-day me loved it. The snacks, the wine, the music, the way he looked at me...It all created the most perfect atmosphere for us.

“Evan, I really should?—”

“Why are you pulling away from me, Amber?”

I'd been backing away, but his firm grip held me there. He was right. I was pulling away both literally and figuratively and I had a good reason to. I was afraid, not just of him learning my secret but of getting my heart broken again. Watching him walk away when we could've had it all hurt really bad, but that was the easy part. I knew it was for his job. I knew he had to do it. I knew Jacob was pressuring him.

I also knew if I had said the word, Jacob would've reversed his decision and brought Evan home. We'd have had a shot at it, but by then I was confused and overwhelmed. I searched his eyes, now feeling the same way toward him—confused and overwhelmed. I wanted so badly to pour myself into this second chance at a relationship, but no matter what way I looked at it I only saw the hurdles and obstacles between us.

“I'm afraid,” I admitted quietly. It was the most honest thing I could tell him. I'd already made up my mind if he asked me directly, I wasn't going to lie. I prayed it never came to that though.

Evan's hand slid up my side and over my cheek. He brushed some hair off my face and smiled at me as he cradled my head. His fingers curled around the back of my neck and he shook his head at me.

"I'm not leaving again, Amber. I'm settled here in Crescent Springs. You can relax and just let go of that fear. I'm not going to abandon you." The way he seemed to look straight through me warmed me to my core. I could tell he was trying really hard to comfort me and assuage my fears, but he had no idea the storm in my heart.

When he leaned down and kissed me, I melted against him. My arms slowly rose up and rested on his shoulders. His hands pulled me against his body, and we danced like that to two songs, then a third. When I laid my head on his shoulder and sighed contently, he tightened his grasp. It felt so perfect in this moment. The comfortable silence between us had me reliving old sweet memories—the time we got ice cream and ended up in an ice cream fight, the time he wanted me to dance with him in the rain.

I looked up at him with a warm smile at the memories. I knew that guy was in there probably waiting to come out and sweep me off my feet. Probably more levelheaded and structured than before. The thought of that brought my heart back to the present and where I was—wrapped in his arms in his living room dancing with him.

"What are you afraid of?" he asked me. His tone was so gentle I almost told him the truth. He deserved to know. The twins deserved to know their father. But even knowing all of that I still felt too vulnerable to being hurt again, to hurting him...

I couldn't answer him. I stared up into his eyes as he searched me and I had no answer. After a few seconds, he kissed me, a soft lingering kiss. It deepened into something more passionate, more hungry. I gave in to him, kissing him back, letting the tension between us build until his hands were searching my body and I was reaching for his buttons.

Without breaking the kiss, he backed me up against the couch, his hands sliding under the hem of my sweater dress, shifting it upward. He was so slow and methodical about it, I whimpered with need. I didn't know if this was going to be the last time we were together, but I didn't want to rush it. I wanted it imprinted in my memory for forever, just in case I got cold feet and withdrew from him.

I reached between us and grabbed his belt buckle. His mouth found its way to my neck, kissed a trail down to my collarbone. His hands cupped my breasts while he suckled on my sensitive flesh. I moaned as he found my aching nipple and gently teased it between his teeth through the fabric of my bra. I didn't know how we got here again so fast, but I didn't care. I was lost in the moment, lost in his arms, lost in our chemistry.

I let him take my dress and bra. Then I peeled his shirt off. His hands were everywhere, roaming, caressing, squeezing. He was a man on a mission and I wasn't going to deny him. I unhooked his pants and slid them down his hips, followed by his boxers. He lifted me up and laid me on the couch, towering over me. Then his hands pulled off my tights, letting my shoes drop to the floor with our clothing.

When he crawled over me, I whimpered with desire. I'd never wanted him more. "I've missed you," he said against my ear before nibbling on my lobe.

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He entered me slowly, his thick girth filling me like he'd never left. I whimpered as he claimed me. He was always so considerate, so gentle and passionate. It was one of the many things I missed about him. His hands roamed my body, caressing every inch of me as he moved in and out, picking up speed with each thrust.

"God, Evan," I moaned. His name spilling from my lips felt so good. His thrusts were deep and powerful, working us both to the brink. I arched my back and cried out as my orgasm hit me hard and fast. My nails dug into his shoulders and I clung to him for dear life as the aftershocks pulsed through my body. Every touch felt electrified, every breath was hot and heavy.

When he slowed to pace himself, his lips captured mine again. The kiss hadn't cooled off at all. If anything, he'd gotten hungrier. Evan's lips trailed down my neck to my breasts while his hands continued groping me. He knew exactly what buttons to push to make me moan louder and arch into him more. He was relentless in his pursuit of my pleasure, and I couldn't get enough of it.

As he backed away, leaving a wake of fire as he went, I gently pushed his shoulders. I wanted more. It felt like the ache between my legs could never be quenched. He kissed across my navel and spread my thighs, and I hissed the instant his tongue drew over my mound.

I gripped the couch cushions as he continued teasing me. His tongue flicked against my clit and I moaned his name. He picked up the pace, lapping at me, sucking on my most sensitive spot until I was groaning his name again and again. A second orgasm washed over me when he slid two fingers into my body, crashing through me like a tidal wave. I couldn't stop the convulsions and twitches even if I wanted to.

It was incredible. Fireworks exploded behind my eyelids. My body pulsed with pleasure and need in even doses. He worked my pussy until I was a quivering ball, on the edge of a third climax, and then he pulled away. It left me whimpering and reaching for his head to pull it back between my thighs.

Evan stood up and helped me flip over onto all fours. I knelt on the cushions and draped my upper body over the back of the couch. He positioned himself behind me and slid into me from that angle.

“Oh, God,” I moaned as he began pumping in and out of me. His grip on my hips was like steel, and he tilted his hips so that each thrust hit that one spot inside me. I knew it wouldn’t take long to get there again if he kept this up. I clung to the couch as each thrust made me whimper.

“God, you feel incredible. I could do this all night...”

His words were cut off as he slammed into me hard, making us both moan. His pace picked up and the couch rocked against the wall with our intensity. I knew this wasn’t going to last long. He gripped my hips, pulling me back onto him, and picked up his pace even more. The friction of his pubic bone against my clit had me so close I could taste it.

“Evan ... oh God ... I’m ...”

My voice trailed off as my third orgasm washed over me. My entire body tensed and waves of pleasure struck, leaving me a quivering mess on the couch. Evan’s fingers dug into my hips as he pumped into me a few more times before growling out his own release.

Together we rode out our orgasms. His lasted less than half the length of mine, but he continued pumping into me, letting me draw every ounce of pleasure I could from his

body. Then he pulled out and pushed his fingers back into me, thrusting in time with my jerks and twitches. When I was sated and limp over the back of the couch, he smacked my ass hard and chuckled.

“Looks like we need more wine,” he said, and I felt him place a kiss on my lower back.

I moaned and grinned, then let my body fall to the side as his sex drained out of me. “I’ll be right back.”

Listening to him walk away I tried to savor the moment, but I couldn’t. Tears welled up and I blinked them away, though a few did escape. He was so incredible and I was such a fool. Present-day me hated past me for keeping the secret that I was having his baby. I thought I was doing the right thing, and now I knew I had made a mistake. It wasn’t as easy as just telling him though. It would blow up in my face. He would be so hurt. How many things had he missed out on that he could never get back? Things I got to enjoy.

“You okay?” he asked as he returned with a fresh bottle of wine. He stood there and filled up our glasses and I stubbornly nodded at him. I couldn’t tell him. Not after that.

“Yeah, just tired and emotional. Probably the wine.” He offered me a glass and I took it knowing I shouldn’t.

“Looks like you’re sleeping over then...” He sank onto the couch next to me and set the bottle on the table.

It wasn’t that I didn’t want to. I did. I wanted to so desperately. I wanted to get lost in this sensation of being wanted and pursued, but my damn fear just kept holding me back.

“I’m not sure ...”

“Here...” Evan reached for my phone. “Send your sitter a message that you’ll be home first thing in the morning. You said she told you to have a good night.” He handed me my phone and I remembered the emojis Shelby sent.

“I’ll make it worth your while,” he said, grinning.

My better judgment flew out the window the instant his smirk appeared. I sent Shelby a message letting her know I was sleeping over. She replied with an eggplant, a taco, and a fire emoji, and I snickered and showed Evan.

“Ah, see, even your friend gets how badly I’ve missed you.” He took my phone and placed it on the table, then put the glass of wine in my hands again. “Now drink. We have a long night ahead of us.”

A long night where I prayed to God in heaven that I didn’t let my secret slip and ruin everything. I needed to talk to Jacob. I needed a way out of this that didn’t hurt Evan. It might not be possible to salvage any spark we had going, but I knew in my gut I had to tell him.

Just ... not tonight.

12

EVAN

Jacob’s desk felt larger than mine, intimidating at times. I chewed on the end of a pencil while I waited for Amber to come in for our meeting. We had a few things to go over for this week, and after this weekend I wanted to feel her out. She’d left Saturday morning before I even got the chance to make her breakfast. The note she

left told me she was taking an Uber to her car because the twins needed her. I couldn't fault her. She was a mother, after all.

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It left me with a sense of curiosity though, and more suspicion than I cared to admit. I stewed on that this morning as I waited. I knew she was shuttling her kids to school. I'd gotten used to her routine over the past week or so. Jacob reminded me every time I stopped by to check on him that I needed to be patient with her. I didn't need him to tell me, but he made it a point to do so, which was irritating.

The sky was gloomy again today, snow in the forecast. I thought of how cozy it was beneath my covers with Amber tucked against my chest and smiled. What I wouldn't give to make that a more permanent thing in my life. She always seemed distant and hesitant, but I was going to win her over. This morning I brought coffee and a bagel in hopes that we could open the lines of communication. She admitted to being afraid of something; I just had to figure out what.

Jacob's phone rang on line one. I knew it was his direct line since Amber wasn't in to answer and transfer calls. There were very few people who had this number, so I wasn't surprised to hear his voice when I answered.

"Evan..." He sounded rough. He'd been tired and sleeping a lot since he came home from the hospital last week. Erin even turned Amber away when she asked to stop by, but I wasn't sure if that was Erin's decision or Jacob's. I knew my brother well. He'd never have turned Amber away if he was feeling well.

"Jake, how are you feeling?" I'd just seen him last night. He wasn't just struggling physically; he was down and out. It was like being hit by that sudden heart attack had taken his legs out from under him. No one expected it, but it appeared to shock him more than the rest of us. He could have died.

“I’m fine. I’ll be back to work soon. How are things going?” Jacob cleared his throat and had a bit of a coughing fit as I filled him in on work updates. It was the last thing he should’ve been thinking about, but I had deep respect for his desire to not let the company falter.

“Why aren’t you resting?” I tapped my fingers on the desk and let my eyes drift toward the window where light flurries preceded the heavier snow to fall later this afternoon.

“I’m resting,” he grumbled. “There’s only so much lying around a man can do.” Imagining his scowl made me chuckle. “How’s Amber doing? You’re not being hard on her are you?”

Emotion stirred in my chest. So many questions had been swirling around. I’d been able to keep them at bay for a while because I’d been focused on work and thinking of Amber. It was easy to distract myself and get lost in the “what could be” thoughts. Jacob bringing this up, however, reminded me of all my suspicious thoughts about his concern for her.

“She’s fine. You don’t have to worry about her. She’s in good hands.” There really wasn’t a better way for me to stake my claim over her and announce it to my brother without letting on that I knew he was hiding something. I’d seen those kids’ faces. They bore a striking resemblance to the Montgomery genes. It didn’t take a genius to figure it out.

I wasn’t going to call him on it though. He just had a major cardiac incident, and he needed people around him to help him focus on healing. The last thing he needed was for me to get him riled up by exposing his infidelity. And poor Erin. She almost lost him. How would she deal with learning Jacob had knocked up another woman?

“I’m not messing around, Evan. You treat that woman with respect, do you

understand? And if she needs anything—anything at all—your answer is yes. If you can't do it, you call me.” I didn't like the edge to his tone. I had to bite back my response in order to keep my calm. The pieces just fit together so well. My gut told me the reason Amber was scared and the reason Jacob was being so insistent that I “respect” her were one and the same.

“I've got it. You can stop obsessing. I'll take great care of her.” I smiled as I saw her walk past the windows of Jacob's office, but my smile wilted a little when I noticed Shelby Cooper following her. Cooper did have to get me some reports, but I wasn't expecting them both at the same time. “I gotta go. I have a meeting. Go to bed and eat your fiber, old man.”

The joke was as much a dig at my own aging body as it was his. He grumbled an insult in reply and I hung up the phone. We had a unique relationship other people would never understand but he knew my comment was made in love. And I knew he got my message loud and clear.

As I stood, I slid my phone into my pocket and straightened my tie. Amber opened the door and let Shelby in then followed her. Both of them wore skirt suits with heels, but my eyes were only for Amber. The curve of her hips hid beneath the jacket, teasing me, but she couldn't hide her legs. Drool practically dripped from my tongue as I said, “Good morning, ladies.”

Shelby was the first to speak. “Morning, Mr. Montgomery.” She held out her hand and I walked around the desk and shook it, then nodded at Amber.

“You have your reports?” The faster I got business with Shelby done, the quicker I'd have alone time with Amber. I gestured at the sofa and chair across the room and they each took a seat facing me.

Amber squirmed a little, tugging the hem of her jacket. She set her tablet and files on

the coffee table and looked down at the brown paper cup and white paper baggie. My eyes flicked to Shelby who also seemed to notice there was only one cup there. Mine was empty already.

“I, uh...I’m sorry, Shelby. I didn’t realize you’d be in this early. I only got a coffee for Amber.” I pushed the cup and bag toward Amber, whose cheeks turned crimson, and Shelby ran a hand through her blonde hair and shrugged.

“No big deal. I have a coffee at my desk...which,” she said with a sigh, “I will go get.”

Amber’s eyes got wide as Shelby stood up. She looked up at her coworker and if I wasn’t mistaken, a hint of panic shot through Amber’s eyes. She licked her lip and tugged her jacket, then masked the nerves by picking up the cup and sipping.

“I forgot something. I’ll be right back.” Shelby nodded at me and walked out the door, and I took a moment to absorb Amber’s body language and try to deduce what was going on.

“Are you alright?” I asked. My eyes studied the lines on her forehead, the crow’s feet near the corner of her eyes, and the way she used the cup to hide her nervous lip biting.

“Fine ... We should get started.”

Getting started was the last thing on my mind. “You left before I woke up.” My body leaned toward her instinctively. It was gravity. It pulled me in. I craved being near her physically and emotionally.

“Uh, yeah. The twins needed me. I sort of promised to, uh...to make them pancakes.”

The way she fumbled for words was adorable. Even cuter than the way she used that paper cup to hide, as if I couldn't see the warmth in her cheeks or read the anxious tension she carried in her shoulders and face.

“Alright, well as long as you're not hiding a secret lover from me...” I winked at her but she went rigid. The blood tinting her cheeks drained and her skin blanched like she'd seen a ghost. It was a curious expression—eyebrows high, mouth agape, hand with a slight tremble.

Shelby tapped on the door as she walked back in and Amber's shoulders relaxed again. I wondered if she had invited Shelby to this meeting to avoid being alone with me, but why would she do that? We were working well together, and she even admitted we could do this. The odd comment at dinner the other night was just her being hesitant because of her fear. But what was that fear?

Shelby jumped into her report and we got work underway, but I couldn't shake the feeling that I was right. It frustrated me that both of them were in cahoots, keeping something from me when I had no way of forcing either of them to come clean. It didn't matter to me if Amber had Jacob's babies. It was in the past. She was probably really hurt when I left and ran to him for comfort. I just wished she'd feel comfortable talking to me about it.

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That was the real rub here. Amber had a secret she didn't feel safe enough to tell me, which meant I was failing at creating an atmosphere she felt free to be herself in. And Jacob was being too prideful to admit it so I could just move past this. One way or another I had to either let this go and put it out of my head, or I had to get one of them to fess up. Because if they were still an item, there was going to be a lot more pain and suffering for all of us, including Erin.

And that wasn't something I looked forward to.

13

AMBER

Being back in the school just weeks after learning how badly Parker was struggling felt like a choke hold. After Jacob's heart attack and how strangely things developed with Evan, I had been so busy and distracted I hadn't put anymore thought into things. Jacob had a few suggestions, but I hadn't chased them up yet.

"It was great for Mona to watch the kids. I sure hope Nicky isn't being a pain." Shelby walked next to me. Our shoes left puddles on the floor. I was shocked they hadn't canceled tonight's open house after the snow that had fallen all day.

"I'm sure she's fine." I waved off her concern. Mom was amazing with children, especially Vera and Parker. Chances were the boys were gaming while Mom read books to Vera.

"Well, it was nice of her. I might just have to keep her in mind if I ever get a hot date

like you.” Shelby hooked her arm through mine as we perused the bulletin boards. Her dumb grin made me smile too.

“He’s not a hot date,” I hissed playfully, but I knew what she was thinking. After sleeping over last Friday at Evan’s house things shifted. Shelby kept goading me, picking on me for liking him so much. She didn’t know how complicated I thought things were. She saw them as a natural progression into something more.

“Oh, but he’s hot.” Her elbow pushed into my side in a gentle nudge as we stopped to look at the winter snowflakes board. Parker’s was creative, but as usual Vera’s excelled. He had made a simple white paper snowflake cut with scissors. Vera, on the other hand, had embellished hers with glitter glue and cotton to give it a sparkly soft effect.

“We have some artists.” Shelby pointed up at Nicky’s which was also embellished simply with blue and purple colored pencils and a few cutouts. It was sweet seeing all the different art done by the second graders here. It wasn’t so sweet when Ms. Newsome walked up to Shelby and me with eyebrows high.

“Hello, Ms. Lawson, I hope you’re enjoying the displays we set up for all the parents this evening.” Ms. Newsome wore her hair down this evening. A blue blazer and black slacks made her look professional but comfortable.

“Thank you. Yes, I love the snowflake art.” The stark contrast just in Parker’s artwork to other students’ skills was obvious. His handwriting where he wrote his name was another tell. He’d written his A and his K backward.

“Do you have a second?” she asked. I glanced at Shelby and decided I didn’t want to do this alone this time. Life was heavy enough on its own without adding more complications. I knew we had to do something to help Parker, and I felt bad about having put it on the back burner for so long.

“Uh, here is fine. Shelby is fine to stay.” My best friend’s grip on my hand tightened at the mention of her name like she could sense that I needed her support.

A crowd of people filtered by as Ms. Newsome cleared her throat and smiled at me. “Well, as you remember we have some decisions to make regarding Parker and Vera.”

My mind went to the day I told Jacob about what Ms. Newsome had said weeks ago. He had been so helpful and encouraging. He pointed out a few programs that could benefit them, and I had forwarded the emails on to the school but never followed up. After that Jacob was gone and I walked into a firestorm of work trying to get Evan up to speed. And rekindling things with Evan was the icing on the cake.

“Yes, I remember. I sent you a program. We’d have to fill out applications for grants and?—”

“It’s done.” Ms. Newsome folded her hands in front of herself. Her proud smile beamed at me, confusing me.

“What’s done?” I glanced at Shelby and then back to the teacher. I hadn’t done anything but share the information with them.

“I filled out the forms and submitted the grant requests. I wanted to let you know in person that Vera and Parker have both been accepted into the programs. We already have a teacher on site certified to help us and the children will start their new classes next week.”

Confusion swirled in my head. I stared at her blankly for a second before I could even process what she was saying. Then tears threatened to well up in my eyes. There were moments in life when I felt like my father was watching over me, protecting me, and this was one of those times.

“So...” I blinked hard and shook my head as I tried to wrap my mind around things. Ms. Newsome only smiled more brightly.

“Someone from Montgomery Enterprises called with all the information, offering to pay for everything if needed. The grant money is still pending, but with the donation on your behalf, Vera will be able to visit the gifted class one class period a day where she will be challenged. And Parker will do the same, but he’ll receive help in the areas he’s struggling.”

Shelby’s hand crushed mine as I shook my head in disbelief. I thought Jacob had just given me information. I had no clue he was orchestrating things behind the scenes. It made me feel even worse for not trying harder to stop by and visit him. When Erin turned me away saying he was sleeping, I should have offered to stay and clean up for her, or anything.

Dad would have been so pleased to know how his best friend was caring for me. Though, he would probably have been ashamed of me forgetting that it wasn’t every day a man would go out of his way to care for his best friend’s offspring long after his death.

“Thank you...” I muttered and Ms. Newsome nodded.

“You’re so very welcome. I’m really happy we are able to intervene so early for Parker and get him off to a great start. From here out, he should have no problem staying in the program until he’s up to par. You’ll just have to work with his teachers every year to reapply for grants.” She glanced away and her eyebrows shot up. “If you’ll excuse me, I have other parents to catch.”

“Thanks again...” I sighed as she hurried away. Gratitude in my heart made a grin spread on my lips. Jacob was my guardian angel sent by my father to be the dad I needed but no longer had. I slid my hand into my pocket, already thinking of what I’d

send him as a thank-you text, but Shelby gripped my wrist.

“Good God, did you tell Evan he’s the father?” Her question snapped me out of my daydream and shock shot through my body.

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I turned and used her own grip on my arm to pull her into the empty classroom. “What! My God, you can’t say that out loud. No one knows, Shelby.” My throat constricted as I glanced around hoping no one had heard her words. Evan hadn’t done this? Had he? It was Jacob. I hadn’t even mentioned this to Evan, just that Parker was dyslexic. Jacob was the one who helped me with the kids.

“Sorry,” she said, wincing.

“No...” I breathed a sigh and shut the door behind us. “Evan doesn’t know. I haven’t told him.” Guilt rained on my parade, systematically deconstructing the gratitude in my chest until I felt deflated again. “I haven’t said a word. I don’t know how to or if I even should.” How had one comment taken my night from joyful to soul crushing in a single breath?

“Christ, I’m so sorry.” Shelby’s arms wrapped around me and she hugged me for a second before letting me pull away. I covered my face with my hand and thought about what she’d said. If Evan had been the one to do this, then I had questions. Was he working on behalf of Jacob? Did he have suspicions?

Now that my peace was ruined, I knew I’d be obsessing about it all night. I felt the phone in my pocket again and thought about calling to ask him. But why would Evan do something like that? We weren’t even officially dating; he had no obligation. I dismissed the idea and sighed, then pulled Shelby back into the hallway.

“Not a word,” I grumbled, and she drew her fingers over her lips in a silent gesture indicating she was zipping it.

We finished our time at the open house and drove back to my place. I got Shelby and Nicky out the door before Mom, who insisted on reading to the twins before she left. And when they were finally in bed and I was alone, I pulled out my phone to call Jacob. My brain refused to let me rest. I had to know if he had pulled the strings and offered the school a donation or if it was Evan.

I didn't even know if Jacob would be awake, but it didn't stop me. He told me to always call him no matter what time of day or night. I only took advantage of that privilege a few times, but tonight felt necessary.

"Amber," he answered, sounding wide awake, "how are you doing? It's late..."

"Hey, Jacob." I sighed and dived right in, no sense in wasting his time. "I'm okay. I just had a question for you..."

I sat back on my bed and stretched my legs out. My body was tense. I felt like I'd been through the wringer a time or two. Keeping this secret from Evan had been much easier when he was a distant memory. The flame that burned between us now drew me in, and I felt like my wings were being singed every time I thought about a possible future.

"Anything. What is it? How can I help you?" The same gentle tone he always used with me comforted me. Sometimes I imagined he was my father on the other end of this line, and that made tears well up in my eyes. How desperately I missed my dad.

"I had the kids open house tonight. Uh...The teacher, Ms. Newsome, said someone from Montgomery had given a large donation to the school to pay for the twins' new special education classes. Was that you?" My breath hitched after my question, and suddenly I didn't really want the answer.

"No, Amber. It wasn't me." Jacob breathed heavily and I knew the sound. He was

frustrated by something, which meant he probably had the same assumption I did. That Evan was involved. “How is my brother treating you?”

The lump lodged in my throat refused to go down when I swallowed. It made my words feel choked as I said, “Good, good...He’s, uh...He’s really nice. He is letting me keep the same arrangement I have with you. So that’s good.” I bit my lip nervously. I knew he couldn’t see me but I also knew he could read me like a book even over the phone. “Did you tell him?”

My whole body felt jittery. Adrenaline thrummed through my veins making it impossible for me to stop shaking. The one thing I made Jacob promise me to never do was to tell Evan. It was my choice if he knew or not. The fact that I’d brought it to him in confidence had never been a concern of mine until now. But then, Evan hadn’t been around until now.

“No, Amber. I would never do that to you. But I do think you should tell him. I know you’re worried, but he can take it. He’s done a lot of growing up.” His soft tone returned but I couldn’t respond to him, even in his concern and caring. If he was wrong and Evan took it badly, I could lose my children. He was wealthy. I had no money to pay a lawyer to fight him.

“I, uh...You should rest. I’m sorry I bothered you, and I’m sorry I haven’t been by to visit. I tried...” My lame excuse felt as small as my feeble confidence now.

“Erin told me. It’s okay. I know you’re a busy mom. You’re taking care of your children. That’s where you belong. Don’t let an old man like me worry you.” He chuckled but it sounded forced. “Go on and rest. I’ll be back to the office before you know it. And if you need anything you call me right away.”

We said our goodbyes and I hung up. If it wasn’t Jacob who sent the school money and got the kids enrolled in that program, it had to have been Evan. No one else at

Montgomery had any clue I might need the help. Evan did have access to Jacob's email now too, so it made sense.

My hand trembled as I held my phone. The right thing to do would be to call Evan and thank him. It didn't matter that I had this massive pressure crushing my chest, or that the secret I carried threatened to suffocate me. He had done a very nice thing for me without being obligated or asked. It was the least I could do.

So as my fingers trembled, I dialed his number and put it on speakerphone. I pressed my eyes shut waiting for him to answer, and his voice had a similar effect on my heart and mind that Jacob's had, only for a different reason.

"Amber? Is everything okay?"

I glanced at the time and realized it was almost ten. It was sort of too late for phone calls, but it was too late to hang up and pretend I hadn't called him.

"Uh, yeah. Sorry it's late. I just...I was at the kids' school." I sighed. "Thank you for giving money for them to enter that program. I assume you saw Jacob's emails?" My fingers found their way to the hem of my shirt, which I tugged at nervously.

"I did..." He paused for a moment then said, "I hope that's okay. I saw an opportunity to help and I took it."

The truth didn't make me feel any better than my suspicion. Evan was skating dangerously close to my personal life being destroyed and it unnerved me. I massaged the bridge of my nose and sighed.

"No it's okay. But...Jacob and I have this agreement. I just want to do things on my own. I don't need help. I very much appreciate what you did, but I'd like it if you could let me do things my way." The monetary gift was too much. I felt obligated to

him somehow now. Jacob did things because he promised my father. It felt like my father was doing them. But Evan...He had no responsibility to me—or at least not as long as my secret stayed safe.

“I understand that, and I’m sorry. I’ll respect that boundary from now on. I just knew Parker needed some help and after my struggles, my heart went out to him. But you’re right. You’re his mother and I’ll take a step back.”

My body slumped to the side, and I curled up and put the phone closer to my head where I could hear him. “It was thoughtful though. Thank you.”

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“Amber, I want to be with you. And I don’t want you to respond to that immediately. I just want you to see that I did that for you because I care. About you, about Parker and Vera.” Evan sounded so sincere it almost made me cry again. “I just want you to see how hard I’ll try to be everything you need. You can rely on me.”

While the hint of possessiveness in his tone sent up a small red flag, the idea that he wanted to be with me made me feel so torn. Jacob was amazing, but he was only a father figure. Meanwhile, I had this equally or even more so amazing man who wanted me—for me. But he felt so far out of reach because I kept pushing him away.

“Have dinner with me. Bring the kids. We’ll have a game night.”

His invitation only added another layer to the lump in my throat. I’d have shot him down instantly, but he just gave the school a lot of money. I felt like I owed him. But his house wasn’t conducive to children at all. The glass tables, expensive artwork...They’d be bored stiff. I wanted to turn him down, but I felt bad.

“Say you will?”

I sighed and resigned myself to the fact that I felt trapped. “Alright. Dinner...But I can’t sleep over again.” My boundaries were slipping away when it came to this man, and it felt like I was helpless to do anything about it. I knew what Jacob thought, but until I spoke with a lawyer about it, there wasn’t even a thought in my head about confessing.

For as kind as Evan was being, I knew the pain of being cut by a double-edged sword. I would protect myself first, and if I felt it was safe, I’d tell him later.

If I could ever wash the guilty stain off my conscience.

14

EVAN

Everything was perfect, but when the bell rang, I did a quick last-minute sweep of the house. Not a single thing was out of place. Amber might be impressed, but it was the twins I hoped loved it most.

I already heard their voices coming through the thick metal of my storm door. I took a deep breath to blow away the tension that had been building in my chest all evening and swung the door open to hear them bantering about something called Pokémon and whether Bulbasaur was better than Jigglypuff. I grinned as I said, “Hey, come on in.” Backing up, I stepped aside for them and greeted Amber with a peck on the cheek.

“Wow, it’s cold out there,” she said, stomping her feet. Her eyes swept over my living room, causing her eyebrows to rise. The children were still going back and forth while I soaked in the reaction from their mother. “Evan,” she breathed as I reached up to help slide her coat off her shoulders.

“That is my name...” I chuckled nervously, waiting for her response.

“Your house...” Amber turned to look up at me with something new in her expression. Her eyes were softer; a tiny smile curled the corner of her lip. “You did this for them?”

“For us,” I said. The moment was perfect if not for the kids’ loud chatting that almost sounded like bickering now. Amber stood in a trancelike state while I hung her coat on a hook and clapped my hands. “Alright, no one gets to play my PlayStation if

they're fighting." Both kids looked up at me with wide eager eyes.

"You have a PlayStation?" Parker was the first to tune in. He tore his hat off and shoved it into his coat pocket, then unzipped his parka and shed it. "What games?"

"Well," I said, accepting his coat to hang on a hook. I felt Amber's eyes tracing my movements, but I avoided focusing on her. This wasn't just a moment for the two of us. That was the reason I'd invited everyone. I wanted to show them all that I was there for them the way Jacob had been. "I have several...Minecraft, Crash Bandicoot, Lego, Fortnite..." Amber's eyebrows went up at that one, which made me chuckle. "If your mom lets you play. I think we should eat first."

Vera shrugged out of her coat but left her hat on and shoved the oversized pink puffer coat in my direction. I hung it up for her as they moved into the house exploring a little.

"What did you do?" Amber hissed. She tugged on my shirt sleeve and made me lean down closer to her. I watched Parker and Vera go straight to the bookshelf that had formerly been where my liquor cabinet sat. I had it loaded down with children's books and board games. There were also a few puzzles and action figures I had in boxes in one of my spare bedrooms from my own childhood.

"I just made it family friendly. The bachelor pad felt too stodgy and unlivable in." I pulled my arm back, causing her fingers to slide up my forearm until our hands were locked together. "Let's eat. I ordered spaghetti."

I pulled her toward the dining area separated from the living room by the kitchen island. "Come on, guys. You're gonna love this." My call to the children went unheeded until Amber added her own beckon. I worked at setting the table, then poured whole milk into the glasses, served spaghetti with sauce, and placed a slice of garlic bread onto each plate.

“Evan, this is a lot.” Amber sank onto her chair while the kids scrambled onto seats of their own. They started digging in right away as I sat across from Amber. She looked overwhelmed by this, which wasn’t at all my desire. I had hoped she would feel cared for, not put out or outdone.

“Don’t worry. I’m not spoiling them. The pasta is made from vegetables too. They’re getting a balanced meal.” It was a lot, I knew that. I’d spent more than five thousand dollars this week having my house transformed into a family oasis. My old modern furniture just didn’t feel right for a family home. I ordered new comfortable couches and chairs, a new arrangement of shelves and tables—that weren’t glass. Things to entertain children the twins’ age, and even updated my subscriptions on my smart TV to make sure there were safe things for them to watch.

Amber massaged the bridge of her nose and swallowed hard. When her eyes met mine, I saw gratitude, but she said, “I think you’re trying too hard.” Then a smile started to spread across her face.

“Nothing is too much for you and the kids.” I dug in, taking the first heaping bite. Parker watched me suck the spaghetti noodle up into my mouth and laughed at me. Amber must’ve taught him to cut them the right way, and I was being a bad influence, but he enjoyed it.

“So do you play video games?” Parker asked.

“Are you kidding? I beat Spyro twice already. I love gaming.” Engaging with him on this level made his face light up. It was like I was looking into a mirror too, the tiny features on his face that reminded me of my brother so prominent I felt I didn’t even have to ask the question burning in my heart anymore.

“I play too,” Vera said, whining. I could see the intensity in her eyes and figured the rivalry for attention between these two probably mirrored what Jacob and I went

through as kids.

“What do you play?” I chewed carefully as I ate each bite and tried to keep the conversation up and positive. It was like Amber faded into the background for a while as I bonded with her children. Part of me felt bad for doing that, but these kids were so adorable.

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“I like the Barbie game.” Vera’s chin jutted out as she spoke proudly then took a huge bite of a breadstick, and Parker rolled his eyes. It turned into some bickering which Amber intervened with, and after we each finished a second helping, I nodded at the TV.

“Well, go on. I’ll clean up. You two try to pick something you can play together—no fighting.” I stood slowly and before I was even fully upright, they were gone.

Amber rose with me, collecting plates and silverware. I carried a few things to the sink and started rinsing them. She joined me and we watched the kids sit down in front of the TV as we did dishes.

“This is really special, Evan. Thank you.” I loved how soft and sweet her voice was. The warmer side of her, the nurturing side, was so tender. I could see she was a terrific mother. I felt a bit jealous for a moment, a pinch in my chest that made my temper threaten to flare. Jacob had all of this and he was neglecting it. What a foolish man to play women like this.

Meanwhile, I’d have given anything to have had this life and it be truly mine. Had I not gone off to Europe, this life might have been mine. I’d have settled down, proposed to her. We’d have started a family too. But “what-could’ve-beens” were just wishful thinking that led to regrets.

“Nothing is too much for you, Amber. I told you. I want to be with you, and being with you means them too...” I let her deduce the rest for herself. In my heart, I knew we belonged together. We just clicked too well, had too much in common.

“Stop it!” Parker shouted, and Amber looked up at me with a knowing scowl. I chuckled as she dried her hands and walked off to stop a bickering match. I finished loading the dishwasher and joined them in the living room in time to hear Amber say a board game would be better than video games if they were going to fight, and Vera ran off to the shelf and brought back Candy Land.

The kids were less than enthusiastic, but we pushed the furniture back from the coffee table and sat around it. Amber spread the board out and placed the game pieces on the board. Parker and Vera voted for Amber to go first, so she pulled the first card.

“I got two yellow squares,” she announced. She moved her pink game piece forward to the second yellow square and Vera chose a card next.

She took her turn, then Parker his. I settled into the long game, admiring how Amber interacted with them. Multiple times I noticed how much Parker looked like my brother, but I said nothing. There was no point in bringing up the topic. If Amber was at my house with me playing games with her children, she obviously wasn’t still attached to Jacob. Perhaps that part of their life was over now. Maybe she was ready to move on.

Later, when the kids turned on a movie and started yawning, Amber and I sat at the kitchen table to talk and drink a cup of coffee. I felt exhausted. It was more activity in the evening than I was used to, but Amber looked fresh. She stole glances at them between sips of the hot brew. I adored how she was so attentive to them.

“You are a really great mom,” I told her. She turned to me and smiled.

“You are an incredible man, Evan. You really didn’t have to go to all that trouble.” A soft sigh left her lips. She looked down at her coffee mug, but I used a finger to pull her chin back up.

“I did, though. They’re part of who you are now. When I said I want to be with you, I meant all of you. What we have is special. We can’t ignore that.” I thought of this week at work, how all week every time she was supposed to be in my office, Shelby tagged along. By this afternoon I figured out that Amber probably had asked her to be the third wheel so things didn’t get out of hand. But here it was just me and her.

“I just don’t understand why you’d go to all the trouble. That must’ve cost a small fortune.” Her eyes flicked toward the TV. Parker was lying down now, covered with my couch throw. I was thankful I’d invested in everything they might need in case they stayed late. His shoes were off, piled on the floor next to Vera’s and her eyes were drooping now.

“Because when you love someone, you care for them.” My statement tore her eyes from her children and focused it on me. I reached over and laced my fingers through hers. “They’re falling asleep. Stay the night.”

“Oh...” She was already shaking her head, standing up. “I don’t think I can do that. Not tonight.” Amber was moving now, leaving her cup of coffee to grow cold. I followed her into the living room to see both of her twins sleeping soundly.

“See, they’re already out.” I thought of the spare bedrooms, how if I’d have had more forethought, I’d have prepared them too. “I have blankets and pillows. I bought toothbrushes, and plenty of breakfast food. Just stay.” I reached for her hand and pulled her away from the couch, then I reached for the remote and shut the TV off.

“I don’t know, Evan.” Amber still resisted me. I didn’t know why she was fighting so hard. I didn’t know why she couldn’t see that I cared about her and planned to care for her children too.

“Why don’t you want to stay? Is it because I said I love you?”

Her eyes widened again, but her lips pressed into a firm line and she let her gaze drop. When I pinched her chin and forced her to look up at me, her eyes were brimming with tears. Emotions she just wasn't sharing with me.

“Because if it is, you don't have to say it back. I get it if you aren't there. I just needed you to know how I feel.” My gaze bounced between her eyes and she nodded, blinking back tears.

“Alright,” she whispered. It made my chest puff out with joy and hope. I backed away, keeping her hand gripped in mine, pulling her along behind me.

We left the kitchen light on in case the kids woke up. I covered them each with a blanket, put a pillow under their heads, then retreated into the bedroom. I shut the door and turned to see the most beautiful woman I'd ever met, and she didn't even know it.

Tonight was about us. I intended to pour every ounce of affection on her that I could muster and pray she accepted it without running away this time.

15

AMBER

Evan locked the door behind himself and stalked toward me. He had a hungry look in his eye and after everything this evening, I wanted so badly to be close to him. I had also felt conflicted the whole night. He was so incredible—more than I ever thought he could be. I knew he was kind and sensitive, but going out of his way to redecorate his house to make my children comfortable spoke to my heart in ways nothing else ever could.

“Now, the kids are sleeping. We're alone. You are stressed out...” He reached up and

curled some hair around my ear. “And I want to help you relax and take a load off.”

I was ready for him to just kiss me and strip my clothes off. My body felt warm and gooey after seeing how loving he was toward my children. Hearing him say he loved me tipped me over the edge too. However, I wasn’t going to rush into anything. There were such huge hurdles for us to conquer, things he didn’t know about yet. Things I wasn’t sure we’d make it over. It made me wrestle against the desire to be with him because I wanted to protect him—and my kids.

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“How are you going to do that?” I asked. My fingers weaved through his. I felt the thrum of his pulse in them. His eyes devoured me, but his words indicated control over that hunger.

“Go into the bathroom. Take all of your clothes off...Leave the panties if you’re nervous.” Evan let go of me and walked to his nightstand. He opened a drawer and produced a bottle of massage oil, scented like rose petals, and grinned at me. “I’m going to rub you from head to toe until you’re so relaxed you drift off to sleep in my arms...Oh, and there’s a robe in there if you want it.”

The gesture was more than romantic. I whimpered and smiled. “That is so sweet...” If I was a crier, I would’ve started tearing up, but the idea of getting a full-body massage sounded amazing. I slipped into the bathroom without having to be told twice.

My fingers fumbled with the buttons and snaps on my clothing. I was nervous for this, and I didn’t even know why. It wasn’t like Evan and I hadn’t had sex multiple times before, but it felt like the first time all over again. I tried to determine why my hands were trembling, but the only thing I could come up with was how I knew this was wrong.

Evan thought he was walking into someone else’s abandoned life and picking up where they dropped the ball. He probably thought I had a partner I left or who left me. He wanted to be the knight in shining armor. It was wrong of me to lead him on and let him think those things, but for the first time in a really long time, I felt like things were going right. What other man in this world would ever treat me like this and adore me and my children? I needed this guilty indulgence, even if later on I had

to swallow the guilt again.

When I walked back into the bedroom Evan was draped over the bed wearing nothing but a pair of shorts. Candles burned around the room; the lights were off. Soft instrumentalmusic played, and I noticed his phone screen glowing from the nightstand for a second before it went dark, and he patted the bed.

“Come on,” he coaxed. I’d chosen to wear the robe, but I turned it backward like they do at fancy salons.

I climbed onto the bed and lay on my stomach, and Evan slid the folds of the robe open in back, baring my skin to the cool room. His hands were warm as he started to work the massage oil into my skin, kneading out the stiffness of my muscles, and when he got to my hips and parted the robe, I felt his lips press onto my butt cheek.

“This is nice,” he said softly. I moaned when he grabbed a full hand of my flesh and squeezed. It wasn’t sexual, but it did feel incredible. The bed shook as he changed the position he was lying in. Then both hands were on me, kneading and spreading my cheeks as he worked my glutes hard.

“God, this feels amazing,” I moaned. Never in my life had I been so pampered. It was such an incredible feeling. I wished I had a partner who could do this for me once a week. My body felt so loose and relaxed I could melt into the sheets, and then he started kissing my skin. His hands were strong but gentle, the perfect mix of tenderness and passion.

It was an exquisite dance of pleasure, the way his skilled hands massaged and worked in perfect harmony with his soft lips. His touch was like fire, igniting every inch of my oiled skin with desire. Groping and rubbing, he breathed out warm puffs of air over my slick thighs, placing tender kisses along the length of them. As his hands moved lower, they worked their magic just below my glutes, easing the tension and

relaxing me. And then he began to spread me open, teasing and tantalizing my most intimate areas.

“God, Amber,” he moaned, his hot breath tickling my sensitive flesh as he hovered close to burying himself deep between my legs. “Your pussy is getting so wet.”

I could only whimper in response, lost in the intense sensations coursing through my body. This wasn’t just a massage; it was pure intimacy. I wanted everything he was offering.

“I think you missed a spot,” I managed to say, trying to hint at what I truly desired him to focus on.

Evan chuckled softly, understanding my unspoken request. His fingers dug into my thighs firmly yet gently, spreading my inner lips and bringing me even closer to blissful release.

My moans escaped my lips in breathy gasps as he worked his way up to my clit, teasing it with soft strokes and gentle pressure. The warmth of his tongue against the sensitive nub made me shudder and I couldn’t help but arch my back in pleasure. “I love how wet you get for me,” he murmured, his voice thick with desire. My core throbbed in response to his words and the skilled movements of his tongue. “I can’t wait to feel this on my cock.” His words sent a wave of need through me, making my body ache for him even more.

“Evan...” I moaned, unable to form any coherent thoughts as he continued to tease and please me. With a whispered command, he asked me to turn over, and I eagerly complied. His weight settled on top of me, his hard cock pressing against my thigh as he massaged my breasts with skilled hands. His touch was electrifying, sending sparks of pleasure through every inch of my body.

Slowly, he trailed hot kisses down my body, igniting flames of desire with each caress. When he reached my core, he paused to look up at me with those intense eyes that made me weak in the knees. “I can’t wait to feel you come all over my face,” he growled, the promise of his words sending a jolt of anticipation through me.

“God...” I whimpered, arching my hips toward him.

The anticipation was killing me, but Evan took his time. He rubbed my inner thighs and then the sensitive spot behind my knees. By the time he reached my center, I was practically squirming with need. His tongue expertly flicked my clit, making me shudder, and then he suckled on it gently. I moaned loudly, my head thrown back in ecstasy.

He didn’t stop there. His fingers joined in, slipping inside me while his tongue continued to worship my clit. I wanted him so badly and he knew it. He curled his fingers inside me, finding that spot that made me see stars. I gripped the sheets as the pleasure built inside me, and when he added a third finger, I practically exploded. I cried out, my body convulsing as wave after wave of pleasure washed over me.

He lapped up every drop, his tongue slow and sensual, as if savoring the taste of me. I writhed under his touch for several minutes. He pinned down my hips with his forearm but continued to lick me clean. When he finally looked up at me, his eyes were smoldering with desire. I was drained but still eager to have him.

“Wow,” I hummed, letting my knees fall apart. Evan continued to lick and suck.

“‘Wow’ is right. I’m just getting started though.” His tongue delved into me and I believed him. One thumb pressed on my clit making me jolt, and his other hand gripped one of my cheeks and squeezed it while he spread me. The stubble on his chin threatened to scrape me raw but I loved it. I didn’t tell him to stop.

I did, however, prop myself on my elbows to watch him enjoy his feast. He continued to lick and suck and rub my clit as pleasure built inside my core again. I panted, my hips bucking against his mouth. He moaned in response, and the vibrations spread through my pelvis.

“I love your pussy,” he growled, pushing his thumb into my back hole. His other hand continued to work my clit, pinching it lightly as he continued to feast on me. “You taste so good.”

“I...I...” I couldn’t form coherent words anymore. The pleasure was too intense. My toes curled and my nails dug into the sheets as the second orgasm crashed over me, even more powerful than the first. I hissed and grunted while my body lurched off the bed and jolted around. It was wild and out of control. I almost screamed in pleasure, but I tempered myself. The kids were just in the other room.

Evan continued to lick and suck until I was calm. Then he crawled up over my body and kissed me hard. Moisture from going down on me coated his face. It smeared on my chin and cheeks, but I couldn’t get enough of him. His teeth bit down on my lip, then he kissed over my jaw to my ear where he whispered, “I need you.”

“Yes,” I whimpered, spreading my thighs to him, but he chuckled.

“This...” he said as he rose up. Evan rolled me to my side. He shed his shorts and tossed them to the floor. Then he positioned himself at my entrance. I lay on my side with my legs together and he entered me from behind, draping his weight on my hips.

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My body lay still as he pushed himself inside me. My heart was racing, and my mind was filled with a million sensations. I could feel the weight of his body on mine, his breath hot against my neck. “I love you,” he grunted, his voice thick with desire. And then he reached around to grasp and knead my left breast. His touch was firm yet gentle, igniting a fire inside me that I couldn’t contain.

As he moved faster and harder, I moaned in pleasure. If only I could reach my clit, I knew I would come again. Desperate to add to the intensity of the moment, I pressed my hand between my thighs and began to rub in small circles, my fingertips barely able to reach. “Yeah, clench on me,” Evan’s orders were commanding but arousing.

“Is this what you want?” I asked breathlessly as he continued to pump into me.

“Yes...milk me,” he moaned in response, his thrusts becoming more frantic and urgent. With each squeeze of my muscles around him, I could feel him getting closer and closer to release. “Squeeze my dick,” he urged, and I obliged eagerly, wanting nothing more than to give him as much pleasure as he was giving me.

I tightened and relaxed my muscles around him. His grip on my breast tightened and he groaned in my ear. His hips slammed into me even harder. I moaned and tilted my hips backward to meet his thrusts. I was so close. My breathing quickened as my orgasm neared.

“Evan...” I panted. My whole body tingled, my core clenching around him.

“That’s it, Amber. Come for me.” He growled in my ear and then his cock throbbed. His hot load shot into me, and my own orgasm came with shuddering intensity. My

whole body convulsed as he continued to fill me up.

He collapsed on me, both of us panting and spent. His cock softened inside me, but he didn't move. I didn't want him to either. We lay there, entwined, for a few minutes, catching our breaths.

"That was," I started to say, but Evan kissed me. His tongue invaded my mouth, tasting of me and him and the lingering scent of roses from the oil.

"Yeah," he said when he pulled back with a sexy smirk on his face. "It was."

He rolled off me and pulled me against his chest. It was cold, but my arms were still deep in the sleeves of the robe. The music played softly and before I knew it, I heard Evan's soft snoring over it. I lay there with him curled around me feeling completely out of place.

That should have elicited deep feelings of intimacy and bonding, but all I felt was guilt and shame. I thought of what Jacob had told me. He believed that Evan could handle the truth, that telling him was the right thing. I wasn't sure. But after a night like tonight, I didn't know anymore. Maybe my secret really should come out. Evan was so amazing with the kids, and who was I to stop what fate had set in motion?

I just didn't know if I was ready for it or not.

16

EVAN

As I parked out front of Jacob and Erin's home, I noticed the light on in the living room. The sheer curtains obscured the view, but I saw movement as normal. It'd become my habit to stop by after work daily now, giving Jacob updates and getting

his thoughts. Erin was usually around too, doting over him and taking care of his needs. Now and then I helped with something she found daunting, but more than anything I found it comforting to know my brother was on the mend.

I knocked but let myself in without waiting for Erin to come to the door. She looked up from her position near the couch where she held a glass of water and a pillow for Jacob who seemed to be getting comfortable.

“Hi Evan, come on in.” Erin’s smile was warm as usual. Today the fine lines around her eyes weren’t as deep, her eyes not quite as tired.

“How’s the champ?” I asked, shutting the door behind me. I stomped my feet off, the light snow from the walk dusting the floor, and took my coat off. The house was warm thanks to a crackling fire in the fireplace across the room. I heard Jacob complaining about something, but he kept his voice low and I couldn’t tell what it was.

“Moody, just like always. Come sit with him. I have to put dinner on.” Erin set the water down on the end table next to Jacob and put the pillow next to him. I walked over and sat down in the recliner to his right.

Jacob looked better too, not as tired or worn out. His hair was sticking up at odd angles, making it obvious where it was thinning. He looked his age today instead of the years-younger look he typically exuded, and he scowled at me when I chuckled.

“This must be killing you, being all cooped up and unable to get to work. “I sat back and loosened my tie. These visits were usually punctuated by his grumpy mood and earnest expectation of a faster recovery. He also tended to complain about everything that was changing. Doctors ordered him on new medications and changed his diet completely, which would frustrate even the saintly among us.

“I’ll be back to work next week. You’ll see.” Jacob shoved the pillow behind his back and stretched his stockinged feet out to prop them up on the coffee table. Then he reached for his water and sipped it.

“Next week?” I asked, confused. “Doctor said it could be months, Jake. There really is no rush. I have things under control. You’re not missing out on anything. We can do video calls to loop you in. You should be at home recovering.” Plus, I didn’t want him back. I was enjoying the time working with Amber and getting to know her all over again, this time from a more serious angle. Going back to R&D in Crescent Springs was in the far future, not that soon.

“Yeah, well doctors don’t know everything, and I don’t want to sit around here.”

I didn’t want to upset him, so I sighed and gave up that fight for now. I wasn’t going to be the one to make sure he followed doctor’s orders anyway. If anyone could manage that it would be Erin. Which made me feel sad. The woman loved him so much and he’d pulled a fast one over on her. How hurt would she be if she knew he had a secret family out there he was caring for? And she was the one here waiting on him hand and foot, caring for him in his distress.

“How’s Amber doing?” Jacob’s question made me tense. I wasn’t expecting him to ask about her directly, though he’d done it on every phone call we had. But here, in front of Erin? Of course, Erin was in the kitchen, but she could walk back into the living room at any second, and how would he explain that conversation to her?

“She’s good...doing fine...” My curiosity was piqued now. I remembered how Erin was the one who sent me with the gift from Jacob to her children on their birthday, how I interrupted that party, how shocked she looked then.

I wondered how much Erin already knew or why she’d tolerate things like that. But then, I wasn’t around for two full years, and when I came back, I made it a point to

keep my distance. I'd had my reasons, all of them stupid, but they were there.

Now I wished I'd have taken a keener interest in Jacob's life, and searched Amber out much sooner.

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“You’re respecting her the way I asked you to?” His eyebrows drew together and irritated me. I wasn’t one for playing games with people, but it appeared my older brother was. He was keeping something from me. These conversations had mostly happened over the phone. I was careful to never broach the topic with his wife around, but here and now my curiosity was getting the better of me.

“Why are you so interested in Amber all the time? What gives?” I leaned forward and crossed my hands in front of myself as my elbows rested firmly on my knees. I had to get to the bottom of this thing. It was driving me crazy.

“She’s my assistant, and I was good friends with her father. I want to make sure she’s cared for. That’s why I’m asking.” Jacob scowled and it reminded me of the sour expression on Parker’s face the other night when they slept over and he was bickering with Vera. The same eyes, same pouty lips, same dark brooding forehead.

“Is there something you’re not telling me? Something I need to know?” I pried a little, but that was what family did right? When one brother had a secret the other was obligated to ask. It was the way of things.

“I think you need to talk to her...” Jacob’s tongue flicked out over his lips and he pulled on his ear. It was his tell. Years of playing poker with this man during college and postcollege parties taught me a thing or two. Maybe he wasn’t outright lying to me but he knew something.

I leaned in farther and pursed my lips. I wanted to read his expression and find out what he knew. “You...Are you their father?” My direct question made his face shift. I expected to see anger, but I saw surprise. “I’ve seen the resemblance, Jake. Don’t lie

to me. How could you do that to Erin?”

Jacob drew his hand over his face from forehead to jaw. The day-old stubble was mostly gray now, but it suited him. He wasn't a young guy anymore. If he screwed things up with his wife of nearly thirty years he'd really regret it. I hated that for him, and I didn't mind helping him keep this secret as long as I knew things between them were over. I also didn't want to get him so worked up he had another heart attack.

“I think you're speaking with the wrong person about this. If Amber hasn't said anything to you then maybe she's not ready for you to know. If you're that curious you need to go speak to her.” Jacob's eyes zeroed in on me and anger bubbled in my chest. I wasn't going to play this game with him, but I saw the serious expression in his eyes and knew he felt strongly about this. I wouldn't be able to push him to answer me without riling him.

“I should help Erin,” I said, standing. As I moved toward the kitchen, worried that I had already upset him and gotten his blood pressure up, Erin was headed back to the living room.

I almost bumped into her in the arched doorway separating the living room from the dining room.

“Oh, Evan...Gosh, I almost ran into you.” She smiled and then her smile soured just like my mood had. “Are you okay? Did he bite your head off too?” She frowned and reached out to pick a piece of lint off my jacket.

“Something like that. I think it's better if I just stick to the kitchen tonight.” Poor loving Erin had no clue what her husband was up to. In the interest of preserving her heart and her future, I avoided the discussion, but I hated it. I hated that my brother was keeping a secret he wouldn't fess up to, and now I was forced to keep the secret for him.

“Alright, I just put the lasagna in the microwave. It has about ten minutes to heat up. Mrs. Grand brought it by last week and I just haven’t had the time to do anything with it. Would you mind setting the table? You can stay if you’d like.” Erin patted my chest near my right shoulder. “And don’t let Jacob get to you. He’s struggling a lot. He feels powerless and well...you know.” Her expression fell and so did her gaze. Her head dipped and I rested my hand on her hand.

“It’s okay. I totally get it. He’s dealing with a lot of stuff right now.” The truth, his lie, was burning my tongue, itching to walk into the open and shed light on Jacob’s lies. “You just make sure he follows doctor’s orders and stays home until he’s better. We don’t want a repeat of this. Next time he might not be so lucky.”

Erin’s head popped up and she nodded. “Believe me, I’m fighting him. I’ll make sure he does what they tell him.” Her smile returned, softer than before. “Thank you so much for being such a good brother to him. And thank you for supporting me through this too. I appreciate you more than you know.”

I nodded but went my separate way. Erin returned to Jacob, whom I heard grumbling about something again. I checked on their lasagna but could only stare at the light inside the microwave door as it spun around on the turntable and cooked. My hands rested on the counter and I leaned on them.

Amber wasn’t the key to this. She couldn’t be. If I went to her and asked her directly about the truth, I knew she’d tell me, but it would humiliate her. She was so impressionable when her father died. At times, I felt guilty of potentially taking advantage of her vulnerability. I felt like the only reason she was with me was that sense of comfort in my arms. But after a while, I realized she was genuinely interested in me.

Still, if I left her and I was her support, it made sense that she’d find that same solace elsewhere, even in the arms of a married man. I didn’t fault her. I couldn’t picture her

being a manipulative woman who would destroy a marriage. It was probably naivety, innocence. She wanted to feel grounded in the wake of a tragedy and I had been that—but I had created a new type of loss when I left.

If she reached out for comfort to Jacob and he gave it to her, who was I to judge her? I only had myself to blame for that. So if I brought this up to her and she felt judged or criticized by me, I would end up being pushed away. I didn't want that.

If I was getting to the bottom of things, it had to be through Jacob, and it had to be when Erin wasn't around.

I sighed as the microwave dinged, then grabbed hot pads to pull it out. After peeling the cling wrap off the casserole dish, I grabbed a few plates, forks, napkins, and cups, and I set the table for Erin and Jacob's meal.

"Dinner," I called, but I wasn't going to stay. Being around Jacob when I felt this strongly about something wasn't a good idea. I'd end up with more questions than answers, and I would blow the whole thing wide open for him and Erin. Jacob was to blame in this. If he hadn't done what he did, he wouldn't have this mess, and no way was I going to be the bad guy here.

I would get the truth, and then I would force him to tell Erin. And when it was said and done, I'd force him to let go of whatever hold he had over Amber. I wanted her. She was good with me. I was even willing to look past the fling with Jacob and the fact that the children were his. They'd have a great man in their life to be a father figure and that was all they needed. Later, when they were old enough to understand, they'd learn the truth.

Until then, we'd keep the secret for their sake.

Erin and Jacob walked into the dining room, and I helped them get situated. I served

the lasagna and pressed a kiss to Erin's cheek before I left.

"Thank you," she whispered again, patting my hand, and Jacob glowered at me.

"You should just speak to her," he said, nodding. I didn't notice even a flicker of curiosity in Erin's eyes. She probably thought Jake was talking about work stuff.

"Goodnight," I said, then I grabbed my coat and slipped back into the cold with more frustration than I had when I came over.

I really could have used Amber's warm body in bed next to mine tonight. But I wasn't going to do to her what Jacob had. I respected her too much. And I didn't have the truth yet. That part was still coming.

AMBER

I'd been debating about what to do for too long. The choice of whether to tell Evan or not had me paralyzed, and Mom could tell. She sat with me now at the lawyer's office waiting. The receptionist parked us in a large conference room with a low ceiling and barely adequate lighting. She told us to relax and settle in, but how could I relax? My future might be on the line and it would cost an arm and a leg.

"Please stop shaking." Mom reached over and grabbed my hand. I oscillated between trembling fingers and tugging on the hem of my jacket. The mere thought of telling Evan the twins were his crippled me. Now consulting a lawyer felt like my ship was going under without a fight. I didn't know how I'd let her talk me into this.

"I can't." My honesty was all I could offer. Mom had no idea how anxious I was. She believed in the goodness of mankind, that by nature humans were inherently benevolent. I'd lived long enough to know that wasn't true in all cases, though I wanted to hang on to that thread of hope.

"It's going to be fine, dear. You'll see." She patted my hand and I sighed. It should've helped, like when you come up from being underwater for a long time and suck in that first breath. That deep sigh was supposed to fill my lungs with air and then allow me to blow away my frustration and fears, but it didn't work.

"How much longer?" I looked at my phone, tucked inside the pocket of my purse. I left the ringer on in case the school called and told Evan I had an appointment this afternoon, but not what. If it were Jacob, I could've simply told him where I was going. I probably should've said something to him. It was just happening so quickly.

The door clicked and a tall, slender, young man walked in. He was probably only my age, maybe thirty years old if that. His nails were trimmed short and he was clean-shaven. He had honest blue eyes and sandy brown, neatly coiffed hair, and it felt like something out of a TV drama.

“Hi ladies,” he said, walking toward the table. He sat down at the head of the table and laid a recording device on the wooden surface between us. His outfit, like the room, was plain—a gray suit with a white shirt and a navy-blue tie.

I adjusted the way I was sitting so I could pay better attention. Plus, it looked unprofessional for me to slouch so far in the chair. The lawyer pressed a button on the device and then introduced himself.

“My name is Mitchell Fair. I’m a family and marriage attorney. What brings you beautiful ladies in today?” He sat back in his chair and Mom gushed over the compliment as if she hadn’t been told she was beautiful in her life. I rolled my eyes.

“Well, Mr. Fair, my name is Mona Lawson, and this is my daughter Amber. We’re here about a potential custody case. I, uh—we paid the retainer out front.” Mom’s matter-of-fact attitude, and the fact that she pointed out that she had paid for the retainer, didn’t get past me. I almost chuckled at how she seemed too flattered by the young lawyer’s comment.

“I see, and which one of you young ladies is having the issue?” His eyes flicked from Mom’s to mine and I raised a timid hand, wiggling two fingers.

“I am.” I swallowed hard against the knot in my throat and for good measure, tugged the hem of my jacket. “It’s sort of a unique case.” If my hand was trembling before, it was a veritable earthquake now.

“Alright, why don’t you tell me a little about what’s going on? Divorce? Deadbeat

dad? Abuse?” He tapped the table by his recording device and said, “You see, I’m recording this, so I don’t have to keep any notes. Whatever you say will be transcribed later on.”

I nodded and looked down at the flashing red light and sighed. “Well, it’s sort of complicated.” I sighed again and this time I did feel a little relief. “My twins turned seven last month, so I suppose it’s been almost eight years that I’ve been keeping this secret.”

“Secret?” he asked and his eyebrows peaked in the middle.

“Oh, dear, you’re making it sound clandestine.” Mom shook her head. “She never told the father because he ran off to Europe and then came back with some other woman. It’s really not all that.”

“I understand,” he said, and his head bobbed.

My mouth suddenly felt bone-dry. There were no drinks, not a water cooler or drinking fountain in sight. My palms were sweaty too, and maybe my armpits. The way Mom spoke, as if it were no big deal at all, only made it seem like even more of a big deal. I couldn’t utter a syllable. My tongue clung to the roof of my mouth like Velcro.

“Go on, Ms ...”

“Lawson, Amber Lawson.” My eyes traced back up to his and stayed there. He seemed to be the calming force. Not that Mom wasn’t a comfort. She was; I couldn’t have done this withouther. But Mr. Fair tethered me to the reality I was facing, yet he seemed calm, even after what Mom said. “My mom is right. I had this...fling with a man. It lasted about six months or something. I didn’t find out I was pregnant until after he was off in Europe at his new job. I knew he’d be gone for a few years, and

the shock of finding out I was pregnant with his baby shut me down for a while.

“I didn’t know at first how to get ahold of him directly without involving his family. That idea also scared me for a while. When I reached out and asked about him, his brother told me he’d been sent there for disciplinary reasons; their board thought he could use some growing up. I didn’t know how he’d react, so I waited. In the meantime, I found out I was having twins, which was even more of a shock.

“I was struggling, barely making ends meet. So, this guy’s brother helped me get a job and an apartment. I confided that I was pregnant, and even then, he was very helpful. He was my dad’s best friend; he told my dad if anything ever happened to him he would watch out for me and my mom.” I sighed and looked down. This was where the story got really deceptive. I felt ashamed.

“What happened next?” Mr. Fair’s fingers tapped the table softly, waiting for my response, and I thought I might start crying.

“Well, I confessed to his brother that he was going to be an uncle. His brother seemed as surprised to find that out as I was. He instantly wanted to tell, but I felt scared. I promised him I’d say something as soon as Evan—er...” My cheeks instantly got hot at the slip of tongue. “As soon as his brother got home. Except when he got home, he had a new girlfriend. It was rumored they were engaged. How could I destroy that relationship?”

My hands were shaking again and tears brimmed in my eyes. Shame wrapped around me like a blanket of fog, obscuring my ability to think straight. I felt Mom push some tissues into my hand and I sniffled as I dabbed my cheeks.

“She’s got it in her head that she’s broken some sort of law.” Mom squeezed my other hand, but it wasn’t reassuring.

“Fortunately, the state of New York does not have any law for mandatory reporting, so take a big breath for me and calm down. You’re not breaking any laws.” He leaned forward, resting his forearms on the table and folding his fingers. “What exactly do you need from me?”

The plain room didn’t feel so plain anymore. It felt comforting and warm now. Nothing busy to distract me from the solid blue color of the walls that felt more like a summer sky. No expensive paintings or lavish decor to boast about money or power. This man felt like a good friend who could help. I let the tension out of my shoulders again and sighed.

“I’ve recently had to begin interacting with him again. We’ve sort of...rekindled something. I think it may be necessary in the near future to reveal the truth to him. I want some sort of reassurance that he’s not going to take my babies away from me. If he fights me, will I lose them?” My hands were drenched. I rubbed them down the front of my suit slacks and blinked rapidly to push back any remaining tears. Then I used my finger to dab a few more tears away, careful not to smudge my mascara, which was probably already running.

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“You couldn’t keep them from him. If he forced paternity, you’d be required to give him a test and if the judge sided with him, he would receive at the very least visitation. Now, that said, a judge is going to side with the mother 90 percent of the time, especially if she’s provided a good stable home.” His eyes narrowed at me and I nodded.

“I do that. They’re well taken care of.”

“Then you should have no problems. If you say you’re rekindling, why do you think he might pursue custody?” There those fingers went again, tapping the table.

“I’m just scared, I guess.” My shoulders bobbed and I sighed. “I want to cover all my bases in case he gets upset. That’s all.”

“I think you’ve got a great case. I would fight for you to maintain full custody, and in the event that he really fights, we just have to prove your worth over his. You said he ran off to Europe for disciplinary action at work; that’s a start. And he’d have to pay seven years of back child support as well as reimburse half of the prenatal and delivery care costs. That’s a huge chunk of money.”

I knew even the most astronomical cost wouldn’t stop Evan if he wanted my kids, but I hoped he wouldn’t make it come to that. I had no way of knowing, however, how he would even react. Jacob told me Evan would be fine, but I had my doubts.

On the drive across town to my place, Mom talked about my dad, how kind he was, what a good father. I let my mind drift in and out of focus, hearing some words, ignoring some. It bothered me that she was being so lighthearted about it, but maybe

that was her way of helping me not get too bogged down in the heavy emotion. It still felt crushing though.

“You know, it won’t be such a bad thing. It could be the best thing for everyone, Amber. Parker and Vera deserve to know their father. If Evan is anything like Jacob, you probably won’t have an issue.” Mom reached across the center console and patted my knee. I tried to respond positively, but I was grateful when she said, “You seem stressed, honey. I’ll stay over tonight. I’ll make dinner and you can have a long hot soak. Okay?”

My phone buzzed inside my purse as she asked that, and I mumbled, “Yeah, sure,” as I pulled it out. It was a text from Evan.

Evan 4:12 PM:Hey, can you come in early tomorrow? Say six? I have that board meeting I need you to help me get prepped for it.

I stared at the phone for a long time before I looked up. I knew it was my job to show up and help him, and I knew Jacob would be counting on me to keep it together to do my job well. Part of me wanted to text back that it wasn’t a good idea, and another part of me wanted to respond yes.

Maybe first thing in the morning before anyone else was there, was the best time to tell him my secret. Or maybe not. It might make him scatterbrained or upset for the board meeting, but then when would be a good time to tell him? There was no good time. I had kept this secret for seven years, almost eight. He would be very angry no matter when it came out.

“You okay?” Mom asked, and I locked my phone and put it back in my purse.

“Not really, but thank you for offering to come over. I’d like that.” I stared out the window the rest of the drive and let my brain zone out, worrying about all the things

that could go wrong if Evan reacted badly. The lawyer said he couldn't really take them, but I still worried about it.

I wondered how well I knew him. The Evan from eight years ago was cold, calculating, and impulsive. How would a more mature Evan react though? And would I be able to hold it together for my twins' sake?

18

EVAN

Amber never responded if she'd be here early, but I assumed she would be. I stopped on the way here at a local diner and picked up breakfast. I wasn't sure what she'd want, so I got a little of everything, along with a candle and some flowers. My plan to have her alone for a few hours before anyone else came in had a point. I'd been wrestling with what Jacob told me long enough. I needed to know what was going on, and if he wasn't going to tell me I had to ask her.

I paced, cautiously chewing my fingernail down to the quick in anxiety. If something had happened between them, I promised myself not to get bent out of shape. She was a free woman, and that was in her past. I had no jurisdiction over her love life, not even now. We hadn't committed to a relationship yet either, so it wasn't like I could be offended if she kept things private.

I sensed her coming before I saw the first glimpse of her. It was far too early for anyone else to be here. The door, slightly ajar, moved as pressure in the building equalized and it made my heart jump a little. I ran a hand through my hair and smoothed the front of my jacket down. It felt wrong to corner her, but I had to know. The secret was keeping me up at night. Those kids looked suspiciously like my brother, too much like him.

When she pushed the door to my office open, she looked a little worse for wear. Her hair was down today, but she wore no makeup. Her blouse wasn't buttoned up to the collar, and she had sneakers on, carrying heels in one hand. She was still ravishing though. A face I could definitely wake up to every morning for the rest of my life. She carried a coffee in her hand and a grumpy expression on her face, tired bags under her eyes.

"Morning," I said, gesturing. "I got breakfast for us."

Amber's eyes flicked toward the table across the room where I laid out the takeout dishes full of breakfast sausages, pancakes, eggs, and donuts. "I already ate, sorry." Her tone was flat, but not offensive. She didn't act apologetic, and I didn't expect her to be. Though my confidence wilted a little.

"Coffee?" I said, and she held up her hand. I'd missed the paper cup in her other hand as I focused on the red pointy toed heels in her other.

"Brought mine...Let's get down to the numbers." Amber dropped her heels on the floor and set her coffee on the corner of my desk. I assumed she had left her coat and purse in her office, probably her makeup bag too. She looked tired and worn out.

"Amber, I was hoping we could talk." There was no point denying my real motive for getting her here. It had worked, but she didn't seem happy about it. I didn't need her help with the prep for the board meeting; Jacob and I had gone over things already. In fact, I had to order him to stay home, otherwise he'd have shown up to help.

She glanced at the food again and toed off her shoes, then peeled off her socks and shoved them inside the sneakers. Her bare toes were polished, sexy—catching my attention. She avoided making eye contact with me as she slid her feet into her heels and straightened her jacket with a tug on the hem.

“I thought we were working.”

“Amber,” I said, stepping closer to her. She smelled like lilacs in spring, the way the warm fresh air whips up the scent of the earliest blooming flower and invigorates the air. I felt sucked into her gravitational field. She didn’t shy away from me.

“Evan, you said we’d keep this professional at work. I thought you needed my help.”

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“I do need your help, but it’s not what you think.” I reached up and traced her bottom lip with the pad of my thumb. The idea of dropping this bomb on her suddenly felt like a bad idea. She didn’t seem to be feeling the best. We’d been getting along so well, dating regularly, and the last thing I wanted was to push her away. “You look so beautiful, even without makeup or all the trappings.” My thumb continued to caress her lip.

“Evan,” she protested, but I curled my fingers around the back of her neck and pulled her in for a kiss. It seemed to be the only thing that we did well without me screwing it up.

Amber didn’t resist me. She let me kiss her gently, and then more fervently until her hands were splayed on my chest, gripping the lapels of my suit. The kiss deepened and I felt my body responding. This wasn’t what I had intended, not at all why I wanted her here, but she was guiding the way. I let her lead me.

“We shouldn’t,” she breathed, but her lips returned to mine.

“We could,” I said, kissing her again.

She pulled back, just enough to catch her breath. Her eyes met mine, and I saw the desire pooling in their depths. Her gaze bounced from my eyes to my lips and then to the door.

“Evan, we are supposed to be working.” She bit her lower lip, but she was already in my arms, already making me swell.

“We’re here alone...” Suddenly my mind decided I had all the time in the world to ask her about her children and Jacob’s involvement in her life. The desire churning in my gut made it impossible to think straight. If I got her a bit more relaxed, loosened up a little, maybe she would be more lucid when it came time for me to ask the question. She would trust me more to be honest.

I slid my hand down her side, cupping her ass. She didn’t stop me as I coaxed her leg up around my hip where I could press against her core. Through our clothes, I felt the wetness between her thighs, the heat that rivaled my own.

“I want you,” I breathed in her ear, then lowering my mouth to her neck, “Amber...God how I want you.”

Her breathing was labored as she gripped my biceps and leaned in. “Evan...We can’t.”

“It’s just us,” I said, and she was right there with me, her mouth on mine. “No one will ever know.”

“Oh God,” she panted. “We...I...” Amber couldn’t finish her thought as my hand slid under her blouse, touching her bare skin. Electricity coursed between us, and I knew she felt it too.

I let my lips trail down her jawline to the sensitive spot below her earlobe where I knew she liked it best. “You want me too, don’t you?” I growled against her skin, my erection throbbing through my trousers.

Amber whimpered and then her lips were on mine again, this time more passionate than before. Her hands tangled in my hair, pulling me closer as she moaned into my mouth. Our tongues dueled and danced, teasing each other as our bodies clashed together. It was like fireworks exploding between us, something long dormant

awakened.

I purred against her neck, my hand sliding up her thigh, brushing against the dampness between her legs. Amber shuddered and gripped my bicep, but she didn't stop me from backing her toward the desk chair. Her hands were as greedy as mine were, groping and grabbing. She had my dick out of the fly of my pants quickly, and I had her panties around her ankles before she plopped down on the chair.

I knelt between her knees and inched her skirt up around her waist. She shook again as my fingers traced the line of her slit. Her eyes were now hooded with lust, devouring me as our gazes locked. She pulled me in for a kiss again and whispered, "I dreamed of you last night. Of this..."

"So you woke up horny?" I joked, and she pulled me against her mouth more tightly. The kiss was searing, melding our tongues together. I rubbed her clit and spread her juices around, and she sucked in a breath when I pushed two fingers into her.

Amber moaned into my mouth and her nails dug into my back, urging me on. I knew exactly how to make her come apart. My other hand gripped her thigh for leverage as I curled my fingers inside her, hitting the bundle of nerves that had her shuddering and moaning into my mouth. The sounds she made were music to my ears.

I pulled away reluctantly, needing to see her face when she came. Amber's eyes were half-lidded, and her cheeks flushed a deep crimson. "Evan," she panted, "I'm...so..."

"Close?" I said, but she unleashed before I could finish the word. Her eyes rolled back, mouth hanging open. Her body spasmed and jolted, her pussy clenching around my fingers. She whimpered and clawed at my wrist, and I continued to thrust my fingers into her. When the orgasm began to subside, she let me cover her lips with mine again. Her hand wrapped around my girth and stroked, pulling more pleasure from me, making me want her more.

I reached into my back pocket and produced my wallet. She whimpered when my fingers left her. We hadn't been the most careful, but I didn't want an unplanned pregnancy that might make things more challenging for her. She watched as I tore open the foil pack and extracted the condom. Then she took her hand away from my dick so I could roll it on. Her eyes remained glued to my dick, but her fingers rubbed her clit.

She let out a deep, guttural moan, her hands gripping the armrests of the chair with white-knuckled intensity as I entered her. Her warm, wet heat enveloped me, hugging me tightly like an old friend welcoming me home after a long journey. Every thrust sparked a wildfire of pleasure within us both, her walls pulsating and clenching around me as if never wanting to let go. "Oh God...Evan..." she gasped, her nails digging into my back.

I groaned in response and captured her lips with mine, our tongues engaging in a passionate dance as our bodies moved in perfect harmony. This time, there was no holding back, our desire and need for each other consumed us completely.

We were both lost in the moment, caught up in the passion and desire that had been simmering just below the surface for weeks. I pistoned into her, my hips slapping against hers in a primal rhythm. Amber was moaning into my mouth, her nails digging into my back as she arched her hips up to meet me with each thrust.

"Evan," she panted, "I ... I ..."

I knew she was close again, and I didn't want to miss it. I pulled out of her slightly, only to enter her again at a different angle, hitting that sensitive bundle of nerves that made her scream my name. Her pussy clenched around me, milking my cock as she came apart in my arms. I held her tightly as she shuddered and spasmed around me, memorizing the feel of her body climaxing.

As she started to go limp, I withdrew from her. The thin fabric of the sleeve I was wearing provided some extra friction and stimulation, helping me maintain my stamina. My desire for her only intensified, but the angle we were in was not quite hitting the right spot.

I let out a deep grunt as I pulled out, my hands gripping her waist tightly. “Stand up,” I coaxed, pulling her upward. She stood up slowly, still lost in the haze of pleasure. I guided her over to the chair and bent her over, positioning her just right for this angle.

As I slid back into her warmth, I could feel every inch of her against me. The friction was electrifying and made me shiver. She moaned and clawed at the arm rests of the chair, and I couldn’t help but admire the sight of her from this position. Her hips curved perfectly, inviting me to continue thrusting with more fervor.

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“God, you’re incredible,” I told her, slowly letting my hands slide up under her shirt. I cupped both breasts and pulled her backward, and she slowly straightened.

The new angle was dangerously close to pushing me over the edge. I could feel my body trembling with every thrust, aching for release. She stood in front of me, her back pressed against my chest as I continued to move inside her. The way her pelvis tilted and swayed with each movement was like a dance, the rhythm driving us both closer to the brink of ecstasy.

“God...this is so hot,” she gasped, her breath coming in short pants as she reached down to touch herself. Her hand hovered over her clit before finally making contact, sending a jolt of pleasure through her body.

Unable to resist, one of my hands left her breast and trailed down her stomach, tracing the curves of her body until it reached the apex between her thighs. I gently pushed her hand away and took over, using my fingers to rub her clit in time with our movements. Amber’s moans grew louder and more desperate as she began rocking her hips in sync with mine, meeting each of my thrusts with a grinding motion that only heightened our pleasure. The air around us crackled with heat and tension as we moved together towards a shared climax, lost in the intensity of our passion.

“Oh God, Evan,” she moaned, and I knew she was close again. “I’m...”

I gripped her breast tighter, feeling myself rapidly approaching climax. Sweat dripped down my brow as I pounded into her. Amber’s orgasm ripped through her like a thunderclap, and I couldn’t hold back anymore. I came with a groan, filling the condom and letting her milk every last drop of my seed. Her body continued to jolt

and twitch around me, and I held her close until our breathing returned to normal.

Her arms reached up and wrapped around my neck, and I leaned down and kissed hers. She still smelled good, but now with added musk of sweat and sex. It was the perfect way to start our day. As I pulled out slowly, she whimpered; then her hands dropped to her skirt, which she fixed.

I gave her a few minutes to collect herself as I removed the condom, tied it off, and tossed it in the trash. I tucked myself away and fixed my shirt and slacks. She had to tuck her shirt in too, and she avoided eye contact the whole time.

The hint of blush on her cheeks was adorable. She was flustered or embarrassed, probably by wanting me so badly she broke her own rule about being professional. But I wasn't embarrassed. I had worked up an appetite, but I hadn't forgotten why I wanted her here to begin with.

"Amber, can I ask you something?" I said, tightening my tie.

She spun around and saw her panties on the ground. Picking them up, she hummed, "Of course." Then she sat in the chair and slid her feet back in the leg holes and shimmed them up under her skirt, covering herself.

I noticed the way the door moved, as if air pressure in the offices shifted again. Someone else was here, but it wasn't going to keep me from asking my question about Jacob and the twins. Still, I wanted privacy, so I walked to the door to shut it.

"It's about the kids," I said, letting the door latch, but before I could get my question out, the door opened, surprising me.

Shelby walked in with her coat on and a cup of coffee in hand. She smiled. Her cheeks were rosy from the chill, but her makeup was intact, unlike Amber's.

“What were you saying?” Amber asked. “The kids are doing well. The program seems to be helping them already.”

Shelby grinned. “Oh yeah. Amber told me how you were helping with the kids’ grants. Mr. Montgomery, that’s so generous of you. Don’t worry, I won’t tell a soul. I know how these vultures we work with would all be begging for a handout. You’re a stand-up guy.”

Shelby’s grin and Amber’s wide-eyed expression clued me in. Amber had invited her here as a buffer. I told her we could get one, but I never followed through. Now I was grateful that she hadn’t walked in five minutes earlier.

I couldn’t ask my question now, and I didn’t know how, when, or where to do it. Maybe I just had to blurt it out, or maybe I was overthinking things and I should just back off. Amber didn’t appear to be playing a game, but it was obvious she felt vulnerable and not quite safe enough around me to open up. If that was truly how she felt, maybe I was out of my league. Or maybe Jacob just swore her to secrecy.

19

AMBER

The past six weeks seemed to go by in a flash. Things between Evan and I had been a yo-yo, back and forth between what my heart wanted and what it feared. I knew the right thing though, and every time I looked him in the face, I felt guilt cripple me. Like now, standing near the doorway of his office with Shelby at my side nudging me to head into the hallway following our meeting.

I’d been inviting her to come to every meeting in Evan’s office to make sure there was a buffer, especially following that morning last week when he surprised me with breakfast and swept me off my feet with passionate sex again. I knew it wasn’t right,

but my heart didn't want it to be wrong.

"We'll check back later," Shelby called. Her hand in my side where Evan couldn't see, pushed me into the hall. She shut the door behind us and smiled a cheesy plastic grin at Gavin as he passed us on his way to his office. When he was out of earshot she hissed, "What is wrong with you? You keep staring at him like a lovesick puppy."

My shoulders drooped and I hugged my tablet to my chest as I let my head fall. We fell into step, headed up the hallway toward our offices. Shelby wasn't typically the confrontational type, so it surprised me that she was calling me out. I shrugged, sighing with indecision as we neared the door to her office.

"I think I'm going to tell him." The choice to let the truth out of the bag had come after a long bout of wrestling and thinking things through. Mom had been in touch with the lawyer a few more times, who reassured her that if I opened that can of worms, he would jump in the trenches with us. I felt like he got the wrong impression of Evan and the situation, but I didn't have the heart to correct either of them. They vehemently defended me and my side of the story, which was all a girl could ask for.

Shelby, however, seemed completely shocked and grabbed my arm, yanking me into her office. I stumbled a few steps as she shut the door and planted her hands on her hips. Her posture challenged me to stand a bit taller and square my shoulders.

"You're what? After all this time?" I knew she only wanted to make sure I was protecting myself. Her teasing and jokes about me having it bad for the boss had been her lighthearted way of making sure I stayed in touch with reality. This was her fierce side coming out to sober me up and I appreciated it.

"Yeah." I sighed and walked over to a chair in the corner of her office and sat down. The pressure of keeping the secret was too much to handle. I'd been interacting with him on almost a daily basis for more than a month. I knew Jacob was coming back,

and there was every likelihood that Evan would return to his job in R&D, never to return to headquarters again. There was still a shift in my thinking.

Evan wasn't seeing someone else. In fact, he wasn't the guy I remembered either. He had changed. Life had matured him, or time, or both. I was beginning to think Jacob was right, and that Evan could handle the shock of it all.

"I'm scared though." I set the tablet on my lap and wrung my hands. Shelby sat next to me quietly saying nothing. Her calm presence seemed to anchor me better than I could do myself. There was something about having a good friend to confide in that seemed to bring stability to my thinking. I appreciated that.

“How do you think he’ll take it?”

Her calm question only further poked at the agony I’d been wrestling with. I had no way of knowing how he’d take it. The best I could offer was a shrug and: “I consulted a lawyer in case he takes it poorly.” The bitter taste as I said the words sickened me. I didn’t want it to come to that, but I feared it would. Deep down, my gut told me only bad things were in my future, at least for the time being.

“Wow,” she breathed. Her hand rested on my shoulder as she sighed. “That’s heavy.”

Silence wrapped around us in a thick blanket as she realized the weight I’d been under. While dinners and dates with Evan had been amazing, I knew it was only because he had no clue the gravity of my secret. There was no way he could know. And so many times I’d felt like he was on the verge of bringing it up, asking me the truth. The last thing I wanted was to be in a position where he outright asked me. I couldn’t lie to him. Keeping the secret was bad enough.

“You know I’m here no matter what, okay? If you want me to be there when you tell him, I will be.” Her fingers squeezed my shoulder gently and I sucked in a breath to calm myself.

“Thank you, Shelby. I think it’s something I have to do on my own, but I appreciate that.” I thought of Thanksgiving next week and how it was a time we were supposed to reflect on what we had to be thankful about. This year my heart was so weighed down I wasn’t sure I could find a single thing other than my twins and their health. I wished I could be celebrating it differently too, like a normal family. But that wish seemed just out of reach.

“I should go back to my office. If Evan gets a call, it’ll ring right through to him instead of my desk. I don’t want him to think something’s wrong.” I stood and tugged my jacket down with one hand as I clung to my tablet with the other. “Thank you for being a good friend.”

“Of course,” Shelby said. She rose and opened the door for me to step out. The silent exchange of pained expression as I walked into the hallway was enough. There were no words she could say to help my situation at all. I’d gotten myself into this mess and I had to get out of it.

Back in my office I sat down behind my desk and rubbed the bridge of my nose. If Evan hadn’t come back into my life like a whirlwind, I would have continued to live happily with my twins and my secret. I imagined how life would be if I just let him finish out his temporary position covering for Jacob and go back to Crescent Springs. My heart would break when I let him down easily, telling him I couldn’t date him. However, my problem would be solved.

I’d move on. He’d move on, and both of us would feel the relief of this back-and-forth end. But my heart would be broken.

Either way my heart would be broken.

Reuniting with him never crossed my mind. A few weeks ago, Evan was a thing of the past to me. I rarely thought of him or what he was doing. Life revolved around the kids and work and my busy schedule. When he showed up at my house, my world seemed to turn upside down, and now I didn’t know which way was up. I did know, however, that I loved him. I didn’t think I’d ever stopped loving him.

Someone knocked on my door making my heart stop. I sat up straight and tensed my shoulders, fully expecting the door to swing open and Evan to walk in. Every interaction between us had been punctuated with awkward conversation, one-word

replies, and avoiding eye contact. I couldn't take it anymore. I braced myself for the worst as the door opened, but it wasn't Evan.

Jacob walked in with a bright smile and a cup of coffee in his hand. He was dressed as if it were a workday—hair slicked back, suit buttoned up, shiny leather shoes. “Hello again,” he said, walking toward my desk to set the coffee down. “I figured this time of day you could use a pick me up.”

My eyes flicked to the coffee and back to his face in confusion. “Hi...” I said, standing. It felt out of place seeing him here. We had spoken on the phone several times, but I had no idea he was returning to work so soon. For some reason, that made the pressure to get this secret off my chest quadruple in that split second of recognition.

“You don't seem happy to see me.” Jacob chuckled and walked around my desk, offering me a hug. It'd been a long time since I got one of his hugs, and I almost broke down crying as I wrapped my arms around him. What I wouldn't have given for this hug to have come from my father instead of him.

“I'm shocked. I thought you had weeks of recovery yet. Evan said after the first of the year.” I pulled away and looked up at him as he waved off my comment.

“Evan doesn't know what he's talking about. I'm fine. Probably be back to the office full-time on Monday. How are you doing? How are things going?” It was just like him to push away himself in the interest of caring for others. It was probably one of the reasons he'd had the heart attack to begin with.

“Uh, things are fine,” I said, nodding at the chairs across from my desk. “Have a seat.” I followed him around the desk, not wanting to seem too professional. Jacob was here as a friend; that hug told me that. “Work is going well. Evan is staying on top of things. You'd be proud of him.” I didn't actually know if he was staying on top

of things, but I hadn't heard Gavin complaining.

"I meant you, Amber." Jacob spoke with a soft tone and a kind expression in his eye. He lowered his volume and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "How are you doing?"

The damn almost burst. Tears threatened to leak out but I blinked them back. If there was anyone on this planet I couldn't hide my true feelings from, it was Jacob. Just like my father, he knew me so well he could read the tiniest changes in my posture or body language. There was no point in pretending anymore.

"I'm a wreck." I drew a hand down over my face and tugged on my jacket to put it back in place. "Working side by side with him makes me feel so guilty." I let my head fall; I couldn't look him in the eye. I felt like it would be admitting to him that he was right a long time ago. That I should've told Evan the truth when he first moved back.

Jacob touched my hand and when I didn't look up he squeezed it. "Amber," he said softly. I raised my head to look him in the eye, but my heart felt so heavy. "He's asking me questions, hon. He's desperate to know the truth. His suspicions are a little out of whack."

I sniffled and nodded. "He knows?"

"No, hon, but I think you need to talk to him. If he hasn't asked you already, he will." His volume lowered and his tone softened. "I promise, I wouldn't tell you to say something if I thought it was going to cause major problems. Do you trust me?"

I looked into his eyes for a long hard second and nodded. I did trust him, as much as I had trusted my father. Jacob always had my best interest at heart. Erin did too. Both of them had become surrogate parents in the wake of my dad's death. When Mom's

depression finally cleared, I had three parents to walk me through becoming a mother.

“Of course I trust you.” I blinked out a few tears and wiped them off my cheeks. It was time for me to do the right thing even though it felt like the hardest thing I’d ever have to do in my entire life. “I’ll tell him.”

“Good girl,” Jacob said. “And if he so much as says one cross word to you, I’ll put him in his place. I won’t let him come after those kids or you in any way, but I don’t think it will come to that. Evan is a smart man, and he’s matured a lot since his playboy days—since you really.” Jacob smiled and patted my knee. “If he’s pushing this hard for facts, it must mean something is brewing. Maybe that flame you lost with him is reigniting.”

When Jacob stood I stood with him, but I felt like a robot following commands. He wrapped me in his arms again, so I hugged him back. My chest felt like it’d been hollowed out, like someone had taken a knife and carved out deep emotions so all I felt was numb.

“It’s going to be okay, hon.” Jacob kissed the top of my head, and I felt more tears leaking from my eyes.

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When the door swung open and I heard whistling, I almost jumped. Jacob held me more tightly and I felt his head turn.

“What’s going on?” Evan asked, standing in my doorway. I turned my head and pried myself from Jacob’s firm loving grip.

“Uh, nothing,” I sighed, swiping at my eyes. “We can talk about it tonight over dinner.” I forced a smile, but it probably looked like a frown.

“Jacob?” Evan asked, but his face contorted into a scowl. “What are you doing?”

“Evan—” The angry snip of Jacob’s tone startled me. I’d never once heard him be cross with anyone, although he did get grumpy from time to time.

“I can’t believe this.” Evan backed out, slamming the door, and I stood there in shock wondering what just happened.

I looked up at Jacob who rolled his eyes. “Go clean yourself up,” he said, “I’ll take care of this.”

All I could do was wipe my eyes and watch as one brother chased the other down. I didn’t understand what unspoken things passed between them, but it didn’t seem friendly at all. Evan seemed angry to see Jacob here, which could be interpreted a million ways. It made me all the more confused and anxious—so ready to get this over with and have a peaceful life back.

EVAN

Walking into that office, seeing what I saw gutted me. Amber all wrapped up in Jacob's arms was an insult. She clung to him the way she should've been clinging to me, and she didn't even have the nerve to tell me what was going on. Something was going on. I knew that much. She'd been distant and evading my questions. Every time I asked her to come to my office she brought Shelby with her, and though we had dinner plans tonight, she'd been hesitant to give me that response.

Now I didn't know what I wanted to do. Jacob was the grumpy one, not me. I knew, however, that if I was in a room alone with her, face-to-face, I'd probably snap at her. I didn't want that. I just wanted answers.

I paced the office and raked my hand through my hair. The sight of them all cozy and cuddled up made my blood boil instantly. I'd slammed that door so hard, the windows of every office in this hallway rattled. Gavin had looked up at me through his window as I stormed past, and I slammed my office door just as hard, before remembering that it wasn't my office. It was Jacob's.

Jacob's office, his job, apparently his woman. I wondered if this entire time I'd been here, I was just a stand-in for my big brother. I would never have thought Amber capable of such callous lack of emotion or respect, but maybe she was. Maybe I had her all wrong and it wasn't my brother who was the problem. My mind was mixed up, my emotions running rampant without the facts to hedge them in.

"What the heck was that, Evan?" I hadn't heard the door open, but Jacob stood there over the threshold with a glower on his face. His eyes were narrowed on me, his chest puffed out.

"You tell me. What was that?" I didn't want anger to come spewing out of me like this, but I felt out of control. I was in love with the woman who my brother had some

unnatural obsession with, and neither one of them wanted to tell me what was going on.

“You’re out of control.” I hated how he could be so calm. The expression on his face was anger, not calm. His forehead was bunched together, lips pursed deeply. He shut the door and walked into the room past the table where I’d shared meals with Amber. Past the chair where we had sex, right up to the desk where I thought we had really connected in an intimate way. I had been wrong.

“I’m out of control?” I said loudly. “You’re in there with her...” I couldn’t finish. Saying the words out loud would make it real. It couldn’t be real. Amber and I were going somewhere. Jacob wasn’t about to come back into this office and take that from me. I loved her.

“Have you spoken with her?” Jacob asked. He rested a hand on his desk and scowled at me. My mood shifted to defensiveness. I didn’t understand why it had to be my responsibility to talk to her. Why wasn’t he telling me what I needed to know?

He wanted to shift blame, to make me seem like the bad guy. He’d done that our whole lives, making me seem like the younger, irresponsible brother. He was always a step ahead of me in everything—school, sports, with girls...I wasn’t taking it anymore.

“Does Erin know?” I asked, going on the offensive. My blood boiled with rage at the idea that this man was playing one woman against the other. “Did you tell her how cozy you are with Amber? Does she see the way you hold her and treat her like the love of your life? The way you go out of your way for those innocent kids?”

The creases in Jacob’s forehead deepened, and I watched his fingers curl into a fist. I was pushing buttons he didn’t want pushed. I liked it. “What happened, Jake? Fire went out, so you found someone new?” I stepped closer to him, puffed out my chest

more. He gritted his teeth and his lips pursed harder. The muscles in his jaw flexed, bulging out along his jawbone.

“Cat got your tongue? You had an affair and you’ve been covering it up...So what...She’s mine now. I’ve been seeing her. We slept together about a dozen times or something now.” I had no idea how many times it had been but smearing my brother’s nose in the truth felt good. “Right here on this desk even.” I stepped closer still, pushing my chest into his. I wished he’d hit me so I could unleash on him.

He held his tongue, but the fire in his eyes told me I was on to something. His nostrils flared as I said, “You don’t even get it do you? The way those kids look just like you...Erin has to know by now, Jake. Just come clean. Move on.” I was starting to calm with his silence. He wasn’t denying anything, which in my experience with him meant he was having his ass handed to him.

“You’re wrong,” Jacob said, and he pushed his chest into mine, making me take a step backward.

“I’m not wrong. Just look at their faces. It’s as obvious as the buttons on your suit.” I reached up and almost pushed him, but he grabbed my wrist with such fury in his eyes, I thought he might spontaneously combust.

“The kids are yours, Evan.” His grip tightened as his words smacked me in the face. His chest was heaving, eyes wide, hand like iron on my arm. “You were irresponsible, she got pregnant. You went off to Europe at my command, and she knew how much you wanted it. It was all you could talk about—the European women, the culture, living your best life...”

I tried to take a step back, shaking my head, but his hand clamped down harder. I thought he’d break my wrist. I didn’t want to hear this. It was just another lie. He was covering his tracks and making me the scapegoat. If it was true, Amber would have

told me.

“She found out after you’d been gone a few months. I never knew you two were even together. She was shocked, and her whole life turned upside down. I was there for her just like I promised Chester I would be.” I shook my head, finally wrestling my wrist from his grasp.

“You’re lying ...”

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“I’m not,” he shouted, shaking me. “Grow up!” It was Jacob’s turn to advance on me. “Amber has gone to hell and back trying to be a good mother for those kids. I promised Chester to be like a father to her. That’s what you saw. Erin and Mona know the whole thing—go ask them. Amber didn’t want to disrupt your life in Europe...Then you came back, and you were dating Holly.”

My head was spinning. My chest felt like a balloon blown up to the point of rupturing. I pressed my palm to my forehead and backed farther away. This couldn’t be true. None of it. Amber would have told me.

“Evan, I’m telling you the truth. I kept her secret because it’s what a good friend does...” He turned as I walked past him, but he didn’t reach for me. If he had, I’d have been tempted to slug him. As it was, I felt devastated and appalled that my own brother would keep something like this from me.

“What does a brother do then?” I said, and I stormed out the door, this time leaving it open in my wake.

I didn’t look up at her office as I passed. I didn’t know if she was in there anymore, and I didn’t want to know. If we bumped into each other, she was likely to see a side of me she never wanted to see. I was enraged, furious with the fact that someone so close to me could keep such a dark secret. I had seven-year-old twins? And no one told me.

I kept my head down as I fumed all the way to my car. I left my coat in Jacob’s office. It was freezing out, and the car took forever to warm up. When I started driving, squealing my tires out of the parking lot, I had no clue where I was going. I

weaved through traffic faster than I should have, and when I stopped, I was parked near the cemetery entrance, where I used to go to clear my head.

Anger drove me onward, out of the car through the stiff, cold breeze. It was like I didn't even feel it, like the horrible emotional chasm Jacob's words had opened up released so much heat into my body through rage, I didn't feel it as November's cold snap bit down on my skin.

I walked aimlessly, tormented by the idea that my brother and Amber had hidden such a huge secret from me. I remembered Europe and how those first few months I pined for her. How many times had I tried to reach out only to have so many hurdles with international communication that I'd given up entirely? And to think, that entire time she knew she was having my babies. Jacob could have reached out to me through company means. He did, just not to tell me this secret.

I kicked a tuft of grass hard and almost slipped and fell. My meandering took me right to my father's grave, where I stood over his headstone, ready to kick it I was so mad. I felt like crying, but I couldn't. I knew the anger I was feeling was secondary—that deep down what I was feeling was betrayal, that the anger was there to protect me from feeling vulnerable, but I didn't want to feel anger.

What I wanted was to be preparing for the end of my day, getting my home ready for Amber to come over and have a relaxing dinner. I planned to tell her how much I loved her, to ask her if she thought we had a real chance at something tonight. Then I planned to ask her to open up about the twins' father. Now I didn't have to.

Jacob was not a liar, but I still found it hard to believe he was telling me the truth. Though, the idea of him cheating on Erin really did sound absurd. I knew how much Jacob loved his wife. I had come to that conclusion as the most illogical, but only realistic way to explain how Parker and Vera looked like our family, and I bypassed entirely any thought that they could be mine.

All because I trusted her.

It was that trust in my heart shattering into a million pieces that made me drop to my knees over my father's headstone and sob. The tears came from someplace deep inside my gut that had never been touched so harshly. I cried onto the grave marker, letting all the emotion out. The woman I believed and who held my heart was capable of keeping a secret from me that could cause me this much pain. I didn't know what to do with that knowledge.

Jacob said she had done it because she cared about me and wanted me to have what I wanted. But how did she know what I wanted? Why hadn't she at least given me the opportunity to make my own choice about what I wanted?

I sat there until my body was shivering. The cold caught up to me and I knew I had to get back to my car or risk frostbite.

I pushed myself up and used my sleeve to wipe my eyes. No amount of crying or breaking down would fix this problem. The real issue wasn't that I had twins. It was that I had been lied to—not directly, but by omission. I had long ago warmed to the idea of being a father, especially to those two adorable little kids. They stole my heart the first time we interacted. I just had no idea how to get past her lies to be what I was supposed to be—that was assuming everything Jacob said was the truth.

Time was what I needed—to process my thoughts and fears. To think about this rationally so I didn't overreact or lash out. Amber had her reasons; that was fine. I wasn't going to go off the handle with her. I had learned a long time ago to temper my reactions. Today in Jacob's office was too much. My old ways reared up. I hated that version of me. I knew better.

So as I walked back to my car, I decided I would take a few days to clear my head. I walked slowly, hands in my pockets, shivering with my head hung. I read the

headstones as I passed, thinking of how all of these people lived a life like mine, or maybe unlike mine at all. Were they happy or sad? Had their ideas of life and love and relationships been true, or were they as traumatized as I was? Then I noticed a name that stood out: Chester Lawson.

I paused for a second and read the dates on his tombstone. Almost eight years ago he died, leaving Amber a broken mess for me to scoop up and love. And had I ever...She never knew it because I was too caught up in my selfishness to show her then, but I loved her more than life itself. I still did. There just seemed to be no way forward now.

I wondered if Amber was even the woman I fell in love with anymore, or if she had changed. How could she keep such a secret from me?

It hurt just to see her last name. I didn't think I'd ever feel the same way about her again.

21

AMBER

Seated at my desk, I looked up at movement in my periphery. I watched Evan rush past the window to my office that opened to the hallway. He looked upset. I'd heard the shouting but couldn't make out what they were saying. I thought about going in there, but Jacob told me he'd handle it. So I sat there, watching first Evan, then Jacob rush out, and my heart sank.

The whole thing was such a mess now. I had so many chances to tell Evan the truth. I didn't know what he'd think of me now. He walked in on me and Jacob hugging each other. What would he think of that? What had Jacob told him?

My heart was so tired of the ups and downs of anxiety and sadness. I folded my arms on my desk and rested my forehead on them. Then I heard a door down the hallway slam. It startled me, but I didn't look up until I heard my office doorknob click and open. Then I looked up, half expecting Jacob to be back with an explanation. It was Shelby, though, with her forehead knit in concern.

"What's going on?" she asked in a hushed tone as she shut the door behind herself. She walked over to my desk and dragged a chair behind her to sit.

"Well, I'm not sure, but it doesn't appear to be anything good." I sighed and used both palms to scrub the frustration off my face along with a few tears I'd shed. "I was talking to Jacob and Evan walked right in. Jacob was offering me a comforting hug and?—"

"Oh God. Evan saw you..." Shelby's hand covered her mouth. Her eyebrows were high but came together in the center.

"Yeah," I breathed as I leaned back in my seat. I felt like I was living in one of my mother's soap operas. There seemed to be so much drama swirling around me I expected to be nominated for an Emmy any day now.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:45 am

“Oh God, Amber.” Shelby sighed and her hand slowly lowered to her lap with the other. “He thinks you’re...” She didn’t finish her sentence, but her face contorted into worry. The painful look in her eyes felt like a stab to my heart.

“I don’t have a clue what he thinks. All I know is Jacob said he’d handle it. He told me to clear my head and clean myself up. I cried a little...Then I hear shouting and Evan storms off.” My hands gestured of their own accord. For the first time since this whole thing started, I felt anger and not anxiety. I wanted Evan to come to my office and sit down like a rational human to have a conversation, but whatever transpired in Jacob’s office had upset him enough to make him storm out.

“He probably thinks you’re shacking up with Jacob.” Her defeated tone only made me feel worse. If that was true, why hadn’t he just come in here and told me off? I’d have put an end to that thinking right away. There was no one I wanted more than Evan; I’d never do that to him or anyone for that matter.

The idea was laughable. Jacob and me? He’d been like a father figure to me for the past eight years. And I loved Erin like a mother. It was true that I accepted comfort from him, and that he was only a few years older than Evan—I liked mature men. But Jacob was never anything more than a really good friend and mentor. If Evan truly believed that, he didn’t know me at all.

“What will you do?” she asked, inching forward on her seat. Her fingers tugged the hem of her skirt keeping it in place, and I sighed as I met her gaze.

“I was supposed to have dinner with him tonight. We never discussed whose place, so I don’t know. I guess I have to assume my place and just prepare. I’ll make dinner

and?—”

“And have him over to discuss that topic while the kids are in earshot?” She cocked her head at me with a disapproving expression. “I’ll bring Parker and Vera to my house. We’ll do a sleepover. You need privacy for that.”

Her simple offer warmed my heart. “Yeah, okay.” I frowned but I felt appreciative. Even with the best friends around me, supportive family members, loved ones, and the most amazing children on the planet, life still had a way of dishing me out the most difficult situations. It felt like one step forward was two steps back. “Thank you.”

“Of course... You just go home. You’ve got too much on your mind to deal with this. I’ll pick them up from school. I probably have a T-shirt Vera can sleep in and Parker can wear something of Nicky’s.” Shelby stood up and walked to my office door. “You call me if you need me. I’ll be there in a heartbeat.”

I believed her, so I nodded. But I couldn’t bring myself to say anything else. Without knowing why Evan had been so upset he rushed out, I had no way of knowing what to expect for this evening.

Guilt riddled me the entire drive home. Leaving work early felt like a mortal sin today, especially since I assumed Jacob would return to give me answers about what happened. I felt horrible for causing problems between them. I hadn’t even told Jacob that Evan and I had been seeing each other. It probably made things even worse between them.

The house felt empty without Vera and Parker and their homework routine. I cleaned everything from top to bottom, put everything in its place. Then I started dinner—homemade Swiss steak, mashed potatoes, and gravy. While I cooked, my mind stayed tormented about telling Evan the truth. I’d told Jacob I would, and I

intended to follow through.

If my doctor saw how stressed I was, she'd tell me to stop and lie down and let my heart rate calm. I knew, however, that the only true way to get this monkey off my back was to tell the truth. Dad always said, "Truth is like a lion, you can't keep it caged." I never understood it until now. My chest certainly felt like a lion was prowling around, clawing at my insides, demanding to be let go.

When dinner was done, I set the table and kept things warm. It neared six o'clock and I sat down on the end of the couch to wait and pulled out my phone. There were no notifications from him, so I shot him a text.

Amber 5:47 PM: Hey, we still on for dinner? I made Swiss steaks.

I watched it send and heard the swishing noise. The indicator under my messages said "Delivered" and showed the time stamp, but after staring at it for a few minutes it never switched to "Read" so I sent another.

Amber 6:01 PM: I'm keeping things warm for us. I wasn't sure if you were coming here or I was going there. I can put it away and swing by if you have something ready.

It didn't escape me that he wasn't responding, or that after what happened he hadn't texted about dinner. I assumed by now he'd have shown up or called. I was beginning to think we weren't going to have dinner, that something happened in Jacob's office to make Evan upset with me.

My head rested on the back of the couch and I pressed my eyes shut. The only thing worse than the roiling guilt of having kept this secret for far too long was the unknown. My body was on fire from head to toe, but I was shivering. I could smell my own anxiety sweat, which grossed me out. And I thought about calling Jacob to

see if he would be able to shed light on the situation when my phone rang.

My head snapped up and I looked down at it, hoping it was Evan, but it was Jacob. His number flashed on my screen, behind it an image of him and Erin on their trip to Las Vegas a few years back. I swiped right to answer.

“Jacob...I’m here.” I took a deep breath and held it as he spoke.

“Amber, we should talk.” He sounded defeated and sad. The room around him was silent. I pictured him slumped behind his desk or resting in his recliner. I thought of his health, how the drama with Evan today probably wasn’t helping his heart when he was supposed to be resting. None of this was.

“What happened?” I chewed the inside of my cheek in lieu of my jacket-tugging habit, as I had no jacket to fuss with. It’d been discarded when I changed into jeans and a sweater to clean. My fingers fumbled with the trendy frayed edge but yanking on it would only misshape it.

“Well, I really hope you’re not angry with me, but I need to apologize. Evan went off on me this afternoon. He accused me of some very hurtful things. They got the better of me and my temper flared. I snapped at him and told him the truth—that the twins belong to him. That he should talk to you.”

A cold shudder swept from my head to my feet and I covered my face with my hand. It wasn’t how I wanted the truth to come out, but at least it was out. I couldn’t be angry with Jacob, though my natural instinct was to be upset. I let out my breath and felt tears burning at my eyelids.

“It’s okay...I take it that was why he stormed out? He’s upset?” If I blamed Jacob for my secret getting out, I was no better than him anyway. I was the one who had sworn him to secrecy, taken his loyalty to his brother and shut it down like he had no right

to protect his own family. That was my fault, and something I never should have done.

“I’m sure you’re both upset with me. His comments hurt, but not as much as knowing I’d broken an unwritten code to be faithful to family. You’re both my family, Amber. You know that...But Evan deserved to know.” Jacob’s apologetic tone made me feel even worse.

“You don’t have to apologize,” I told him, standing up. I walked over to the kitchen counter where I had a scented candle burning and blew it out. I turned off the oven and stovetop. There was no point keeping things warm. After that shocking revelation, I understood why Evan wasn’t here or responding. He was hurt and hiding.

Tears streamed down my cheeks as I walked to the bathroom to get some tissue for my nose. “You didn’t do anything wrong. I don’t want you to beat yourself up.” I tore some off and blew my nose, then asked, “Where is he now? I should go to him.” Tossing the tissue in the bin, I walked out of the bathroom and headed for my bedroom. I’d need my parka and sneakers if I was going out, but Jacob’s words froze me in my tracks right outside my bedroom door.

“He’s missing.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:45 am

My blood ran cold. “What? I just saw him. You followed him out of the office.”

“He got out of the parking lot before I got to my car. I can’t do much running right now.” Jacob sighed heavily. “He’s shut off his phone. He’s not home, hasn’t gone into R&D. He’s not responding to anyone, and no one knows where he is.”

It wasn’t like him to just vanish or shut his phone off, though the last six weeks had been a whirlwind. What did I know? Jacob would know better than me what Evan’s temperament and habits were. Or maybe he wouldn’t.

“He’ll turn up though, right? I mean, he just needs time to process.” My mind raced with the possibilities. It was a bit snowy when work let out. The roads were a little slick but not horribly so. Was it possible he’d raced off and been in an accident? Had Jacob checked the local ERs?

“Amber, he’s not like this. I’m going to wait until morning, but if he’s not at work or at home, and he doesn’t answer my calls, I’m going to file a missing person’s report.” Jacob’s words scared me. He couldn’t possibly think that Evan was in danger, could he?

“I, uh...I should come over.” I felt scared and too worried to be alone.

“You stay put. I’ll get Erin and we’ll come over. I feel just awful.” He sounded awful too. “We’ll be over soon.”

“Yeah, okay...be safe.” I hung up the call and looked down at my messaging app screen. Both messages said they’d been delivered, neither one said they’d been read.

He hadn't opened them. I tried calling, but Jacob was right. The call went straight to voicemail indicating his phone was off or out of service. Both of those things were normal, not a sign for worry, but if Jacob was concerned so was I.

If something happened to him because he was upset over this, I'd never forgive myself.

22

EVAN

The house felt cold and sad. I stood by the door for a long time looking at all the changes I'd made—for the twins. The bookshelves with toys and games on them, the gaming console, the new furniture, it all made me feel depressed. These things were meant to welcome them into my home like family. I wanted that; it was why I'd gone to all the trouble. Now I wasn't sure what to think.

It was painful to stand here and be reminded of how stupid I'd been. I couldn't stay here and look at this stuff until I knew without a doubt the truth under all of this. I headed to my bedroom and threw some things into a bag—a few suits, a couple changes of boxers and socks, my toiletries, and my phone charger, though I'd turned that off already. Just a few messages from Amber was enough. I didn't need to wince in pain every time I saw her name pop up.

My office would be as good a place as any to crash for the night. I could figure it out when I woke up. I wasn't tired, but the large bottle of whiskey I grabbed from my liquor stash in the kitchen would help with that. I planned to be up and out of the office before anyone else woke up, and after that I didn't know. I needed to decide how to handle this. Hiding from everyone wasn't a viable solution. I still had a job.

If my brother knew what was good for him, he'd give me space for a while at least. A

few days or weeks. He was as much or more to blame for this than Amber. He had known from the beginning and never said a word. He acted like nothing in the world was going on for years, and he was lying to me the whole time. It hurt more than I cared to admit, so I shoved it down with the rest of the feelings I was experiencing.

Pausing at the front door, I scanned the room one more time. If there were only a way to make sense of all this, without having to trust someone's word. They could still be lying to me about the whole thing, and I'd never know. A DNA test would prove paternity, but that meant I had to talk to Amber to get a sample from one of the twins...Unless...

My mind kicked into gear. I set my bag by the front door and walked to the guest bathroom. When Amber and the twins stayed over, I'd let them use toothbrushes I had saved away for if guests stayed and didn't bring one. They were still lying next to the sink in the guest bathroom. I'd left them there in hopes that more sleepovers would happen and the kids would put them to use again. It was perfect. Hopefully, I'd be able to give them to a doctor at a clinic and have them pull DNA from it.

I grabbed them, carefully putting them into plastic baggies before tucking them into my bag. Then I locked up and left. My heart already felt a bit more at ease with having a plan. I climbed into my car and threw the bag in back then pulled into traffic. The car was too quiet, so I turned on the radio, but love songs were playing. It only made what I was feeling worse, so I shut it off as quickly as I had turned it on.

I parked outside the building and snuck up to my office. The place was dark except for emergency lighting, but I knew the way like the back of my hand. I'd worked here for five years and spent plenty of sleepless nights on the sofa across the room from my desk. Tonight was no different. I filled my whiskey tumbler for the first drink, and the next several I swigged right from the bottle. I passed out before 9 p.m.

The first rays of sunlight slipped through the blinds, casting a faint glow on the

papers scattered across my desk. I leaned back in my chair, rubbing my eyes, feeling the weight of what I had to do this morning press against me. I had to move quickly—soon, people would start filing in, and I needed to be gone before they noticed I was here, or when Jacob called they'd cough up the information.

The office was still quiet, the city just beginning to awaken outside. I grabbed my suit coat and headed for the door, the cold air hitting me as soon as I stepped outside. My car was parked under a layer of frost, and it took forever to warm up. I slid into the driver's seat, shivering as I turned the key. It took the heater forever to produce warm air but eventually warmth blew from the vents.

I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel, watching my breath fog up the windshield. I should've grabbed that spare coat from home. My jacket didn't do much against the bite of the November deep freeze Buffalo was enduring. Traffic was light as I drove across town to the clinic and waited for them to open.

I knew there were lots of places to help me, but I wanted this to be 100 percent anonymous. I didn't want it getting back to anyone that I was having my DNA tested for paternity. After several rattling dreams last night, I had convinced myself that it wasn't true. That somehow they were still lying to me. I needed this test to make my brain accept the truth I didn't know how to accept.

The walk-in clinic worked on a cash basis, so I brought plenty of it. The place was a little run-down, stained carpets, worn-out chairs. I waited in the lobby for ten minutes before they opened the reception area. A pretty young blonde sat behind the open window with a bright smile.

"Good morning, can I help you?" Her cheery face felt foreign to me. With what I was feeling, a smile felt out of place.

"I, uh...I need some tests run." My hand reached for my pocket where I stuffed the

baggie with the kids' toothbrushes. "Do you run paternity tests?"

The woman nodded and looked down at her computer screen as her fingers started to move. "Yep, we sure do. Could I get a name?" Her fingers flew across her keyboard as her eyes flicked to meet my gaze and back to the computer.

"John Smith, thank you." Giving a false name was my only option right now, though I had no choice but to give them my real phone number. I stood and answered a dozen more questions before she hit enter and looked back up at me.

"It's a fifty-dollar charge to be seen. You can pay that now. Then the rest will be due when you leave, depending on what the doctor does." She tapped her manicured fingers on the desk in front of her and waited.

I pulled out my wallet and took out a fifty, dropping it on the desk next to her hand. "Thanks...How long?"

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“You can go on back. Doc is waiting for you since you’re the first one here.” She gestured at the door to my right. “Go through there and step on the scale. Cindy will be right with you.”

“Thanks.” I pulled my slacks up higher by the belt and turned toward the door. There were warning signs hung there, taped with scotch tape, depicting sick people covering their mouths or sneezing out germs. I opened the door and walked through to find a plump woman with a round face holding a clip board standing next to the scale.

“Mr. Smith,” she said, nodding. “Step up here and we’ll get your weight, then we’ll get you in a room to see Dr. Sharp.”

I allowed her to herd me through the process of taking vitals and history. She narrowed her eyes at me when I told her I was here for a paternity test so it was all rigamarole, but she put me in a room and I sat on the exam table waiting.

A few minutes later, a stout man with a burly mustache and wild eyebrows strolled in. He carried the same clipboard but nicer energy.

“Mr. Smith...I’m assuming it’s an alias?” The way his head dipped as he looked at me over his glasses made him seem approachable.

“Yes, my name is Evan, but I don’t want that on any records.” I fidgeted with my collar and loosened my too-tight tie. It was choking me for some reason. “I just need a paternity test run...There’s this whole drama and...” I reached into my pocket and pulled out the baggie of toothbrushes. He eyed them and then sat on the stool next to the exam table.

“I see. And these are?” he asked, accepting the toothbrushes as I handed them to him.

“These are toothbrushes used by the twins; I need to know if I’m the dad.” My heart hammered in my chest. There was no turning back after this. If Amber got furious with me for having her children’s—potentially my children’s—DNA tested, that would be it, no chance at redemption. But how could I live with myself not having actual evidence of the truth? I’d been stupid to believe I had a real relationship with my brother, one where I could trust him.

“That won’t be a problem,” he said, laying the baggie on the counter. “We’ll have a nurse come draw some blood and you’ll be set.”

“How long will it take? I’m sort of lying low. I have to face some things, but I need to make sure I’m prepared for that...” I didn’t want to even think about talking to Amber until I knew what the truth really was.

“Well, we can put a rush on it. Typically, between forty-eight to seventy-two hours.” He stood and tucked the clipboard under his arm and reached his hand out to shake mine. “They have your number on file?”

“Uh, yes,” I said, shaking his hand. “And I appreciate this being very confidential.”

“Not a problem, Mr. Smith,” he said with a wink. “That nurse will be right in.”

I sat anxiously waiting for the future to unravel, trying to wrap my mind around the fact that I could very well be the father of amazing seven-year-old twins. But was I ready to be a father? And how would I handle the fact that Amber had kept it from me?

I didn’t know if my love for her would cover this huge mistake. It might be something we could never come back from.

AMBER

After two days of not hearing from Evan, I was beginning to panic. The twins sat at the coffee table working on flashcards after being at school all day, but I had called in. The only thing more frightening than waiting for news of Evan to surface was the idea of learning something tragic had happened to him. I couldn't even begin to process the idea of discovering that while I was at work.

"Mommy, she's doing it too fast," Parker whined. Vera shushed him, glancing up at me with a naughty grin.

"We're fine. He's just slow." She smiled so hard she squinted at me, ignoring the way I glowered at her with disapproval.

"Both of you need to focus a little better please. Vera, he's not as fast as you are, so be patient. Parker, please don't whine okay, honey? If you have a big emotion like that, take a deep breath and call my name, and I'll help you."

My gentle correction felt like the most hypocritical thing to say. Internally, I was whining and complaining, crying a little. Not knowing what was going on with Evan felt like the worst sort of torture. After Jacob told me he'd let the secret slip, I figured Evan would blow off steam. I assumed he would ignore me for the night, call me in the morning. When morning passed, I waited by my phone all afternoon, then into the evening.

Now the evening of the second full day, I was starting to be as worried sick as Jacob was the instant Evan stormed off. He wanted to contact the police immediately, but they wouldn't do anything until he'd been missing for more than twenty-four hours. At that point, they filed the report, but there was no evidence of foul play anywhere. I

showed Jacob where the hide-a-key was and he looked through Evan's house. The only things missing were a few suits and some toiletries, or so it appeared.

"Mom!" Parker grumbled. "Please." His tone wasn't exactly respectful, but he was doing what I asked. I walked over to the kitchen table, prepared to settle in and make them obey, but as I stood over them staring at the flashcards, something inside of me broke. It wasn't often that I hit my limit with them, but I was done.

"Alright, guys. We're not going to make a habit of this, but as long as your homework for class tomorrow is finished, you may go play. Mommy has a lot on her mind right now. I don't want to be grumpy with you."

They raced away from the table with cheers before I finished my sentence, going straight for the Xbox. I sank onto a chair and began picking up the flashcards and worksheets. I felt so numb from the heavy emotion my body had started to ache. When I felt like crying, no tears would come. When I wanted to sleep, my mind raced and kept me awake.

Evan was out there somewhere, angry and hurting. It felt like half my heart was on fire and the other half was already made of ash and smoke. I hadn't realized how important our interactions had become to me until they were gone—how important he had become to me.

Someone knocked on my door and my shoulders went rigid. Parker raced to the door as he had done a dozen times before, but this time his eyes fixed on me as he reached for the knob.

"Wait please," I said as I slowly rose from the chair. He obediently waited, watching me walk toward him. I peeked out the peephole.

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It wasn't all that long ago when I looked through this same peephole and saw Evan waiting for me to answer so he could deliver Jacob's gift for the twins' birthday. Then not long after when Parker swung this door open to invite him in without asking me if it was safe.

This time, however, it was Jacob with his long face and crisp trilby hat. Erin stood next to him with her hands folded and a worried expression on her face. If only Mom were here it would feel like a family gathering. I nodded at Parker and he swung the door open.

The minute he saw Jacob, he squealed in delight and threw his arms out. Jacob scooped him up in a big hug and spun around. The display warmed my heart, but not as much as it would've if it were Evan.

"How are you?" Erin asked as she stepped inside while Jacob greeted Vera, who had seen him and come running. Erin hugged me and I shut the door.

"I'm a wreck. This whole thing feels like my fault. I don't know what to do." It wasn't that I wasn't happy to see them. Whenever Jacob and Erin came over, I was always thrilled to entertain them. They were as close to grandparents as my kids had ever had—they and my mom. But entertaining was hard work, and I was emotionally spent.

"Come, sit," she said, taking my hand. She led me to the couch where Jacob sat with one child on each knee. His smile was priceless. I knew how much he loved them like they were his own grandkids.

“Where did you go?” Parker asked, cocking his head. He scrunched his nose and played with Jacob’s tie. I hadn’t told them anything about the heart attack. Kids were too sensitive to hear scary things like that unless it was necessary.

“Well, I got a little sick so I stayed at the hospital for a while.” I appreciated how Jacob tempered his response, adding a wink in my direction for good measure. “And now I’m better so I’m back to work. I figured I’d come see you since I missed your party. I didn’t want you guys to get sick too.”

“I like when you visit,” Vera announced proudly. “Want to play Candy Land?”

Jacob chuckled as Erin and I sat on the sofa on either side of him. “Alright, that sounds like fun. How about you two go set it up in your room and I’ll be there right away. I need to talk to your mom for a minute first.”

Watching their happy faces made my eyes well up. Only last week this was the reaction they’d had to Evan and a family night with games and movies. The reality that they needed a father figure hit me harder than a tsunami. I couldn’t watch as they dashed off; my heart was breaking. Keeping my secret from Evan was the worst possible thing in the world. Jacob had been wrong. Evan wasn’t able to handle it. In my mind, his disappearance proved that.

“Amber,” Jacob said softly. I looked up at him with a frown and tears on my cheeks. “We have some news.” He touched my hand and I swallowed hard. I wasn’t sure what that meant. Judging by the expression on their faces it didn’t seem like good news.

“They found him?” My question was physically painful to ask. The words seemed to claw their way all the way up my throat and across my tongue.

“Not exactly.” Erin offered a frown and sighed. “They searched his house and office.

He's taken his wallet and phone but it hasn't been turned on in a few days. That was as of this morning. Now, they did find evidence that he probably stayed a night at the office."

It piqued my curiosity. "He did? How do they know?" My body inched forward on the couch, anxious for more news, anything to make this dreaded fear of the unknown less.

"They found a bottle of alcohol that appeared to be just opened. It was more than halfway empty. The plastic seal was still there like he just tore it off." Erin frowned again. Her forehead furrowed in deep crevices that aged her substantially. "It seems he was pretty upset."

My heart sank again. I buried my face in my hands as the tears started to flow. Knowing how much I'd hurt him made this so much harder. If it were a simple case of a missing person, I'd still feel anxious, terrified, or panicked. But this was all on me. It was entirely avoidable if I'd only done the right thing and told him the very minute we reconnected.

"Hey," Jacob said, patting my knee. "Don't get in your head. I told you he could handle it, and I hold to that. If he's been to his office and downed most of a bottle of booze, it means he's processing. I think he'll turn up any day now." Jacob's previous attitude of fear over Evan's safety seemed to have shifted. I wasn't sure if that was for my benefit or if he truly thought it would be alright. I'd learned to listen to his gut as much as my own. Now I wished I really had listened before.

"It's just...This is my fault. If I had told him sooner, maybe he wouldn't have run off." I couldn't stop the tears now; they came pouring out freely. The safe place Jacob created for me to be myself and find comfort allowed me to be this vulnerable. I would never know how to repay him for stepping in as a father to me when my dad died. I couldn't ask him to do that for my kids too.

“This isn’t your fault.” Both of them said the words almost in unison. It felt comforting to hear them say it, but it didn’t stop me from believing it was still true.

After hours of playing, Jacob and Erin left and I tucked the kids in. I lay in my bed staring at the ceiling, following the swirls of texture with my eyes. It relaxed me sometimes when I was really stressed out; tonight was one of those nights. When my eyelids started to droop, my phone rang, so I picked it up and answered the call from my mom.

“How are you holding up, baby?” Mom offered to come and stay, but I wanted life to stay as normal as possible for the kids. Adding Evan to our lives had already been a huge adjustment—in a positive way. I wasn’t sure how they’d take it if he didn’t come back. Having Mom here during that process would only alarm them that something wasn’t right.

“I’m about as amazing as you’d think.” My dry humor landed a chuckle from Mom as I rolled to my side to stare at the wall instead of the ceiling.

“Do you want me to come over? I will. I can sleep on the couch and take care of the kids for you. Honey, let me help.” The offer was so sweet, but I couldn’t take it. Mom would dote and fuss; I would complain and cry. The combination would make me weaker than I already was because she was my mom; I would lean on her too much. Being independent forced me to handle this like an adult.

“I love you, Mom, but no. Thank you though.” My phone buzzed, and for a second, I didn’t even stop to look at it. I would have dismissed it as a notification from Facebook or Twitter.

But I’d been waiting for something, anything, from Evan. I had formed a new habit of checking my phone relentlessly every fifteen minutes despite not having notifications.

I pulled the phone from my ear and glanced at it. Evan's name was there on the notification that disappeared quickly. My heart leapt up into my throat and I sat up abruptly.

"Oh my God, Mom. He just texted me." I spoke without even having the phone to my ear, then pressed the button to turn it to speaker mode before reading his text.

"What does it say?" She sounded as eager as I was to know what was going on, so I showed her the message:

Evan 9:46 PM:Be at my house tomorrow at six o'clock for dinner. Come alone.

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I read and reread the words over and over, hoping for any hint of his state of mind to stand out. It was a flat statement, no emotion, no context. To anyone else it might sound like a threat or intimidation, but to me it was the lifeline I'd been waiting for.

“Oh, honey, that doesn't sound good.”

I understood where she was coming from, but she didn't know him. He was finally reaching out. This was a good thing—I hoped. Either he was about to tell me he wanted answers, that we could work on things, or he was going to tell me he was so angry, he wanted to wipe me off the face of the planet. All I knew was, he was alive and not harming himself or running away.

“Mom, I'm gonna go. I have to.” My thumbs flew over the screen as I talked to her, typing a response to him.

Amber 9:47 PM:I'll be there. I'm sorry.

“Amber, you need to be safe. You don't know what state of mind he's in.” I welcomed Mom's warning with a grain of salt, but happy tears welled up.

“Thank you, Mom, but I know him. He's not going to hurt me. He could be raging mad and he wouldn't lay a finger on me, okay? Please don't worry...But...Can you watch the kids?”

Evan was right to tell me not to bring kids. What we had to discuss could not be handled with children around. I just had to show up and hope for the best, praying he wasn't so angry he might take them from me.

EVAN

My car's engine had started to grow cold by the time I mustered the energy to pull my eyes from the sheet of paper in my hand. It was warmer today, a few days before Thanksgiving, but it was still brisk. I looked up at Montgomery headquarters and let my eyes walk up the windows to where Jacob probably sat by his desk, proudly reassuming control of the company I had neglected the past four days.

With a grunt, I pushed open the car door and climbed out. Light rain fell on my head, dampening my hair. I was glad it wasn't snow that might hinder my plans for this evening. Amber had responded that she would be at my home at six for dinner. I didn't want any reason to have to cancel this. After my vanishing act, she probably felt angry with me, or scared of me.

"Morning, Mr. Montgomery!" I heard behind me. I glanced over my shoulder to see Shelby walking through the parking lot toward the building. She had her phone in her hand too. No doubt she'd be texting Amber immediately to let her know what was going on. News traveled fast. I had to be faster.

"Morning," I called back, keeping my tone even. I locked my car and followed her in, watching her type into her phone.

I steeled my resolve as I headed to Jacob's office. I didn't have to hear the news to know he'd be back there. After I walked out, someone had to lead. I just hoped I didn't have to face Amber, but talking directly to my brother was worth that risk. And doing it during work hours when he would be more likely to remain calm was the only way I felt comfortable.

I rapped on his door and walked in. A woman I'd never seen before stood near his

desk talking to him softly about a work event in January. I waited as his eyes flicked up to meet mine; then he nodded at her and waved her off.

“We’ll talk more later. Go on,” he told her, finally focusing on me. She smiled stiffly at me as she walked past, shutting the door behind herself. “Temp...Amber’s out sick.”

The thought rolled around my head for a moment as I mulled it over. Jacob would never have gotten a temp to fill in for Amber if it were just one day, which meant she’d taken some time off too—probably to deal with the fact that I up and left without a word.

“I assume you knew I’d show up here?” I walked forward, careful not to drop the slip of paper from my hand. The paternity results sure felt a lot heavier than the weight of that piece of paper, especially when I dropped it on Jacob’s desk before sitting down.

“I thought maybe you would.” His eyes raked over the paper then met mine. “Amber told me you reached out to her. We’ve had a lot of people looking for you.”

I wasn’t surprised they’d called in the cavalry. I’d never done anything like that before. Falling off the face of the planet had always sounded like a good idea, but the logistics of it were impossible. I had barely crossed the hurdle of a few days. Reinventing myself would never happen.

“Stayed at a hotel. Paid cash...” I tapped the edge of the paper then sat back in the chair again. “You were right.”

Jacob looked back down at the paper, this time examining it more closely. His lips moved as he read; then a firm pout formed on his lips. He took his time raising his eyes back to meet mine. His expression haunted me almost as much as the ghost of my former relationship with Amber—before I went to Europe.

“We should really talk.” He pushed the paper toward me, but I didn’t accept it. I didn’t need it anymore.

“Yes, we should.” My shoulders carried the weight of days of stress and heavy drinking. I was dehydrated and stiff. My body reminded me that I wasn’t a twenty-something anymore, that going on a bender was about as smart as turning your umbrella upside down in a rainstorm. “I’m a dad...I took toothbrushes the twins used one morning after a sleepover at my house to a private clinic and paid cash to have them run a paternity test. Parker came back a 99 percent match and Vera’s toothbrush didn’t have enough DNA.”

“I’m gonna crack down and make sure she starts brushing better,” Jacob joked. His deadpan expression matched mine. The humor didn’t faze me because the only thing I could articulate was that I was hurt. Laughter seemed like a thing of the past.

“I’m hurt, Jake.” My honest truth pulled a grimace from him. I ran my tongue along my teeth and sucked the saliva out of my mouth and swallowed it. It was a bitter taste to speak the truth so bluntly. “But I need to tell you I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have snapped at you.”

Jacob sighed and sat back. He rubbed a hand down over his face then back up over his head. My apology opened the dam, releasing tension from both of us. We were just two brothers here to have a chat about a mutual acquaintance.

“Evan, you have no idea how many times I wanted her to tell you.” He shook his head, furrowing his brow deeply. “She’s been through so much. Life hasn’t treated her well since having those kids. Preemies take extra attention and care. She has expenses for Parker’s therapy for his learning disorder.”

Jacob’s posture told me more about the situation than his words. Since the first interaction with him after returning back here—the way he demanded I respect

her—I'd known he cared a great deal for her. Now I knew why. He was here watching her struggle and almost suffocate under the weight she carried as a single mother. Things I should have been here to help with.

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“I just don’t understand why you never told me...Why she never thought to tell me if it was such a struggle.” Anger threatened to rise up, but I swallowed it down the way I had been for days now.

“She chose you over herself.”

“What?” I was shocked by Jacob’s words.

“You were going around bragging about Europe and this big adventure you were going to have. You told everyone you knew at least three times.” Jacob chuckled and shook his head. “I almost believed it was the wrong choice sending you.”

“And she thought I wanted that more than her? More than learning I’d be a father?” Understanding dawned slowly, light creeping into the dark places of my mind that had painted her and Jacob as villains in my story.

“She thought you would be happier. Then she found out it was twins and got afraid. Eventually, we agreed we’d say something when she felt safe, but I learned you were dating someone. Erin let it slip at family dinner. After that Amber refused to say a thing to you. She respected that you had a life she didn’t want to interrupt.” He scratched his head with one hand while he closed his eyes. “She was afraid of your reaction.”

Those words broke me. Until now, I harbored a lot of anger toward her for the secret. My mind still wanted to hold on and stay angry, but the very idea of her being afraid of me for anyreason softened the edges of my emotion. Sandpaper over a fine wood grain being smoothed out by understanding.

“God,” I grunted. It was my turn to rub my face in frustration. I leaned forward and took the paper off the desk, folding it up. Knowing that information settled something in my chest. I now knew how to approach this situation tonight when she came for dinner.

“So go easy on her. Amber’s a great woman. Chester would have been very proud of her.”

“I’d say he would.” I stood up and tucked the paper into my pocket. “So, I guess I’m fired?” This time the joke landed. Jacob chuckled and stood with me.

“From CEO, yes. From R&D? No.” His hand shot out and I accepted it, shaking it firmly.

“Thank you for talking with me. And thank you for taking good care of them.” As I pulled my hand back, Jacob nodded and smiled warmly.

“It was my genuine pleasure. I don’t know if you and Amber are going to work things out, but I know she’s pretty nervous about your reaction. You have every right to be angry, but be gentle.” I didn’t need his kind reminder but I respected it. “What are you going to say to her?”

“We just...We need to talk,” was all I could offer him. I had no way of knowing what words would come out in what order. Amber meant the world to me, despite having hurt me so deeply. Any love worth having was a love worth fighting for. “I’ll talk to you later.”

I grabbed my coat on the way out the door, turning toward the exit. Passing Shelby’s office, I glanced in and noticed her watching me. It seemed the entire office was curious after my vanishing act. But the only opinion that really mattered was still out ahead of me on this lonely road.

At six o'clock, I had to face my demons and pray by some grace of God I'd be able to hold myself together long enough to articulate how I felt. Jacob was right. Amber didn't deserve a harsh reply from me if she really had done everything to put me first. The fact that she'd been afraid of my reaction saddened me, though. I wasn't sure how to take it.

The only way to get through this was one step at a time.

Tonight, I was taking the first one.

25

AMBER

I walked back and forth, my mind racing. Every step felt like I was getting further from where I needed to be. My palms were sweating, my chest tight, and the pit in my stomach wasn't getting any smaller. I kept running over everything in my head—what I was going to say, how I was going to say it. But no matter how many times I thought it through, the nerves didn't let up.

Shelby was sitting on the couch, but her eyes were on me. She wasn't letting me lose myself in my head. She was waiting for me to stop pacing, waiting for me to just breathe. She'd been with me through everything, and I could feel the weight of her concern even though she didn't say a word.

Mom had been quiet so far, focused on her knitting, but I knew she was watching me too. Watching and worrying. She always worried.

Finally, Shelby got up from the couch, crossing the room and placing her hands on my shoulders, stopping me mid-step. "Amber, listen to me. You've got this. I know you're scared, but this isn't just about him. It's about you too. You've been carrying

this for so long, and it's time to put it down."

I let out a shaky breath, my chest tightening again. "What if he doesn't get it? What if he can't forgive me?"

Her hands gripped my shoulders, pulling me back to her. I knew I couldn't hide from this moment anymore. "He'll understand, Amber. You're not the same person you were all those years ago. And neither is he. If he loves you, he'll find a way. But you have to be honest. You have to let him in."

I shook my head, but it didn't feel as defeated as it had before. Shelby was right, of course. But it still didn't feel real. It felt like the ground was slipping beneath me.

Mom spoke up then, her voice quiet but full of that knowing warmth. "No matter what happens, we've got you, Amber. You don't have to do this alone."

I felt a tear slip down my cheek before I could stop it. I wiped it away quickly, though it didn't make me feel any stronger. There was no turning back. I had to go through with this. For me, for Evan, and for the twins.

"Should one of us go with you?" Mom set her knitting down to look up at me with creases on her forehead. "It's a shocking truth for anyone. What if he's angry."

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I huffed and rolled my eyes. “Mom, he’s not going to hurt me. I swear, you worry too much.” Tugging the hem of my sweater I refocused on Shelby’s calming face while I listened to the chatter of the twins filter out from their room. She let her hands drop from my shoulders, but I still saw the concern in her narrowed eyes.

“You love him, don’t you?”

Her question was one I’d asked myself a hundred times in the past three days. The answer was the same every single time. “Of course I love him. It’s why I did everything I did. It might have been the wrong way to show it, but I do love him. I only wanted him to be happy.” I swiped more tears off my cheeks. It felt like all I did all week was cry. I was so ready to be calm again.

Shelby stood in front of me. Her expression was serious as she grabbed my hand. “Amber, love finds a way. I’ve seen it. You’ve spent so much time worrying about what might go wrong. But if he loves you, he’ll work through it. Love isn’t easy, but if you both want it, you’ll make it work.”

I thought about her words. The fear didn’t go away, but something inside me shifted. Maybe she was right. Maybe it wouldn’t all fall apart.

Mom spoke then too, reminding me how wise she was. “Love isn’t perfect. It’s messy. It doesn’t always look the way you expect. But you and Evan, what you’ve shared...it’s real. Don’t let fear stop you from taking a chance.”

I let her words sink in. Real. I needed to believe that. I couldn’t hide behind my fear anymore. There was a chance, a real chance, if I allowed myself to believe in it. Evan

loved the kids; I saw it in his eyes when he looked at them.

Shelby nodded. “He won’t run. If he loves you, he’ll be there. But you have to give him the chance.”

I slowly nodded back, feeling a little steadier. “I hope you’re right,” I whispered.

Shelby smiled. “I know I am. Now, let’s get you off on your dinner date.”

I sucked in a breath and blew it out. I wasn’t ready for this. My hands still trembled; my thoughts still raced. Not knowing what would happen crippled my ability to stay calm, but I slid my arms into my jacket and let Shelby shove my car keys into my hand.

“I can’t do this.” I pleaded with my eyes for someone to make this entire situation go away, but no one could.

“You’ve got this.” Shelby opened the door and I walked into the hallway. When I heard it click shut behind me, I knew I was alone in this. Or at least, this part. They’d be here for me if it went bad and I came home sad. And they’d stand beside me through any mess or battle that sprang up.

One foot in front of the other. It was the only way to walk a path, and it was what I did.

The car doors were frozen shut. I pried them open and wished I had left myself time to warm the car up. I drove across town shivering the whole way there. Traffic was light, and it took me less time than normal to make the short trip from Buffalo to Crescent Springs. I parked in front of Evan’s house and stared up at the light streaming out of his front window onto the yard. I didn’t see any movement inside, but I knew he was in there waiting.

Taking a few minutes to prepare myself and attempt to calm down, I whispered a silent prayer that things would go well. The hard part was done. Jacob had already told Evan the truth. That part was out of the way already, which meant all I had to do was accept his reaction without breaking down.

I opened the car door and climbed out. My feet crunched on some rock salt sprinkled on his driveway to prevent ice from forming. The first hints of movement in the house caught my eye, shadows on the wall revealing his presence. I shut the car and locked it, then made my way up the walk trembling.

He had to have been watching me because the door swung open right when I pressed the bell. Evan stood inside wearing a soft-looking sweater and jeans. I expected a suit, which was what he always wore, and was pleasantly surprised. He looked more handsome than normal, or maybe that was because I hadn't seen him all week.

"Come in," he said gruffly. I stepped inside wondering what tortures awaited me. The elephant in the room was so giant there was no avoiding it.

"Hi," I mumbled quietly. I moved to the side so he could shut the door. As he did, he handed me a folded-up piece of paper. "What's this?" I glanced at it and then caught his gaze again.

He said nothing. All he did was stare at me and wait, so I unfolded the paper and read the heading. It said "Buffalo Health" and under it, smaller print said "Paternity Results."

Tears immediately welled up and I dropped the paper and covered my face. This wasn't what I expected. I couldn't breathe. I wanted to run away.

EVAN

Standing between Amber and the door blocked her point of escape, but it didn't lend a very good view for her reaction. She dropped the paper and cried, covering her face from view. It wrenched my heart seeing her in pain, so I reached for her because this whole thing should never have happened.

After talking with Jacob this morning, I did a lot of thinking about everything. As I pulled Amber into my arms and held her while she cried, thoughts of my own failure to read the situation flooded my mind. We had a lot to talk about regarding the kids, but we had both made mistakes. We were both complicit in the act of unprotected sex, which I knew put her at risk of an unplanned—but not necessarily unwanted—pregnancy.

“Hey, shh.” My arms held her tightly, my hand smoothing up and down her back in a gentle motion. I couldn't read her mind to know what she was thinking but I assumed maybe it was guilt or fear. What Jacob said stuck in my heart like a dagger. It sliced to the core of my anger, cutting it out and leaving a hole in its path.

Amber hadn't come to me with this truth out of fear of how I might react to her. Her fear had merit too. She knew me very well. I would have exploded in anger or outrage, demanded answers—the way I had in Jacob's office earlier this week. I wouldn't have cared if she was upset or scared. I'd have only thought of myself.

Taking these few days to get facts and think of this situation from every angle not only helped me temper my response now, but it also afforded me time to think of her and what she'd feel. Jake's warning was just icing on the cake.

“I'm so sorry, Evan. I should have told you. I'm such a horrible person.”

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“No,” I said, more forcefully than I wanted to. I gripped her by the shoulders and held her back at arm’s length to look her in the eye. Tears streaked her cheeks with black mascara. “You are not horrible.”

My throat constricted; I felt choked up, like words wouldn’t form now. Looking into her eyes I saw the sparkle there that matched Vera’s. The tiny flecks of gold in her dark chocolate eyes reminded me of Parker’s when he won a particularly hard video game challenge. Their faces looked like mine, but their hearts matched hers—gentle, timid, loving.

Gratitude for everything she put herself through for me overwhelmed me. Tears burned in my own eyes. This woman took on the responsibility of raising my children completely alone simply because she thought I wanted that life of freedom out on the road. To protect any future relationship I may have. To help me chase my dreams.

“Evan, please say something,” she mumbled. Her hands rose and smeared the mascara across her cheeks as she blinked back more tears.

I shook my head, unable to conjure words for her. The only thing that came to mind as I stared into her eyes was: “I love you.”

Words my mother used to say to me and Jacob as children poured into my mind. Love is patient, love is kind. It doesn’t think selfish things; it isn’t prideful. Every bit of that was true for me. I loved her more than words could say. More than actions could represent.

“I don’t understand...” Amber tried to back away, but I pulled her closer.

“You don’t have to understand. You just have to believe it.”

In that moment I realized it didn’t matter what she had done or what secret she had kept, she was my soulmate. We might have spent years apart, lived very different lives, been separated by time and distance, but our hearts were fated for each other, tied with a string of destiny long before we even met.

I slid my right hand up her neck and cupped her cheek. Brushing the pad of my thumb over the mascara stains on her cheek, I hooked my fingers behind her neck and let my grip tighten there. No words passed between us, but a thousand thoughts flowed through our locked gaze. I couldn’t live without her, no matter how badly I was hurt by what happened. I didn’t want to. She could stomp on my heart a billion times and I would still love her.

“But...you’re not mad?” She sniffled, but she leaned into my touch.

“I’m furious.” My jaw clenched slightly, a momentary knee-jerk reflex, but I took a breath and blew it away. “But love isn’t just for good times.”

“You really love me?” Fresh tears sprang to her eyes. Her disbelief was waning, being carried away on the current of her emotion that sluiced down her cheeks.

“I really love you. Now would you let me kiss you already?”

Amber smiled and laughed through her tears as she nodded. I leaned in, pulling her closer, and pressed my lips against hers. It felt so different from the hot, crazy kisses we had been sharing. I was gentle, taking my time to breathe her in and memorize the sensation of her lips against mine, her tongue sliding along mine.

She splayed her hands on my chest and deepened the kiss, parting her lips to let me enjoy her more fully. I felt her grabbing my sweater, tugging me closer; my other

hand lowered to the small of her back, where I encouraged the closeness by pressing her body against mine.

“And you’re happy that you’re a father?”

Her question mumbled against my lips brought on a smile. I took a step toward her, forcing her to take a step backward. “The happiest man alive.” Her curves fit against my body so nicely.

Amber’s cheeks flushed a pretty shade of pink as she looked down to the floor. “I...I love you too, Evan.”

“Amber.” I tilted her chin up to meet my eyes. “I know.” I saw recognition as she blinked out more tears.

Now both of my hands were on her hips, thumbs dancing across the soft skin just under the edge of her shirt. She kissed me again while I continued backing her toward the bedroom.

“I want to make up for every missed moment,” I said against her ear as my hands left her sides. I continued walking her backward and lifted my hands to her chest where I focused on the pearlescent buttons. I unbuttoned her shirt, one button at a time. “Every missed birthday, every night you cried alone.”

Amber panted as I slid the fabric off her shoulders. Her lace-covered chest rose and fell with each labored breath. The white bra was sexy, supporting her full fleshy globes, but hinting at the nipples that awaited my attention. I bent in front of her, brandishing a wicked grin. “Every missed anniversary, every orgasm.”

Her hands fisted in my hair as I palmed her breasts and massaged them gently, paying special attention to her sensitive peaks. They hardened against my touch, as did the

length between my legs. She sucked in a breath when I kissed the inside of her right breast then her left. She watched me bite her skin softly, then work the front clasp to free her nipples for my tongue to enjoy.

“Every night you were never held. Every day you were never told how incredible you are.” I flicked my tongue over one nipple then sucked it into my mouth and swirled my tongue around it.

“Evan,” Amber moaned, arching her back, pushing her chest out more for me to suckle on her. Her hands in my hair clenched and pulled gently, urging me on.

“I love you.” I said the words against her skin as I switched sides. The other breast was just as hard and sensitive as the first one. I felt her fingers sliding down my back to my waist then slipping under my sweater to do what I’d done to her. She tugged it higher and pulled it up over my head as I rose, straightening to discard it.

Her hands trailed down my abs then clasped my erection through my jeans. My dick jumped in her palm, hardening and throbbing. I stepped closer to her again, cupping both cheeks hard and crushing my mouth against hers. This kiss was scorching, melding our mouths and hearts together while she unbuckled my belt and unzipped my jeans.

“I want to worship every inch of you,” I said against her ear as she freed my length. She wrapped her warm fingers around me and stroked gently, almost teasingly. “I want to make up for every time you went to bed alone.”

Amber’s breath caught in her throat as I kissed her neck, sucking and biting gently. “No one has ever said things like that to me,” she whispered. Her voice was breathy and aroused.

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“Well, now you know.” I nibbled my way down her collarbone and sucked a mark at the hollow of her throat. “You are the only woman for me.”

She groaned as I slid her slacks down her legs, leaving them forgotten on the floor. My fingers then trailed up the inside of her thighs, teasing the sensitive skin lightly. She whimpered as I hooked my fingers in her panties and pulled them to the side so the backs of my fingers could caress her slickness. Her moisture coated my fingertips and I couldn’t resist a taste. I brought my fingers to my lips and sucked them clean while she watched with hooded eyes.

“You taste delicious,” I said before pressing my lips to hers again. Our tongues dueled as she moaned into my mouth. I slid a single finger inside her, then two. We backed against my bedroom door and stopped as I fumbled with my free hand for the knob. Her clothes, mostly discarded now, lay strewn in our path. My body felt constricted by my jeans, which she pushed at, trying to force them down over my hips.

“Patience,” I told her as I found the knob. The door swung open, making her stumble backward and snicker.

Amber covered her mouth and the salacious grin, while I toed off my shoes and shoved my jeans down, my dick springing back upward once it was free.

I reached for her again and pulled her to me, kissing her. My tongue delved into her mouth, exploring every nook and cranny as if I’d never tasted her. Her hips pressed against me, seeking the contact I so desperately needed. The silk of her panties divided us, preventing the freedom I sought. I slipped my thumbs into the elastic of

their waistband and pushed them down while she stroked my length hard.

“I love you,” she said against my lips, her breathing ragged.

“I love you too,” I muttered before I bent down to trail kisses along her jawline, down her neck, then between her breasts. Her taste on my tongue was intoxicating. I could feast on her all day and night. My tongue dipped lower, teasing the top of her mound as I slid two fingers inside of her, curling them just so to hit that spot that made her arch and moan. I knelt there, worshipping at her source, drawing gasps of pleasure from her lips.

“Evan,” she gasped as I continued to tease her. “Please.” Her hands clawed at my scalp, alternating between pulling my hair and pushing me lower. She lifted a leg, draping it over my shoulder, allowing me more room to work. Her head arched back, but her mouth was agape.

I teased her with my tongue, circling her clit then sucking lightly. Her hips rocked against me in response, pussy clenching on my fingers. Her hands knotted in my hair as she arched forward into my face. I felt her tensing, her body poised to climax.

“Evan, I’m...I’m...” Her lips parted, pleasure overtaking her as she orgasmed against my mouth. I felt her muscles contract around my fingers as she spasmed. Her knee went weak and she used me for balance, so I bore up under her weight and supported her as convulsions wracked her form. My fingers pumped in and out of her until the orgasm began to subside, then I slowly kissed my way upward.

My lips grazed over her nipples, then up her collarbone as I stood. Her hand reached for my dick again while I kneaded her breasts. She hissed when I pinched a nipple and twisted it. It made me grin against her mouth. “That will never get old.” My voice rumbled a smile from her lips.

“Torturing me?” she asked playfully as she pressed her thumb to the tip of my cock and stroked harder.

“Hearing your moans while you come apart around me.”

Amber pulled me against her mouth again and took charge, turning us until she was the one backing me against the bed. Her hands pressed my chest. I didn’t have to fall but I did. I fell hard, and I never wanted to get back up.

27

AMBER

Evan fell backward on the bed with his eyes locked on my face. His hands slipped from my sides as I pushed him then crawled over him on the bed to straddle his hips. The minute he told me he loved me a whole new world broke open for me. It wasn’t what I expected. None of this was. It was better than I ever could have imagined it would turn out, and Jacob had been right all along.

“God you make me feel so incredible,” I whispered as my mouth closed in on his again. My pussy still throbbed from climax, but I wanted more. My core slid along his length, grinding on him as I rocked my hips.

Evan groaned, his hands gripping my hips. “Amber, you’re going to kill me.”

I smiled against his lips and kissed my way down his jawline until I reached his ear. “Good. Die with me then.”

His chest rose in a shaky breath as I licked along his earlobe and then bit it lightly. He groaned again, longer this time, and I felt it through him, straight to my core. My pussy clenched around nothing, wanting him inside of me. I moved to tease him

further, trailing my tongue down his neck and across his collarbone as my hands pressed against his muscular chest for support. The moisture between our bodies teased us both, but it made my core ache for him.

“Oh God, Amber,” he groaned, his hips arching upwards, pressing against me. His fingers were so firm on my hips it almost hurt.

“Mmm?” I hummed, teasing him even more by running my fingernails down his abs and then along his length. “Yeah?” I asked innocently, as if I didn’t know exactly what he wanted. I wanted it too.

Evan groaned louder, and I could feel his cock twitching against my core. “I-I,” he stuttered, and I couldn’t help but smile. It was so erotic to know that I was the one causing this much pleasure in him, to hear him moaning and panting for me like he needed me. It was intoxicating.

“What is it?” I asked, teasing him further by circling his tip with a finger. “You want me to stop?” As I swirled my finger it brushed over my sensitive clit making me jolt too. I still felt raw from the way he sucked me. It made me want to come again.

“God no,” he hissed, “give me more.” Evan’s hands rode up my back to my shoulders pulling me back down for a kiss. His lips were fierce and hungry, devouring me until I was breathless.

I rocked my hips and positioned my pelvis as he continued to grind. The head of his cock brushed against my entrance, and desire coursed through my body. I wanted him so bad. I needed him. I met his hips with mine, easing him inside of me. His length filled me, stretching me deliciously as our bodies connected.

“Tell me you love me again,” I whispered against his lips, my eyes locked with his.

Evan's gaze burned into mine as he moved inside of me, his breathing ragged. "I love you, Amber. So much." His hands caressed my back and side, causing waves of heat to wash over me. "I don't know how I ever lived without you."

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“Me neither,” I breathed, my voice catching as the pleasure intensified. Our bodies moved together in a primal dance, our lips never parting as we explored every inch of each other’s mouths. This was more than sex; it was a union of souls, a connection that transcended time and space.

With every thrust, our bodies molded together as if they were made for each other. Sweat coated our skin as we moved faster. My groin started to tense and ache. I rolled my hips until his dick hit my sweet spot.

“Oh God, there...Like that...” Evan continued to thrust into me but now with more control. “Yes, please...Don’t stop.”

I was on the edge, ready to tip over again, when he wrapped both arms around me and held me down tightly to his body. The added pressure helped him go a smidge deeper and I exploded again, detonating around him in a burst of spasms and jolts. I bit down on his shoulder and felt him kiss my cheek.

“That’s it, come for me,” he whispered in my ear. I didn’t know how he maintained so much control to go so long, but I wasn’t complaining. The orgasm was ten times better than before. It took me a while to come down from the high, but I managed to open my eyes and look at him. His pupils were blown and his jaw was tight.

“Wow,” I mewled. I was spent, ready to let the waves of pleasure lull me into relaxation. I draped myself over his chest, but he had other thoughts.

Evan rolled, taking me with him. He grunted as he shifted his weight so he wasn’t crushing me. His lips plucked at mine before he bit my lower lip and pulled on it. “I

want you naked.” The warmth of his baritone vibrated my chest before he grabbed one of my breasts and squeezed it.

“Mmm, mm-hmm,” I hummed, nodding into the kiss.

His hips started moving again, pushing his dick into me. I spread my legs wider for him and found a rhythm that matched his. He plunged deeper, harder, his grip on my breasts tighter. The sensations were enough to make me moan and arch into him. I wrapped my arms around him and rested my hands on his ass, urging him deeper as I tilted my hips upward. Then I lifted my hips and locked my feet behind him. I couldn’t get enough of him.

“God, you’re amazing...” he groaned, his eyes rolling back in pleasure. My body felt boneless as he took me, but I still managed to meet his thrusts with equal fervor. We moved together, our bodies entwined in a dance of lust and desire.

I could feel the headboard hitting the wall with every powerful thrust.

“Again,” I panted, my nails digging into his shoulders. “Please.”

Evan’s lips curled into a smirk against my neck as he started to move faster. His hips snapped against mine, and our moans filled the room. The sound of flesh smacking against flesh was almost as erotic as the feeling of him inside me.

“Amber,” he growled, his voice thick with desire. “You’re going to make me come.”

“I want you to,” I whimpered, arching my back to take him deeper. His thrusts, however, slowed. I whimpered when he pulled out, leaving my body with a distinct ache to have him inside me. “What?”

“Shh,” he shushed, smirking at me. He grabbed my ankles and spread my legs wide,

pushing my feet apart and forward as he crawled closer. “Like this...” He let go of one and grabbed my hand. “Hold your foot here,” he coached, so I did as he asked. Then he gripped his girth and slid back into me.

The way his hands now held both of my ankles, practically folding my body in half, made almost no space for his dick to fit. I could barely breathe, but he started thrusting. It was exquisite, the tightness, the angle.

“Touch yourself,” he ordered. His eyes stared down at my pussy as I reached between my legs and rubbed my clit. The new position felt better than the last three. My body absorbed every ounce of pleasure from it as I built toward orgasm again.

“Oh God, this is...Wow...I...” I couldn’t speak. The way he made me feel was incredible.

“Let go for me,” he panted, his eyes locked on my touching hand. His thrusts intensified, and my climax loomed closer. “God, Amber, I want to see you come all over my cock.”

The way he spoke, the way he moved; it was all too much to handle. My mind spun as my body trembled on the edge of ecstasy. Evan’s relentless pounding pushed me over that edge, and I cried out his name as I shattered around him. My pussy clenched him tightly, milking his orgasm from him as he groaned my name in response.

His dick pulsed and twitched. He arched his head back and grunted, “Oh yeah,” as I felt the warmth from his explosion flood me. I jolted and gasped for breath. In this position I couldn’t get a deep breath, but it made the sensations all the more powerful. My head spun; I saw stars, and his thrusts began to slow.

Slowly, he lowered my legs and let me wrap them back around him. He descended on me for another kiss as his hips continued to rock in and out of me. Cradling my

cheek, he panted and used his teeth to capture one lip then the other. He sucked my lower lip into his mouth and sighed as he let it go.

Our confessions of love were sealed with the moment and intimacy, but while I wanted to get lost in that moment, neither of us could pretend to ignore the elephant in the room. I pressed my eyes closed as he rested his forehead on mine and we caught our breaths. He smelled like me, like my moisture. It made me smile against his lips as he kissed me softly again. His hand rose up and kneaded my breast again, but then he pulled out and rolled to the side.

It was instinct. I rolled into his chest and let him hold me. The security of being held after a moment so intensely intimate felt incredible. I breathed in his musk and sweat scent while endorphins coursed through my body. Still, the lingering guilt and shame I felt, that had plagued me for weeks, kept surfacing, nagging at my mind.

“Evan, I’m really so very sorry. I know that you deserved better. I thought I was doing what you wanted. I thought I was keeping the mess away from you so you could have the life you wanted.” Deep sadness weighed me down, but at least I wasn’t crying anymore.

“Hey, those kids aren’t a mess.” He pinched my chin and forced me to look up at him.

“Oh, no...I know that. I just mean, the pressure of giving up your career, staying here.” I had to look away. I knew I was right. He did love my children, but he’d have given up Europe and probably his job as head of R&D to stay with me. “I mean, you had a good life going. You were progressing at work, and then you were dating that skinny blonde woman?—”

“I’m not dating anyone but you, Amber, and I love every inch of your curves. It’s what I prefer.” His hand rode down over my hips and thighs then slid back up to my

face. “And I’ll have an amazing life with you too.” He sighed as he brought his hand back up to my chin where he forced me to tip my jaw up. He kissed me softly as he looked me in the eye. “I want a life with you.”

“But the job... You had to go to Europe and?—”

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“And Jacob would have seen me grow up and mature as I took on the job of fathering the twins, but that’s the past. What’s done is done. I’ll have some feelings to sort out, but none of that matters now. I was an idiot.”

I stared up at him confused by his statement. “What do you mean, you were an idiot?” I was the one who kept things from him. Why would he take any of the blame?

“Because I left, when I loved you so fully I wanted you to be my world, but I chased a dumb job instead of you. And worse, you feared what I might think—enough to hide the truth from me. I hated that I let you feel afraid of me for even a second. Will you ever forgive me?”

His sincerity hit me in the chest, making tears spring up. “Oh, love, yes. You don’t need my forgiveness because you didn’t do anything wrong, but it’s yours.” This time I kissed him and tasted myself on his lips still.

“So when can we tell the kids about me?” he asked and I froze. It was something I hadn’t even taken the first second to think of.

When would we tell them? And how would we tell them? And most importantly of all, how would they react?

28

EVAN

Flitting around Jacob's house, helping Erin get things ready for the holiday meal, I felt nervous. My palms were a rainforest, but my mouth was the Serengeti. After the night I spent with Amber, we had agreed to take a day and think about the best way to approach how to tell the children about me. When Erin invited all of us to have dinner tonight—including Mona and Amber—I decided to bring the topic up during dinner.

I hadn't the faintest clue how to tell a seven-year-old child who had never met their father a truth like that. I was so far out of touch with children I might as well be an alien. But I knew Jacob, Erin, and Mona had a lot of combined wisdom too. My appearance—silvering hair, wild old-man eyebrows, and random hairs that grew out of my nose from time to time—might've screamed "experience" but it was far from the truth. I'd spent my entire adult existence removed from children. I knew I had a lot to learn.

"So, the kids aren't coming?" Erin asked, a small pout forming on her lips.

"Not this time," I told her. "Amber's friend Shelby is keeping them. There's something I want to discuss, so I sort of asked her if this could be adult only tonight."

Erin's eyes sparked to life and her eyebrows went up. "Are you going to propose?" she asked as a smile crept across her face. Sadly, I had to disappoint her.

"Not exactly." I sucked in a breath to explain the predicament, but the doorbell rang and interrupted me.

"I'll get it!" Jacob called from his perch in the living room watching the football game.

"You'll see," I said, before turning to join Jacob.

He swung the door open and said, “Ladies, welcome!” He greeted Mona with a kiss to each cheek and Amber with a warm hug. Mona held a casserole dish with something orange in it and held it out to me with a smile.

“Sweet potato casserole,” she said with a wink. “I’ll take it in to help Erin.”

The minute I looked at Amber my body warmed. Memories of our night together two nights ago flooded me. Her body on mine, my lips all over her skin. I leaned in and kissed her cheek, then whispered in her ear, “You look incredible.”

She wore a bright red sweater with dark slacks. Her hair was loose around her face, and green earrings dangled in the shape of teardrops from her ears. I parted her coat and slid it off her shoulders, and a whiff of vanilla rose to greet me.

“And you smell incredible too. I could eat you.” My comment was a little louder than I thought and Jacob snickered.

“Alright, you two. Keep it PG.”

He turned to head toward the dining room after slapping my back once. Amber waited while I hung her coat; then I took her hand and held it as we moved toward the food and family.

“How was your day?” she asked. She knew my day consisted of baking and helping Erin cook while listening to Jacob’s grumbles directed at sports on TV. It was pretty traditional for this home, though I couldn’t wait to form new traditions with her soon.

“Ah, you know. I’m not a chef, but I like to eat.” The small talk felt awkward, like we were dancing around the issue already.

“I’m sure whatever you made is excellent.” Her smile put me at ease, though I still

felt anxious about the topic I intended to bring up.

I hadn't discussed it with Amber first. I wasn't sure if she would be annoyed with me that I would be so bold as to broach the topic with our family around, but the truth was out there. Everyone knew I was the twins' father, and the twins weren't here to accidentally overhear it. If there was any safe place to bring it up and get answers and help, it was today, around the Thanksgiving table.

The spread before us was a feast fit for kings. Erin and I had spent hours in the kitchen, preparing a succulent roast turkey with perfectly golden skin, creamy mashed potatoes, savory stuffing filled with herbs and spices, tender carrots, sweet corn, and warm rolls fresh out of the oven. The aroma of roasted meat and buttery potatoes mingled with the earthiness of the vegetables and the sweetness of the rolls, creating a symphony of scents that made my mouth water and my stomach growl in anticipation.

As plates were passed around the table, I couldn't resist taking generous portions of everything. The sliced turkey was still warm after I freshly carved it moments ago. The potatoes were irresistibly creamy and the stuffing was buzzing with flavor. My plate quickly became overloaded, but I couldn't help myself from indulging. Even as dishes were still being passed around, I couldn't resist taking bites of my favorite dishes, savoring every mouthful like it was my last.

I was enjoying a bite of carrots when Jacob said, "Evan, do you remember the last Thanksgiving we had with Mom and Dad?" He started chuckling and I knew right where he was going. "Aunt Margaret was there, bless her heart. She was older than the sun at the time. We started to sit down for dinner and Dad asked her to say grace..."

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“Yeah, and she was so happy.” I joined in him laughing as the ladies offered confused expressions.

“And she started reciting the lyrics to the ‘Star-Spangled Banner’ instead of praying.” Jacob laughed so hard he burst into tears and had to put down his fork.

It made everyone around the table laugh too. The memory was always a fond one for me and Jacob, though we hadn’t spoken of it in years since we had been more distant than usual. I was happy to be bringing back the close bond we had when we were younger, and even the familiar traditions that we’d let slip over the past few years.

“Ah,” I sighed, feeling grateful for this day. “We used to go around and say what we’re thankful for. Erin, would you like to start?”

Jacob didn’t seem to be upset that I made the request despite him being the host. He and Erin exchanged glances and smiles, and she boldly announced: “While I have so much to be thankful for this year, the thing I’m most thankful for is my husband.” Her eyes misted up as she continued. “We almost lost you, baby, but I’m so glad you are a fighter. Sometimes I hate that feisty temper you get but it makes you so determined.” The grin on her face was priceless. It made a few of us tear up too as they leaned forward to kiss.

Jacob reached out to touch her hand and his glass tipped over, sending his water splashing off the edge of the table, almost onto Erin’s lap. She dodged it and snickered. “Clumsyman.” Her playful scolding preceded Jacob standing to drop his cloth napkin to the floor and mop up the mess.

“Alright, Mona, how about you?” he said while he used the toe of his dress shoe to push the napkin around the hardwood floor.

“Well yes!” Mona set her fork down and dabbed her mouth as she swallowed her bite of food. “I’m so thankful this year that my business is doing well, and that my grandbabies are healthy. I just keep thinking of how hard life can be, but we’re so blessed in so many ways. Aren’t we?” She looked at Amber whose eyes were misty still from laughing so hard.

“We really are,” Amber said. She held her mom’s hand while it was her turn to say what she was grateful for. Her eyes traced up to mine and her expression grew more serious, eyes sobering, forehead clearing of lines. “I’m so thankful that after all this time, the love I’ve felt for the most amazing man in the world is still there burning so brightly.”

“Aw,” Erin cooed. I didn’t look in her direction to see the expression on her face because Amber took her hand from Mona’s and turned to me. She stared up at me until I offered her a chaste kiss, careful not to spill my water.

“What are you thankful for, honey?” Erin asked Jacob as he sat back down.

He harrumphed and sighed, then his forehead furrowed and he nodded. “Life.” The one simple word was enough. The room grew silent for a moment as we all remembered truly how close we’d come to losing him. This meal, the presence of joy and love here, none of it would’ve been present this year without him. I wouldn’t know about my twins, and we would all have been mourning the loss of such a great man.

“Me too, honey.” Erin softly acknowledged what we were all thinking. Gratitude for life truly ran deep.

“I supposed it’s my turn.” Everyone remained somber after Jacob’s gratitude was released. It wasn’t the perfect moment to say my piece, but it was an opportunity I wasn’t going to pass up. My heart was overflowing with thankfulness for the life I hoped to have. The road was laid out in front of me plainly, but the steps to navigating it were still foggy.

“I’m thankful for my family.” My head hung; I didn’t look at anyone’s faces. Pouring out my heart wasn’t ever an easy thing for me. “I’m thankful for this woman by my side, and for the children she carried and birthed for me.” Amber reached over under the table and touched my thigh, and I heard someone shifting in their seat.

“But most of all I’m thankful for the way life can give you second chances.” I finally looked up, first at Jacob. We had a brotherly bond so deep at one point, people thought we were twins. It got severed through years of feeling like he doubted me. I pulled back, but I felt that bond returning now. Like he was proud of me. “I am grateful for you, Jake.”

“Look at that, my punk brother is growing up,” Jacob joked, and Erin swatted at him.

“And,” I said, turning to Amber, “I’m grateful for the second chance at loving the woman of my dreams. I almost screwed it up entirely—twice. Amber, you are my world, and I’m so thankful you love me.”

“Aw...” This time it was Mona gushing as I leaned down to kiss Amber. The atmosphere of love was thick and tangible.

I looked Amber in the eye as I sucked in a breath and blew it out. “There’s something I would like to ask everyone, and Amber, baby, I hope this is okay.” She looked confused, cocking her head. “We need to know the best way to tell the twins I’m their dad.” I blurted out the truth as my eyes swept over the table, taking in each of their faces. Amber didn’t seem upset at all. She looked relieved, and her hand squeezed my

thigh harder.

“Oh dear,” Erin sighed. “That’s a tough one.”

“What do you think is right?” asked Mona. I turned to look at her, and she had a compassionate expression. I’d seen her in action as a mom and knew it was where Amber got her mothering skills from.

“Wow, I have no idea.” I ran a hand through my hair while I gritted my teeth. “This is all going to be a huge learning curve for me. I don’t know anything about raising kids.”

“Those kids are pretty sharp, no matter what Parker’s teachers say about him.” Jacob nodded his head downward once and pursed his lips. “You just come right out and tell them the truth. It’s all you can do. They’ll have to adjust, and they’ll probably ask questions?—”

“But isn’t that how life is anyway?” Erin added. “So sorry, dear.” She blushed and looked at Jacob who patted her hand.

“It is...There isn’t going to be an easy way to spring something like that. You just have to tear off the bandage. They’re resilient; you’ll see.” He picked up his fork and took a hefty bite of mashed potatoes while I turned to look at Amber. I couldn’t read her expression at all; she was stoic. I worried that I might have upset her by asking the question because I’d been worried about that all day.

But she changed the subject and asked about Erin’s recipe for stuffing. Meanwhile I stewed over a new fear I’d just unlocked. What if my own children weren’t really interested in having a father? They’d been fatherless for so long in their life, I was sure they were content without one. Me stepping in and trying to help parent might not seem like a positive thing to them. They might look at Jacob as a father figure I’d

be replacing, and that made me worry they'd reject me.

There were so many things that could go wrong if we didn't handle this correctly, and since Amber had been their primary parent for their entire life so far, I had to let her lead. I tried to reassure myself that it would be alright, but the nagging fear of failure and rejection would whittle away at my nerves until the deed was done.

Which I hoped was sooner rather than later.

AMBER

The past three weeks since Thanksgiving at Jacob and Erin's house had been tense. So many times I wrestled with how much our news would disrupt the twins' lives. I spoke to Shelby at length, sat and talked to Mom so many times, and even spoke to the kids' guidance counselor at school for advice. I was rattled and nervous to say the least.

"You're really tight," Evan said as he stood behind me. I felt his hands on my shoulders rubbing the tension out of my muscles, but I knew it would return the instant his fingers stopped massaging.

"I am," I sighed. "What if it really upsets them? What if they are too emotional or it interrupts their schooling? What if?—"

"Hey," he said, turning me around to face him as he cut me off, "worst-case scenario they freak out entirely, scream that we're ruining their lives, and storm off to their rooms." Evan chuckled, but I didn't think it was that funny.

When he wrapped his arms around me and kissed the top of my head I did feel comforted though. I had taken to sleeping over at his house every Friday and Saturday night with the kids. He had remodeled almost every square inch of his house now to make it family friendly, including decorating rooms for each of the twins to their own tastes.

Parker's room looked like a superhero comic book exploded all over the walls, while Vera's room had every shade of pink imaginable. He left the choices up to them and

they loved the spaces. The only thing lacking were the questions. Neither one of them asked if I was dating him or if he was their new dad—nothing of the sort. It made me wonder what was going through their heads when they thought of him and our sleepovers, and now our early Christmas dinner.

“You sure doing this before Christmas is a good idea?” I frowned as I pulled away and looked up at him. I wasn’t sure about anything. Jacob had said to just blurt it out, but even that felt doubtful. I’d never been one to doubt Jacob, but in this case my gut felt torn.

“I’m positive. Look,” he said, kissing my forehead, “they’ll have time to settle in to the idea over holiday break from school. If it’s too much we’ll hire a family counselor for everyone. They get some presents tonight, and then they can have a full second round of gifts with Mona, and then you at your house Christmas morning...Babe, try not to worry.”

The timer on the stove dinged and I turned around to shut it off. “Turkey,” I announced. Evan backed away to give me space to move as we both heard the doorbell ring.

“I’ll get that. You finish up here.” I felt his hand on my lower back before he left, and I pulled the large bird out of the oven and set it on the stovetop. Everything else was already positioned on the table, ready for eating. I breathed in the warm steam coming off the large turkey and reached for the carving knife to begin slicing hunks of meat off the bones.

My hands worked quickly while I listened to happy sounds of Vera and Parker greeting Evan with high fives and laughter. His low baritone rumble mingled with Mom’s gentle chiding as she insisted the kids remove their shoes by the door to not track snow in the house everywhere. I smiled at the back and forth as they acted like typical kids while Mom thought they should be more mature.

“Listen to Nana,” I shouted loud enough for them to hear me, and I heard grumbles as they obeyed. I was thankful she’d taken them for an overnight last night; it’d given Evan and me time to discuss how we would tell the kids about him this evening.

When the sounds in the living room changed from banter to video game music, Mom joined me in the kitchen. She walked up beside me and said, “This all looks so delicious, Amber. Did you cook?”

“Are you kidding?” I asked with a chuckle. “Evan did this. He has the culinary bug. I’d have made mac and cheese with hot dogs.” I grabbed a hand towel from the drawer and wiped my hands clean after putting the last slice of turkey on a plate. “We’re ready to eat if you can pry Parker away from games.”

“That sounds like a job for his father,” she said to me as she took the plate of food and winked.

Together we walked into the dining room, and I peeked into the living room on the way. “Dinner is ready, guys,” I called, surprised to see Evan battling it out with both children in a game of go-kart racing. “Come on! No presents if you don’t eat.”

The thunder as six feet stampeded into the dining room as the bell rang again was cacophonous. I didn’t even have to go to the door. Erin and Jacob let themselves into Evan’s front room and stomped the snow off their feet at the door.

“Don’t start without us!” Jacob pulled the hat off his head and smiled at me.

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” I walked over and offered each of them a hug, helping Erin out of her coat. “Turkey just came out of the oven. Everything is still hot.”

We joined Mom, Evan, and the kids at the table and found our seats. Vera scrunched her nose up at the spread, but Parker’s eyes were wide. I heard his belly rumbling and

could tell he was hungry.

My eyes flicked over to meet Evan's gaze and he nodded at me. I wasn't ready for this at all. I wanted more time, though I wasn't sure if it was because I was afraid of ruining their innocence or if I was just afraid of the bad reaction I feared would happen.

"Vera, Parker," I sighed as Parker's hand retreated from the bowl of dinner rolls in front of him with one in his grasp. They looked up at me as he took a large bite. "Guys, there's something Mommy wants to talk to you about before we eat."

Both of them looked up at me with saucer eyes, expecting me to tell them something important, but my throat constricted and my breath caught. I felt tears welling up as fear wrapped around me. I couldn't do this. I couldn't ruin them. I looked to my mom for help, then Evan, and he smiled and tilted his head.

"You know guys, Mom is having a tough time saying it, so I want to tell you a funny story." If he were closer to me, I knew his hand would've been on my leg to reassure me. "My dad once tried to fix the car by himself. He had no idea what he was doing, so he ended up spraying the entire garage with motor oil. I swear, it looked like a Slip 'N Slide for cars. I don't think he ever touched the toolbox again after that!"

Jacob laughed at the memory and eyed me carefully. I was trembling, but when he took over, I felt less out of control. "That was a pretty funny day, wasn't it Evan?" Jacob sighed and turned to Parker. "You have any good stories about your dad?"

He reached out and picked up the dish of corn and added a scoop to his plate then each of the twins while Parker narrowed his eyes and shrugged. "I don't have a dad, just you." His honest answer broke my heart. More than anything I wanted them to know and love Evan as their dad, and that gave me the courage to finally speak up.

“Parker, Vera...” They turned to me again and I sniffled and wiped my eyes. “You do have a dad.”

Vera looked confused, while Parker’s eyebrows shot up. “We do? Is he a superhero?”

Evan chuckled with Mom, who covered her mouth with a hand. Erin started dishing out food as I continued. “No, why would you think that?” I tried not to laugh because to Parker this seemed like a very serious thing. Vera, however, was rolling her eyes.

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“Superheroes aren’t real, dummy!” she quipped and before I got to scold her, Mom beat me to it.

“Vera, that’s not nice. Say you’re sorry.” She frowned and Vera grumbled.

“Sorry, Parker.”

“Honey, why do you ask that?” I asked again, and Parker took a bite of his corn while Erin put some turkey and stuffing down next to it.

“Well, we’ve never seen him. Superheroes have to keep their identities a secret, you know. Like Peter Parker. He’s Spiderman, but he has to pretend to be a picture-taker. Or you know Clark Kent is really Superman.” In Parker’s world this was logic. I thought it was sweet.

“No, baby, your daddy isn’t a superhero, but he is very special to me, and I love him very much.” I looked up at Evan and smiled. I had so much love for this man I wasn’t sure what to do with it all the time. I felt overly emotional and weepy, but all in a good way. “Evan is your daddy, and I think maybe he’d like if you called him Daddy.”

Parker glanced up at him and nodded, pushing his lips out in an expression of acceptance. “Okay,” he said as he shoved another bite of roll in his mouth. There wasn’t the slightest hint of disturbance or upset in his expression as he chewed. I glanced at Vera who was picking the raisins out of her stuffing. She, too, looked happy as can be and not at all disturbed.

“Vera, how do you feel about that?” I was a little confused, still waiting for the explosion or meltdown I thought might come, but Vera tilted her head as she bobbed one shoulder.

“Yeah, okay. Do I have to eat these?” She used her fork to point at her raisins and scowled at them.

I looked at Mom, then Jacob. Evan sat with a cheesy grin on his face, hands folded in front of himself with his elbows planted on the table. Erin had finally sat down with a full plate and was eating quietly. It felt surreal. They weren’t having any reaction at all. It felt as if I’d just told them we were going to the grocery store, or that it was time to have their showers before bed. They had less of a reaction to this than when a snow day was declared for school and they got to celebrate a day off.

“Don’t you have any questions?” I furrowed my forehead and tapped my fingers on the table. I was baffled.

“Yes, I asked if I have to eat this...” Vera’s attitude was something else lately.

“I meant about your dad.” Pressing my lips together I licked them and waited for a response. For as much as I worried about this moment, my fears seemed to be completely unfounded. Neither of them seemed fazed.

“No,” Parker said, shrugging. He continued to shove food into his mouth making Erin giggle. The laughter spread to Mom, then Jacob.

“You don’t want to know where he’s been?” I asked, trying not to laugh too. The bug caught Evan, and he laughed louder than the others. Then Vera giggled.

“Lots of kids don’t have a dad,” he said, “or they visit their dad.”

It was a somber statement that shifted the mood in the room back to more serious as I started to fill my plate with small portions of each dish. It was the most mature, yet stunted, reaction I'd ever seen. I knew there would eventually be questions, which I'd have to face when they came up, but I was happy the news was out. My hands didn't shake anymore, and my stomach finally felt a bit more settled.

After dinner we shared gifts, then we said goodnight to Jacob and Erin. Mom lingered a while until we tucked the kids in, and then she left us alone.

Evan sat on the couch once the kitchen was clean and the leftovers were put away. He patted the cushion and I curled up next to him. His body was my comfort now; I drew everything I needed by being near him.

"Well, that went better than we expected." He kissed the top of my head and sighed happily as I clung to him. He smelled like Christmas thanks to the pine scented bar soap I bought him last week.

"It did...But I'm a bit concerned that they're not fully understanding it yet." I picked at a loose thread on his shirt but didn't pull it out. The muted way the children reacted caused me as much concern as if they'd blown up and gotten really upset, except I wasn't shaking or worrying now.

"Oh, give them time. They'll have questions for sure." He hugged me to his side tightly. "And when they do, we'll have answers."

The house felt quiet now after all the activity for the day. My eyes were heavy and I knew sleep would come quickly tonight. I'd been on my feet for hours cooking; they hurt a lot. I kicked off my slippers and propped my feet on the table and yawned.

Movement in the corner of the room caught my eye and I looked up to see Vera peeking around the corner of the hallway. She stared at Evan and me cuddling, so I

nudged him. I didn't know he'd laid his head back and shut his eyes, but he raised his head to look down at me. I nodded at her and he turned to look.

"Vera, do you need something? I can get you a drink if you'd like." Evan was already on his way upright before she spoke.

"No, I'm not thirsty." She stepped out and Parker followed her. They both stood meekly by the hallway with matching Christmas pajamas and serious expressions.

"Is something wrong?" I asked, sitting up as Evan sat back down. My heart thumped a little harder as I wondered if this was when they would have their questions.

Vera shook her head but said, "I have a question." Parker gave her a nudge and she hissed at him. "You ask her."

"No," he said, defiantly shaking his head. "You ask her."

"Ask me what?" I took a deep calming breath. Evan put his hand on my back and rubbed it. It didn't actually calm me, but him being there helped a little.

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“Well, some kids get to stay at their dads. So can we stay at Evan’s house—I mean Dad’s house?” Vera reached up and twirled a strand of her hair around her finger and Parker snickered.

“He has better video games.” He nudged Vera again and she smacked his hand.

“Stop touching me.”

Evan chuckled and stood up, kissing my forehead. “You stay there. I’ll get them back in bed.” He clapped his hands and turned to them. “You guys can stay whenever you want, but no video games if you don’t get enough sleep.”

His comment sent them cheering and running for their bedrooms, and he followed them up the hallway. My heart felt settled finally. My twins knew their father and they loved him. He loved them and me. I was content knowing he was willing to work on every issue we had or might have. And with Jacob and Erin supporting us, my mom to help with anything, and a bestfriend like Shelby at my side, I felt like everything was going to be okay.

But I also felt a bit nauseous.

That part was still a secret, and I had my suspicions, but I hadn’t said a thing. My family might be expanding sooner than I planned, and if Evan was happy about Vera and Parker, I hoped he’d be happy about that too.

EVAN

From my spot on the couch hovering over the coffee table where our boardgame was spread out I could see out the front window. Heavy snow had been falling for the past hour, and with every second that passed it concerned me.

“Dad, it’s your turn.” Parker shook me for the third time. I was distracted, worried about Amber who was meant to pick up the kids fifteen minutes ago. I pulled my eyes from the window and looked down at the board.

“You’re right, it is.” Smiling to keep them happy and hide my concern, I flicked the spinner and the needle spun round and round. “Four! Oh no...” I moved the game piece four spaces only to find myself at the top of a chute, which set me back three levels.”

Vera covered her mouth and giggled, and Parker cheered. Before this turn, I was only six spaces from winning the whole thing. He was next in line to win, with his piece seven squares away and a few chutes as hurdles.

“My turn.” Parker snatched the spinner and my eyes rose up to the window again. The snow had to be sticking and making roads slick. I thought about calling her, finding out where she was but I stopped myself. It would be dangerous for her to try answering a call if the road conditions weren’t safe. I was on the edge of my seat.

“I got four too!” Parker’s cheer snapped me back to the game where he moved forward, narrowly avoiding the chute that set me back. Vera went next, climbing a ladder to come right behind Parker and my measly two spaces left me far behind.

As Parker spun to win, I saw a flash of headlights and looked up. Amber’s car pulled into my driveway, putting my heart at ease. When the relief took over, I was better able to celebrate Parker’s victory.

“Hey, you did it!” I slapped his hand in a high five but Vera crossed her arms and pouted.

“Don’t worry,” Parker told her, “you’re good at flash cards.” He patted her arm and she laughed at him.

“Let’s get this cleaned up before Mom comes in, guys.” We started picking up the pieces and placing them in the box but we weren’t quite fast enough. Amber stumbled in with snow dusting her shoulders and the top of her head which was covered in a dark colored sock hat. She had a grin the size of Texas as she stomped her boots by the door.

“Hey, guys, I’m here.” Shedding her coat, she looked over at us as we finished cleaning up. Vera was the first to take off, racing toward her mother with joy. Parker walked calmly, but I could tell he wasn’t so happy. We’d had a few sleepovers at my house with just the kids, which he loved. He always hated going home, probably because I was a little more lenient about video games than his mother. When Amber came to pick them up, he would pout a little and ask why we couldn’t all live together.

I’d been meaning to bring up that topic, but I wasn’t ready to push Amber just yet. I put the lid on the box and left it sitting on the table as I stood up and prepared myself to handle Parker’s pouting fit. I wanted us to be a family under one roof, but Amber and I had only been back together as a couple since around October. Being the third week of January, that meant less than three full months. It was moving kind of fast for a stable relationship. Or at least that was what I thought she’d say.

“Do we have to go?” Parker whined. “I don’t want to go home yet. I like Dad’s house.” The way they instantly started calling me “Dad” without hesitation made this whole thing feel that much more real. These kids were incredible. They had adjusted so quickly to my presence it made me feel like I had always known them.

“Actually—” Amber bit her lip and looked up at me apologetically. “The roads are pretty bad. I’m not sure I’m going anywhere tonight. It didn’t feel safe.”

Stopping by the door, I helped Amber out of her coat and pressed a kiss to her cold cheek. Her hair clung to me with static as she pulled her hat off. “It’s alright. We have plenty of breakfast food for everyone. I was worried you wouldn’t get here safely. I’d rather you be here where it’s warm than take the risk of being stranded on the road with the kids.”

Vera and Parker cheered loudly, pumping their fists in the air up and down. “Yes! Can we stay up late too?” Parker already had his eyes fixed on the TV, but I was about to burst his bubble and be a dad.

“Nope, sorry. It’s been a long day, and Mom and I are pretty tired.” My hand rode the small of her back as I herded everyone toward the couch. “You two go get your pajamas on and brush your teeth, and we’ll come say goodnight soon.”

“Aw man, that’s not fair.” Parker pouted, crossing his arms, but Vera ran off to obey. He slunk after her slowly, using his best childish manipulation techniques for which I was no longer falling for. I’d spent enough time with them to know how to handle these situations. I just had to buckle down and not feel sorry for him.

Amber and I watched them disappear down the hallway then she turned and wrapped her arms around my neck. “I take it you guys had fun?” Her soft smile tempted me closer. I kissed her and bit her lower lips sensuously.

“We did...Parker is a bit of a handful sometimes with his pouting.” I chuckled and pulled her against my body. I wished every sleepover would be with her too. Lying in my bed in my arms, letting me place kisses on her skin every night and every morning.

“Better than Vera’s attitude before Christmas. She was a little snarky.” Amber laughed and kissed me again. “It feels like Christmas again all over. The snow is so pretty.”

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“Dad, Parker spit on me!” We heard and I sighed.

“Don’t move a muscle. I’m going to tuck them in and I’ll be right back.” I pecked the tip of Amber’s nose and reluctantly pulled away from her to walk up the hallway. I found Parker laughing and Vera glaring at him. She had toothpaste spit on her arm that had soaked into her shirt.

“It’s okay, Vera, you’ll take it off when you put your pajamas on.” I turned to Parker and said, “What happened, bud?”

“Her arm was in the way because she’s slow. I didn’t mean to spit on her; it just happened.” He shrugged innocently, but I assumed like any brother he didn’t really care that he’d done it.

“Spitting on someone is disrespectful. Please apologize to Vera.” I waited while he offered a half-hearted apology, then I said, “Please don’t do that again. Now you two get your jammies on and get into bed.” I kissed the tops of each of their heads. “And if you wake up before me and Mom, keep the volume of the TV down. There are Pop-Tarts and donuts on the counter just like this morning. Alright?”

“Night dad,” Parker groaned.

“Goodnight,” Vera said, throwing her arms around me. “I’m glad you’re my dad.”

It touched my heart to hear that. I crouched and wrapped my arms around her to give her a squeeze. “I’m glad I’m your dad too, baby. Goodnight.” I kissed her on the cheek and stood up. “Night, kiddo,” I said to Parker, tousling his hair while he rinsed

his toothbrush, then I slipped out of the bathroom and headed back to the living room, but Amber wasn't there.

Her coat hung by the door still, shoes beside the kids' boots lined up on the shoe mat near the door. I glanced around; she wasn't in the kitchen or dining room, so I flicked off the lights and headed for the bedroom. I was so tired my bones were aching, and though it was a bit early for sleep still, I knew if I laid down I'd be out like a light.

"Are you here?" I called as I stepped into my bedroom. The light was on, the bed turned down. I could see the light under the bathroom door and shadows moving around.

"Yeah, just getting into my pajamas. I'm cold and my jeans were damp," Amber called from the other side of the door.

Moving to my dresser to pick out my own pajamas, I thought about how quickly life had changed for me in such good ways. I'd been so accustomed to bad things happening my whole life, it felt like a shock that instead of the shift being hard and involving grief, that this life shift was incredible and brought a wholeness I never knew I could have. Sudden positive shifts were a thing; I'd just never experienced them before.

I kicked off my socks and shucked my pants, pulled on some drawstring pajama pants and took off my button-down shirt. Yawning, I plugged my phone in on my nightstand and crawled under the covers, propping myself up on one elbow while I waited for Amber. I let my eyes shut but fought sleep until I heard the bathroom door open. When I opened my eyes, she stood in front of me wearing nothing but a slinky negligee.

"Wow," I breathed, not even trying to hide my attraction to her. "You are sexy as hell."

Amber blushed and crossed one leg over the other, turning her body back and forth from the waist up. “Can I tell you a secret?” she asked, batting her eyelashes.

“Sure.” I sat up a little higher, watching her inch closer to the bed.

“I never planned to go home tonight.” She bit her lip and crawled onto the bed seductively, staring me in the eye. I chuckled and reached for her body, my fingers finding the soft skin of her outer thigh.

“You didn’t? What did you have planned?” My question came out as a grunt as she pinned me down and straddled me, pulling the blanket up around her backside. Her palms splayed on my chest as she smiled down at me. Her hair formed a curtain around us and made her look all the more beautiful.

“I want you...” she said cheekily, “but I also want to talk about some important things.” She leaned down and kissed me hard, tongue searching my mouth. My lips parted and I kissed her back hungrily. I was so exhausted, but seeing how badly she wanted me energized me. I could definitely go for some sex.

Our kissing grew more passionate until we heard a thump and some giggling. I tore my lips away from hers to shout, “Go to bed, kids!” It was followed by more giggling and then silence as Amber snickered.

“You enjoy being a father?”

“I love it,” I told her, pulling her back against my lips. The moisture her body was creating dampened her panties and my pajama pants too. It made me swell just thinking of how incredible it was to slide into her. She pushed away though and rolled to the side, lying down next to me.

“You know...” Amber sighed and brought her hand up to the mattress between us,

drawing a figure eight on the sheets. I turned to my side and lay there looking at her, watching her hand move. “My lease is coming up in February. I will have to sign on for another full year since they don’t do six-month leases. I’m wondering if it might make more sense for us to pool resources.” Her eyes rose to meet mine in a hopeful expression.

“Parker has been asking when he can just stay here.” I grinned. “It would only be because it’s totally more economical and would have nothing to do with how amazing it feels to make love and fall asleep in each other’s arms, right?” I narrowed my eyes playfully and reached over to pull her against me.

“I’m serious,” she said, pressing her hand against my chest. “My lease is up, Evan. This back and forth is fun, but the kids love it here. I love it here; we love each other. I want to be a family under one roof.”

All playing aside, I wanted it too. If she hadn’t brought it up, I’d have continued the way things had been much longer. I was waiting on her to push for more because I didn’t want her to think I was rushing things.

“I would love to have my entire family and the people I love under my roof.” My statement drew a grin from her lips that quickly faded into seriousness again.

“But what if the family grows?” she asked, worrying her lip between her teeth again. “Do you think your house is large enough for a bigger family?”

Studying her for a second, I tried to understand what she was saying. Her face was so serious, eyebrows peaked in the middle, lip crushed between her teeth. Reading her was impossible, so I just asked.

“What are you saying?”

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“We had an oopsie. I wasn’t planning it, but sometimes things just happen.” Her shoulder bobbed as she grabbed my hand. I thought she was going to put it between her legs, but she pressed my palm to her belly. “The family is about to grow by one—hopefully just one.” A nervous laugh bubbled out of her while I connected the dots.

“You’re pregnant?” As I said the words warm tingles spread over my skin. She nodded and grinned, closing the gap between us to kiss me.

“Are you happy?” she asked with a wince.

“Happy? My God, I’m ecstatic.” I kissed her back, this time rolling over on her to pin her down. “I get to be a dad again? This time from the beginning...” My mouth covered hers as I maneuvered my body, grinding on her and positioning myself between her legs.

“Mm-hmm,” she mumbled, nice and slow as we kissed deeper.

“Mm, it means I don’t have to use a condom for a while and I get to enjoy your skin,” I growled, kissing my way down to her earlobe where I breathed into her ear and nipped at her sensitive flesh.

Amber rocked her hips up against mine as I continued grinding, her hands resting on my hips. “Yes, and we can start immediately if you want.” She claimed my lips again, forcing me away from her neck. I couldn’t believe what was happening. My heart was so full.

Her fingers expertly traced the edge of my pajama pants, slowly pulling them lower while I lifted my hips, eager to give her space to take them off. Every touch sent a jolt of electricity through my body, igniting a fire in me. My fingers tangled in the delicate straps of her negligee, my desire growing with each movement she made.

“I need you,” I moaned against her neck, my breath hot against her skin as I helped her slide the material down her body, revealing the soft curves and smooth skin underneath. Her breasts looked even more enticing than usual, full and round, begging to be touched and tasted. My cock throbbed with anticipation as I imagined all the ways I could pleasure her.

“Good,” she purred as I deftly removed her panties, revealing her wet, hot center. “I’m yours.”

I lowered my head and placed a gentle kiss on her belly, my lips leaving a trail of heat as I made my way down towards the center of her desire. With trembling hands, I parted her folds and reveled in the sight of her glistening core. The sweet aroma of her arousal filled my senses, making me crave her even more.

Amber’s intoxicating taste exploded on my tongue, sending shivers of pleasure down my spine. Her nails dug into my shoulders as she arched towards me, begging for more as I continued to explore every inch of her with my mouth. Every moan that escaped her lips fueled my desire, driving me to please her until she was completely satisfied.

I continued my sensual assault on her pussy, alternating between long languid laps and quick flicks of my tongue, dragging her moans out of her with each touch. Her hips rocked and bucked against me as I worked her into a mind-numbing orgasm.

“Evan,” she whimpered, her walls clenching around my tongue. Her breath was ragged and her hips were bucking against my mouth as she moaned my name. She

trembled and spasmed, her fingers tearing at my hair, gasping and gritting her teeth to keep from screaming out in ecstasy. I continued until she finally unraveled beneath me, her body limp and spent.

With a satisfied purr, I trailed kisses up her body until I reached her lips once again. “You taste amazing,” I growled huskily against her ear, delighting in the pleased shivers that ran through her body.

“Let me see,” she responded, guiding my lips back to hers. I kissed her hard and she sucked my lip into her mouth while she spread her legs for me.

I positioned myself at her entrance, feeling the slickness and heat of her arousal making the first push inside almost effortless. A low moan escaped from Amber’s lips as she dug her nails into my back, her body eagerly taking me in until I was fully submerged within her. She enveloped me like a warm and welcoming glove, her inner walls pulsing with pleasure as we moved together in perfect synchronization. It was like we were two puzzle pieces finally fitting together, completing each other in every way possible.

As I groaned in pleasure, her body pressed tightly against mine, our movements perfectly synchronized as we both started to move in unison. My thrusts were slow and deliberate at first, but soon picked up speed as the heated passion between us intensified. With each movement, I could feel her body reacting to mine, a symphony of moans escaping her lips as I angled my hips just right to hit her sweet spot. The delicious friction between us only drove me closer to the edge, but I couldn’t stop now, not when she was begging for more.

“Oh, Evan, right there,” she whimpered, her fingers digging into my skin and urging me on. The intense pleasure coursing through my body was almost too much to handle, but I couldn’t deny the primal urge to keep going, driving us both toward sheer ecstasy.

“I’m almost there,” I managed to grunt out between heavy breaths, the pleasure building up inside of me like an unstoppable force. “I’m going to...”

“Yes, baby, come in me,” Amber panted, her walls contracting around me, urging me on. Tension coiled in her body, building and intensifying. Her muscles tightened and released in a rhythmic pattern as she lay beneath me, her hips rising to meet my thrusts.

Finally, with a guttural moan, she reached the peak of pleasure, her pussy clenching and releasing around me like a vise. I felt my own release coming, a wave of sensation crashing over me and sending me into a state of pure bliss. My mind went blank as stars exploded behind my closed eyelids, every nerve in my body alive.

As she tightened her muscles, her body rippled around me, drawing me deeper with each spasm. My vision blurred and my heart raced as I surrendered to the intense sensations. I couldn’t hold back the moan that escaped from my lips. I collapsed onto her, both of us panting and trembling with satisfaction.

My hips continued to slowly pump, soaking up every last shred of enjoyment, while I kissed her softly. “You are the best thing that has ever happened to me.” My hot breath cushioned between our lips as she responded.

“You are very good at that.” Amber smiled and clenched her pussy again, making me grin.

“That’s it...do those Kegels. You’re getting a head start.” I chuckled as I rolled off her and pulled out. Our bodies were only apart for a second before I pulled her back to me and covered us.

“Can we do this every night for the rest of our lives?” My nose rubbed against the tip of hers as she sighed softly.

“I hope so.” She yawned, wrapping her arms around me. “But let’s sleep on that one.”

That was a sentiment I could agree with. I yawned too, and fell asleep before I could even respond to her. I dreamed of life with her, marriage, more children—buying a home we both chose. I dreamed of vacations and holidays, family reunions and birthdays. And in every dream, she was right by my side, where I always wanted her to be.

EPILOGUE: AMBER

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:45 am

The nurse with a warm complexion and smile laid Mona Elaine in my arms against my chest. I was exhausted from labor, having been awake all night long. The kids were with Mom; Evan hovered over me smiling like the proud father. He was just as tired, hair mussed, eyes drawn, but we were thrilled baby Mona was here.

“She’s so beautiful, looks just like you...” He pressed a kiss to my forehead, leaving a cloud of his cologne and musk warming me. I blinked slowly as more waves of exhaustion sank into my bones. “I’ve already called Jacob and Mona. Hang in there with me a few more minutes, Momma, and we’ll get you some sleep.”

Evan hovered over me, doting on me while we waited for our family to arrive. “I can’t believe she’s here so soon.”

“I can’t believe we don’t have the nursery ready yet. Erin and Mona are going to go by the house with the kids this evening to finish up for us.” Evan reached for Baby Mona, so I handed her over as I pushed myself up in bed farther. The mattress was so stiff and uncomfortable. I was glad I only had to spend two nights here and then I could go home to my own bed, unlike with the twins where we were in the hospital for a month.

“There was so much to do still. I hope they can manage. I’d be okay here if you want to go help.” I reached for the water on my tray table and sipped it through the straw, watching Evan cradle our newborn. His face was lit up with pride and joy.

“And miss Baby Mona’s first poop?” he said, chuckling. “I’m not leaving your side. Besides, Jacob will be there to watch the kids. If they need help, you know he’ll jump right in. And Chelsea is coming to town too. She heard Uncle Evan was headed to the

hospital for baby time and booked her flight.”

Jacob and Erin’s only daughter coming home to visit from Europe was a nice surprise. I was sure everyone was looking forward to seeing her again. I knew I was.

“I’m so tired,” I whined, letting my head drop backward at the same time we heard a knock at the door. Reluctantly, I raised my head again and turned that direction to see the door swing open. Mom entered first, followed by the twins, then Jacob and Erin. Shelby waltzed in too with a bundle of balloons and an arm wrapped around a teddy bear, grinning.

My heart was so overwhelmed and full at the sight of my entire family and extended family in this room with us. The kids raced toward me with huge grins.

“Mommy!” Parker said, leaping on the bed.

Vera stood to my right and shrugged her shoulders as she asked, “Where’s the baby?”

“Daddy has her,” I said, nodding at Evan who was surrounded by adults.

“Her?” Vera asked, frowning. She was hoping for a boy so she would be the only girl, despite weeks of telling her having a sister to bond with would be a good thing.

“Yes, you can hold her if you’d like.” I smiled weakly as Parker draped himself over my chest and wrapped his arms on my neck.

“Mommy, can you come home now? Nana doesn’t want to cook me chicken nuggets.” He buried his face in my neck as I looked up at Mom with a hint of amusement. She shook her head and rolled her eyes with a smile as I wrapped him up in a hug.

“Well, your birthday party is in less than two months, so you can have a full chicken

nugget extravaganza.” I squeezed hard and kissed him. I missed my kids so much when they weren’t with me.

“Mommy, look!”

I glanced in the direction of Vera’s happy call, seeing her rocking Baby Mona back and forth in her arms like a doll baby. She’d had a lot of practice with her dolls at home, pretending sweetly and playing house. It was a heartwarming sight.

“Mona?” Evan said, standing up and moving to the side. I watched my mom wink at him and narrowed my eyes in confusion. Something was up, something they had planned ahead of time that I knew nothing about. I watched him walk over to Jacob who stood with his chest puffed out looking down at Vera and the baby.

“Jake...” Evan thrust his hand out toward his brother and squared his shoulders. The two of them were closer than they’d been in years, thick as thieves after the secret had come out. I wondered how much of their separation of hearts had been my fault, for making Jacob promise to keep my secret. Now I was grateful for them both and the way they protected me and looked out for me.

“Evan?” Jacob said, his voice lifting at the end like a question.

“Jake, Chester isn’t here anymore. You know me...I’m somewhat of an old-fashioned soul when it comes to this sort of thing.” Evan glanced at me then turned back to the man who’d been my only father for the past eight years. “Jake, I want to marry her. She’s the love of my life. Look at my beautiful family. I need her with me. She makes me a better man, and I want to make her happy. I’m asking for your blessing.”

Tears welled up in my eyes and I covered my mouth with my hands. Evan was asking for Jacob’s blessing to propose to me right in front of me, which set off huge green flag energy. I shook my head as I watched it unravel, Jacob questioning Evan’s

priorities and loyalty, Erin grinning like a mad woman, Mom nodding knowingly. They had set this up ahead of time, trapping me.

When he turned to me, he didn't even have to ask me. I was already nodding. Still, he got down on one knee by my hospital bed and held out a ring in my direction. Parker, still lying on my chest, tilted his head and said, "Jewelry? Yuck..."

I chuckled and readjusted him. "Shh," I whispered to him.

"Amber, you are the love of my life, my other side, my better half. I need to feel whole now. Say you'll marry me. Make our family a real thing."

I nodded the entire time he was asking, extending my hand to reach for him. First he slid the ring on my finger; then he rose up and kissed my forehead. "I love you," he whispered to me softly.

"Yuck, kissing," Parker grumbled. Evan and I laughed as he slid from the bed, giving us more space to enjoy the moment.

"I love you too, and I'd love to be your wife." I wrapped my tired arms around him as he kissed me again, this time on the lips. Evan's stubble scratched my face but it didn't bother me one bit. Bringing our daughter into the world to meet our twins on the same day he asked me to make this officially permanent was the happiest day of my life. Evan and I were made for each other. And if I learned anything from all of this, it was that when something is meant to be, nothing on earth can stop it. Not time or distance or even a secret.

In the end, we got our second chance at love because fate made it so. I couldn't wait to see how the rest of our story went.